

The Clintonisation of Labour

The nearer the general election, and the long-awaited moment of a change of government, the more worrying the prospect. This is the sad situation that now faces us in Britain.

This should be a moment of great opportunity, of political transformation. Thatcherism seemed to have almost foundered, kept afloat only by the expedient of throwing its leader overboard. The government has been so far behind in the polls that it will take a record-breaking swing to bring them back to within sight of victory. The Conservative Party is viscerally divided over issues of Europe and national identity which show no sign of going away. Surely, in these circumstances, there has been the space for the Labour Party to construct for itself a programme, to find some coherent ideas to guide it, to offer the electorate some new understanding of the world, and to identify some solid social forces which might sustain its project? In all these respects, something which might actually justify the name New Labour would be welcome.

But instead, New Labour has been constructed largely as a marketing strategy, a piece of political image-making. It insistently defines itself, in a routine that has continued from where Neil Kinnock left off, against what it brands as 'Old Labour'. The dominating principle of this politics is 'realism', as Tony Blair often reminds us. There is said to be no point in a politics of sentiment, in being condemned to further decades of impotent

Soundings

opposition. But the tactical realism of electoral politics, which is understandable enough, masks a realism of a deeper kind - New Labour's belief that little or nothing can be done to alter the substance of post-Thatcher capitalism.

Tony Blair, as Martin Jacques has recently observed (*Guardian*, September 26, 1996), has been triumphantly successful in his project for transforming the Labour Party, but less so in evolving a project for the country. But it is precisely because his project is perceived to remove all serious threat to the dominant order that it has been given such a smooth ride. Its air of inevitability, its success in positioning sceptics as mere fundamentalists and malcontents, derives from its convergence with the main flow of marketisation. New Labour is one successful outcome of Thatcherism - the very political position the right's more far-sighted strategists wanted Labour to take up. The purpose of the new right's project was not, after all, to keep the Conservative Party in office for ever, but to establish a social and economic regime, based on individualism, the market, and a State which would uphold these. What does it matter, from this perspective, that New Labour eventually gets its turn in office, once it has been made to abandon all its earlier commitments to equality, or, in more moderate form, to a changed balance of wealth and power? What it has been induced to jettison is not just 'economic determinism' - who would mind that? - but the basic socialist idea that economic power really matters.

It is because the ruling political discourse has set such iron limits on what New Labour believes it is politically possible to say that Labour has in fact become so reliant on Tony Blair's personality, on belief in his moral integrity (rooted in Christian belief), on ethical declarations which entail no definite commitments, and on a vacuous rhetoric of newness and youth. If Old Labour resorted often enough to one kind of nostalgic sentimentalism, New Labour depends no less on its own inspirational kind.

It becomes clearer as the days pass, that this project is not merely being invented before our eyes, though it has its moments of frenetic improvisation (e.g. the fiasco of the Scottish referendum, in which Labour's capacity to panic from inside an impregnable position will have given the Tories fresh hope even in Scotland). There is a precedent being followed, and as so often in British politics, it comes from the United States. What we are seeing, in sum, is the Clintonisation of British Labour.

What does this process consist of? In the first place, the casting-off of as much of the Labour Party's political and institutional inheritance as can be got rid of-

stitution, the power of its policy-making conference, the weight of trade influence in its decision-making, the very idea of a politics of class, and of a principled democratic counter-balance to capitalism. It is reportedly Clinton's strategy to position himself at the apex of a triangle the other points of which are the Democratic and the Republican Parties, cherry-picking the most popular policies from each. This has been the contribution of a new breed of non-partisan political advisers, who switch between parties as opportunity serves them. He is said to have been shaped in his formation by political scientists for whom the normal condition of capitalist democracy is two competing parties, differing not in programme or philosophy, but merely in inflection and style.

It is not difficult to see this as the emergent politics of New Labour, even though the approach here still retains a gloss of innocence - the Bambi factor - which no-one any longer associates with Clinton, if they ever did. New Labour does not contest the moderate right's economic agenda, and some even dream of a realignment that might bring Kenneth Clarke on to our side. The imperatives of keeping taxation down at all costs, of leaving all the privatised utilities in private hands, of giving priority to low levels of inflation and low government deficits - in short 'of maintaining business confidence' - are policies adopted or retained from the right, as a condition of electability and perhaps of governability.

These constraints leave little scope for a coherent programme of reform. Lacking a programme for its full tenn of office, Labour instead offers a list of five early pledges', acknowledging by these few specifics the growing anxiety that it might not do anything significant at all.

'There is no alternative', one almost hears, in a reincarnation of Mrs Thatcher's famous TINA. But this only shows new Labour's failure of imagination. Tony Blair said, in defence of not significantly increasing present levels of taxation, that there was no point in raising taxation to increase the social benefit of the unemployed, since what the unemployed want is to work. But it is obvious that to increase employment requires expenditure too, if on investment rather than on welfare. It would be possible, surely, to say that whilst the total level of taxation, as a proportion of national income, would not increase under Labour its *distribution* certainly will change, in the direction of greater equity. But of this, hardly a word. The risk of offence to the 120,000 citizens who earn more than £100,000 per annum has so

far outweighed identification with the millions on average or near-average incomes, not to mention the third of the country living in poverty.

Soundings

New Labour bases itself on one rising form of institutional power in contemporary capitalism. It is, or intends to be, a post-modern and post-industrial regime, in its recognition of the power of image and information to construct and determine political reality. The role of the 'spin-doctors' and media experts in New Labour is not merely a quirk, an accident of Islington life, or a tactical choice. It represents the rising power of a new social technology, the technology of information and its management.

Previous radical coalitions each relied on a particular institutional and social base to sustain their reforming programmes. These included, at different times: Non-Conformity; a newly mobilised mass democracy; the role of the State and its functionaries as the guarantors of social cohesion and the strength of the nation; the organised working class; and an emergent class of newly-educated professionals in the 1960s and 1970s. Collectivist liberals, the post-war Labour Government, and Wilson's creative blend of what we might now call Old and New Labour, represented these forces in different mixes.

New Labour has no confident relation to any organised constituency. It is positively afraid of the damage that will be done to it electorally if it shows any undue affinity with the state, or with the institutions of the working class. So it constructs its potential following in more individualised ways, addressing both presumed aspirations (the language of opportunities) and anxieties (the language of community, attachment, and social discipline). What is used to bind these atomised constituencies together, given that there are few institutions to do it, is the technology of communication. New Labour seeks to construct, and maintain, a 'virtual' majority.

This form of power unavoidably displaces others. The face-to-face institution of the party branch, or the trade union meeting, a sort of deliberative democracy and delegation, however imperfect, becomes secondary to the individual ballot and the referendum. The subscription previously painstakingly collected by ward treasurer, or automatically checked off as an expression of the power of the union in the workplace, is solicited instead by direct mail. Funding is sought through the clueless patter of telephone fund-raisers. We members will each, individually, be able to vote this year for the Manifesto, for the first time. But this methodology will not allow us to discriminate between policies. Such ballots, since there is only one option to choose from, are little more than a loyalty test. The party leadership go round the country, meeting the membership, in larger and perhaps more

active meetings than their predecessors did. But these meetings have no power. They can inform the leadership about the state of one particular body of opinion (the party membership), they can suggest some new options for the market researchers to test out. But they leave the leadership to make up its own mind, no longer as the delegated representatives of a constituted assembly. The decision to ignore the vote for the National Executive, and downgrade Clare Short despite her third place in the poll, was a signal of this emerging system. It is a new kind of plebiscitary politics which is being constructed. It is made possible by the new sophistication and efficiency of communications technologies, and their swamping of more conventional and pedestrian channels of influence.

We write on the eve of the Labour Party Conference, which looks as if it may be the final showdown for the politics of Old Labour. Will the trade unions, already being shown the door, administer some last defeat to the New Labour leadership, for example on the level of the minimum wage? Will the ageing heart of Old Labour, in the person of Barbara Castle, win a majority for the principle that pensions should be linked to rising average earnings?

We hope so, but we fear that it may, in the event, make little difference even if this happens. We doubt that the leadership of the Labour Party any longer accepts the idea that its programme should be mandated by its Conference, or that it should be any more accountable to the party membership than to other key interest-groups. Just as Bill Clinton regards the Democratic Party as just one interest, to be balanced as necessary against others, so we think Tony Blair and his advisers regard themselves as accountable not to their party, but to whatever 'virtual' majority they can construct. These rulers call upon the testimony of marketing professionals, as Caesar called upon soothsayers, to legitimise what they do. If they obtain office, they will have acquired sufficient mandate, and other claims to accountability will be defined as secondary. Defeats at Conference on policy issues will be deemed to be non-binding, and will be finessed, or forgotten.

These, if we are right about them, are major changes in our political system, These political technologies are designed to include some voices and interests, and to exclude others. There is an inescapable conjunction between the trimming or Labour's programme towards the norms of the market, and these changes in the institutional forms of the party and its mode of domination. New Labour's courting of the corporations, not only on issues of policy, but also in the soliciting

Soundings

of funds, is another aspect of Clintonisation. Labour wishes to position itself as but one of two parties which can equally claim and receive the support of business. This is a significant retreat not only from the goal of long-term socialist transformation, but even from the will to constitute a democratic balance or counter-weight to the power of capital.

We shall return to these themes in later issues, including the question of what Labour's 'project for the country' ought to be. Meanwhile we point to the necessity to maintain and develop such democratic spaces as one can, including those within the Labour Party itself.