Questions which remain

It is too late now to regret what has not been done over the last four years or so. We are reconciled, reluctantly and yet again, to the fact that even if Labour wins the next election this country will not have the kinds of politics we would like to see. This is partly because what we'd like to see is a minority persuasion (though why that is so and whose interests are served by keeping things that way is a subject worthy of some thought). But it is also because it is now too late. We are up against an election - maybe one will be called before this issue of *Soundings* lands on your mat. And, above all, we do not want four more years of Conservative government.

A historic opportunity has been let slip. But we are now where we are, and must hope and work for a Labour victory.

And yet…

Yet the political process of the formation of Tony Blair's version of Labour will not end with the election. In the cold light of having to govern the country, old, unresolved questions will return to haunt us. And new issues will arise, and problems will be posed, which will set new challenges to Blair's definition, may even urge it in some ways to become more radical.

Above all, there will be the questions posed by neo-liberalism itself. The last twenty years of right-wing government have been long and forceful enough to reveal the sterility and the contradictions in their own approach. We know now, through painful experience rather than intellectual argument, that market relations alone are inadequate to run an economy, never mind a society. We know that

forms of calculation other than monetary ones must be used in many areas of social interaction. We know that there has to be such a thing as society, even if it is not self-evidently there but has to be created. Moreover, the 'we' here is a broad one. These things are, at least latently, part of popular understanding. They are not confined to a coterie of political commentators.

Tony Blair is wont to say that this present Tory government has 'run out of steam'. This is the most inept of propositions. For one thing, if that were true we would be only too glad - the last thing we want is to goad it into reinvigoration, implementing yet more ideas from some right-wing think-tank. But the real point is quite different: this government has not run out of steam; more importantly, it has run into the buffers of its own contradictions.

A huge element of politics is about moulding the questions people ask, providing the commonsense for the stock replies. Margaret Thatcher did this. And her refonnulations were immensely successful. For a while. Their inadequacies are now becoming increasingly clear. There are questions now, in the air and on the streets, which demand formulation and address. Questions posed precisely by some of the dislocations produced by the last twenty years. Questions posable now which would not have had any resonance even only five years ago. It is in this sense that this moment provides a historic opportunity.

No such thing as society?

What then is New Labour's political assessment of the present conjuncture? To judge by recent statements and policies, it believes that, since nothing whatever has changed since the early days of the Thatcher revolution, Labour's project must be strictly tailored to those severe and confining limits. Thus matters like the levels of taxation and public spending are regarded as permanently fixed, mired in the concrete of the crippling horizons of the 1980s. There is nothing Labour can do but to reproduce the neo-liberal vision, and adapt in every particular to the Thatcherite terrain. In effect, the Thatcherite definition of political and economic reality, which John Major inherited and tinkered around with but largely retained, is now the definition of political and economic reality *tout court*. Hence the cryptic but resonant obeisance which, from time to time, Tony Blair has made to his great predecessor. We will forebear to point out how long ago it is that sources politically not a million miles from this journal first pointed out that, unless the left could match, in vision, depth of rethinking and imaginative reach, the hegemonic scope

of the Thatcher revolution, it would find itself driven to operate on the terrain which Thatcherism had redefined, as surely as the trapped animal - wriggle as it may - is held in the noose of an ever-tightening net. Such now are the conditions of existence of New Labour's illusory 'freedom of manoeuvre'.

But if everything is exactly as it was, why does Labour have a chance to win office which it manifestly lacked in the 1980s? Yes, the Tories have massively-blundered, are corrupted by their long tenure of office, are deeply divided, constitute a spent and empty force. But if that is all, then Labour's chances depend on the very slender thread of 'we're tired of this lot: let's give the other lot a shot'. That is the sort of feeble support which vanishes with three or four weeks of hard campaigning. For all our sakes, the calculation had better be somewhat more robust. What Labour must be calculating - for it is what we all believe - is that there has been a significant shift in the popular political mood; and that this is a shift - not of very extensive proportions, perhaps, for ordinary voters, but politically significant nonetheless - against the worst excesses of the neo-liberal revolution: and specifically against its rampant individualism, its profound selfishness, against 'the only thing that matters is to look after Number One'; against the philosophy that 'there is no such thing as society, there is only the individual and his (sic) family'; in rejection of the belief that market forces are the only criterion of social value and should be 'free' of all limit and regulation, to drive blindly and ruthlessly through society, destroying the social fabric and the bonds of reciprocity between people - and the devil take the hindmost.

Curiously, there is also an echo of this in what Dick Morris (Bill Clinton's right-hand man) argued when he was analysing why Bob Dole's promise of across-the-board tax cuts fell flat on its face in the recent presidential election: 'Through the sexual revolution of the sixties, the "me" decade of the seventies, the yuppie adventures in hedonism, and into the selfish, money-hungry eighties, we tested life [sic - we think he means the 'free market society'] to its limits. But people's personal well-being was impaired more by the dysfunction of society as a whole than by a lack of money for themselves... we realised that the 1990s were a "we" decade ... the poll showed us how wrong a tax cut that appealed to self-interest would be'.[1] And this is America we're talking about.

This assessment might be wrong, but if so, New Labour owes it to us to tell us

1- Cited in the *Guardian,* 14.1.97-

where it thinks the voters who are supposed to be floating towards Labour, and whom its strategy is principally designed to mobilise, have come from. But if it is right, then a certain logic follows, even within the narrow electoral terms which New Labour has set itself. It must follow that, in order to win their support, New Labour must address their concerns; and those concerns have to do, precisely, with the social fabric, with strengthening the bonds of social reciprocity, and with strategies designed to address 'the whole' society - rather than just what each individual 'and his family' can take home in a personal pay-packet.

Somewhere, deep in his bones, Tony Blair knows this too. When he invoked the people who 'want to do well... to get on ... to succeed', he added, 'but you can only do so within a society which is compassionate, with a sense of decency and obligation to others'. Quite so. The question is how to imagine this; how such a societal form is to be created; what structures of supports will be needed. What is required is a different philosophy.

The concept of stakeholding seemed for a moment to hold out the potential for a move in the right direction, at least on some primarily economic fronts. It was potentially developable into a coherent and progressive framework (see *Soundings* 2, editorial). Yet after a brief flurry of attention the concept seems to have been lost. The suspicion must be that it was indeed potentially too radical. Could it be taken up again?

In our last issue, Maureen Mackintosh edited the theme on 'the Public Good'. In her editorial she analysed the nature of social settlements, and in the articles which followed ideas were presented for new kinds of social settlement. The authors not only addressed the individual/social issue, but also pointed to the necessity of coming to grips with the fact that both society itself, and the way in which we think about it, have changed and continue to change. Here were addressed both the need for social cohesion and the imperative to confront social division: the necessity for the solidarities of universal provision *as well* as the imagination fully to address the fact of difference.[2] Ways forward do exist. (It might also be noted, *en passant,* that this kind of original thinking completely ignores the immobilising confrontations between 'traditionalist' and 'moderniser' which frame so much of

2. Maureen Mackintosh, Introduction to Public Good theme, *Soundings* 4, Autumn 1996, ppl04-8. Gail Lewis in 'Welfare settlements and racialising practices' in the same issue (ppl09-l 19) explores these possibiities in the context of one of the deepest divisions, that of racism.

what currently passes for debate.)

Instead of such original thinking, however, we have been treated to communitarianism, opportunistic moralising and the occasional resort to tabloid Christianity. The inadequacy of these forays is painful to behold. Jack Straw worries about getting children off the streets by late evening, while leaving completely unaddressed the wider moral bankruptcy of the world in which we now live. By such means questions of ethics are reduced to individual behaviour, and the individuals singled out for opprobrium are the usual collection of targets: single mothers, working-class lads, beggars, unruly schoolchildren, the 'underclass', and various 'rabble elements'. Nothing is said of the wider context. As Kate Soper recently pointed out, 'Our schools have remained havens of morality by comparison with the finance markets and the boardrooms of the arms exporters'.[3]

A rhetorical flourish on Labour's part, and a dollop of Christian moralising, will not strike a different balance from the one pioneered by Thatcherism - between individual success and social co-operation, between market forces and social regulation. Yet, precisely on this delicate cutting-edge, New Labour has consistently and regularly failed. It has consistently defined 'modernisation' as requiring us to make a choice *between* these alternatives - and has itself chosen the Thatcherite path (There is no alternative), instead of finding new forms with which to capture the popular imagination, for a new balance between them, a new deal, a new kind of social settlement. Following the most tumultuous seventeen years of political upheaval and change, this is a dramatic - and devastating - historic failure of political imagination.

Not feeling so good

One of the recent 'mysteries' of politics has been: if the economy is in such good shape (and at the turn of the year six ministers were paraded to give us this good news) then why is there no, or so little, 'feelgood' factor? It is a question which in itself bears witness to the emptiness of current political calculation. The aphorism 'it's the economy, stupid' may have a lot going for it, but economics and especially economic indicators are not all there is to life, or even to politics. Just take the same question, but pose it, not as from the Chancellor of the Exchequer puzzled at our lack of *joie de vivre* and gratitude, but as from the daily lives within which

3. Kate Soper, 'The moral high ground', *Red Pepper*, no 31, December 1996, p5.

we experience that economy: if the economy is in such good shape, why am I having to wait so long for my hospital appointment? why are there no hooks in my children's school? why are we treating old people so badly? On this last, there have been cuts in meals on wheels, cuts in home helps (and in what they are allowed to do - as a friend commented, the 'social' has been taken out of social services), there are now payments for services once provided free, there are shortages of hospital beds, and a lack of money for nursing-home care. The generation now in its eighties (that generation which so often lost parents in the first world war, which survived the grim years of the depression, fought the second world war and established the welfare state) ... that generation is now, when it really needs it, unable to rely on the secure provision for which it fought and which it built. In a society where this is so, how *could* there be a feelgood factor? If there were it would be obscene.

The first and most obvious answer is that the 'feelgood' factor (more generally, the quality of life) cannot be measured by macro-economic statistics alone. To start with, there are different *modes* of growth, each with their own effects. We have for twenty years been treated to the neo-liberal mode, of which the best-known effect is the production of inequality.

New Labour, as far as one can tell, has accepted the broad framework of neo-liberalism. Essentially Hugo Young is right in his assessment that, in the recent definitive statements by Labour on taxation and the acceptance for two years of Tory spending targets, a historic moment has been defined. These statements consolidate much of what has been emerging over the past 18 months, but they give the character and prospects of Labour in office a definitive and - until we hit the shoals and rainstorms of 'government' - irreversible stamp. The implications of all this are worth teasing out. First, 'it defined what the left alternative to right-wing politics...is'. This is the whimper with which the historic response from the left to 17 years of the Thatcherite neo-liberal revolution terminates. This is the farthest point to which the assembled intellectual and political resources of New Labour can take us. An alternative to the right does exist, Hugo Young assures us; but 'its aspirations are narrower than any the Labour Party has ever had before'. Second, it abandons any serious concern with equality. This too has been in the pipeline for some time. But it is worth remarking on just because Tony Blair is fond of saying that, despite all the changes, New Labour is still committed to the principles of the Party's tradition. However, we do not make

the argument here from the perspective of 'tradition'. The point is that this abandonment of any commitment to equality follows a period in which the grossest inequalities between the well-off and the rest have reappeared and in which there has been a grotesque feathering-of-nests by those in a position to determine their own salaries, perks and share options. That, indeed, was Labour's own analysis. And the decision to remain within Tory spending targets, and to refrain from increased income tax for the rich, is its considered response. New Labour's view is either that the inequalities engendered by neo-liberalism are no longer socially significant, or that they do not impair the vision of 'the good society', or that governments cannot do anything about them. Much of what is currently going on looks like the third option - educating the electorate towards diminishing expectations. This, in turn, provides a useful gloss on what is now meant by 'social justice' (the code phrase which has replaced 'equality' in New Speak) - and puts flesh on the observation by Blair that the purpose of Labour in government is to help those who 'have ambition and aspiration, want to do well... want to get on ... want to succeed'. Even in the context of 'compassion', this still really means success to the successful, to those who fail, failure. Here, a word from Outer Space seems in order: as John Redwood commented, if Tory tax levels and spending targets are right (and, we may add, the share-out of goodies is 'fair' and 'just') what possible argument is there for a change of government?

It may, of course, be possible that everything that New Labour wants to do in health, education ('Education, education, education'), transport, etc, (and has spent its entire time in opposition criticising the Tories for *not* doing) can be funded out of the windfall tax plus savings here and there, without any substantial rise in either public spending or in taxation. On the other hand, pigs might fly. We do not know any seriously-informed person who believes it and we don't believe the 'ordinary folk out there' are deceived by it either. A more plausible response is that New Labour is treating the electorate as if they could be 'spin doctored' like everybody else - not an approach congenial to winning an electorate's hearts and minds, especially once the election is over and the problems identified remain unresolved. Just to stay, for a moment, with education and 'the vision thing': 'we've got to see... that other countries are educating more of their children to a higher standard ... We are bad at educating the whole of the population' (Blair, *Sunday Independent,* 19 January 1997). Do Tony Blair or David Blunkett really believe that this is being achieved among our 'Tiger' competitors in South-East Asia by

holding spending on education 'steady'? Or that Chris Woodhead, who has made himself the chief apologist for and instrument of Tory education 'reform', and whose continuity in office Labour has just confirmed, really is the best and the only person to see a radical shift from the present drift to selection through to a successful completion?

Of course, moving people from the dole queue to jobs will gradually reduce the swollen social security budget but, apart from 'training', New Labour has no substantive economic strategy to create jobs and seems no longer to believe that it is government's task to have one. Welfare-to-workfare *is* something New Labour fervently espouses - what in the American context Dick Morris describes as 'triangulation' - 'a combination of the intentions of the Great Society and the Tough Love concept of discipline and responsibility'. One doubts whether, even after 'zero tolerance' and the New-Speak version of The Leader as Good Samaritan ('No, I don't give money to beggars, actually'), the electorate actually is aware of where all New Labour's brightest and best ideas are coming from. But little by little it is becoming possible to understand what New Labour's 'triangulation' project is really about.

Moreover, the presence or absence of the feelgood factor involves far more issues than these. New Labour is clearly aware, for instance, of the employment conditions on which the present form of growth has been so widely built. It speaks frequently of the casualisation masquerading as flexibility; it supports the limit of 48 hours on the working week: it will sign up to the Social Chapter. All this is eminently positive. But there are bigger issues here, about the nature of the work-culture in which we are embroiled. The hours worked in this country, by full-time workers, are longer than elsewhere in Europe. Much of the growth of the 1980s depended, especially in professional sectors, on a macho workaholism which reinforced the already highly gendered way we organise paid employment. Surviving in some sectors of the labour market meant having either an unpaid (usually female) partner or a low-paid (usually female) domestic help. In turn this reinforced, even could be used to legitimate, men's historic under-performance in the home. And it promoted the growth of a divided culture - of the resources-rich but time-scarce folk versus those with no money but time on their hands. The question of economic policy is, or should be, not just about how much growth, but about what form of growth and on what terms.

All this is just to touch the surface of why we're not feeling so good. The point

is that a party which had its finger on the pulse, a party which dared to ask big questions, could not only address these issues but (thinking more instrumentally) use them to re-align political debate on to terms more in tune with its own priorities.

Changing the terms

Tony Blair has spoken a number of times of his admiration for Margaret Thatcher. A part of the left declared itself horrified by such a 'confession'. But this reaction was surely both dishonest and disingenuous. How often during the 1980s did we not say that we wished that we too had someone with her degree of commitment, her strategic sense of purpose, perhaps above all, her sense of whose side she was on? So to feign horror at Blair's general proposition now rings hollow. Rather, the proposition should be more sharply interrogated: *what*, precisely, has Tony Blair learned from her? And what has he not learned?

One thing, for sure, is that he has not learned how useful adversaries can be. We have commented already in *Soundings* on how New Labour's politics has tried to become so all-inclusive (at least towards the middle-ground and the right) that no-one will suffer as a result of them (except, of course, by exclusion from attention altogether) (and the parentheses here are of devastating importance).

But a further thing which Tony Blair has failed to learn from Margaret Thatcher goes right to the heart of the approach to politics of New Labour. It is that political subjects, political constituencies, have to be created. Quite contrary to the passive approach of the minute statistical interrogation of opinion polls (where, in James Naughtie's recent words 'voters are statistics embroidered with human attributes, and not much else'), the creative aspect of being a politician is to tap into those incipient discontents and desires, perhaps as yet barely expressed, possibly even not yet consciously recognised, but which always exist to be drawn upon within a changing society. Political creativity consists of giving voice to these things, of bringing them into the open and moulding them into a politics. Now is the time to tap into the discontents wrought by neo-liberalism.

Tony Blair and New Labour are, famously, very nervous about 'Middle England'. It is this section of the population which they feel they must attract, in terms of votes, if they are to succeed at the election. They are correct. In a society in which Galbraith's 'culture of contentment' covers such a large part of the population it would be dishonest to argue that one could succeed on the basis of the poor and the excluded alone.

But Mrs Thatcher, too, needed to win over Middle England. One of the vital keys to her victory was the group of skilled working-class people in the West Midlands - Middle England geographically, upwardly mobile economically, trade-unionists then ripe for conversion to unbridled individualism, a group well-used to voicing their demands and at that time experiencing discontent with the welfare-state-as-was, and with perceived local authority ineptitude. They were not an identifiable force, but she made them into one. They were not born Thatcherite subjects. They could easily have stayed with Labour. But she touched chords which converted them to her own convictions. Mrs Thatcher did not just appeal to this section of Middle England - she created it. She moulded it, along with other sections of the population, in a particular political direction.

Tony Blair must create (or should have created) his own Middle England too. Admittedly, his task is a more difficult one than hers. His Middle - England-potential, of the home counties and of suburbia, is perhaps more settled in its ways, more wary of change: more conservative with a little 'c'. And yet it is evident that there are desires and discontents here too, understandings that all is not well in Conservative Britain. Some aspects of this have already been referred to: the lack of a feel good factor when economic indicators are apparently so rosy; the fact that we have lost a sense of what might be 'the social'. Other desires and discontents Labour is making some, though as we have argued rather feeble, attempts to address: the desire for security in old age, a gnawing fear about the decline of the NHS. (Yet surely some more passionate, imaginative, campaigning - drawing out those feelings and relating them to the nitty-gritty of actual policy proposals - would have enabled the policy proposals themselves to be more radical?...)

But there are other issues too where - had we started four years ago - at least some elements of Middle England could have been mobilised as a potentially radical force. Environmentalism is one such. New Labour is certainly making efforts in this direction, but it is piecemeal and passionless. Could not a clearer commitment, the communication of a sense of purpose, around this issue not only have touched chords in Middle England but also have connected up elements of that group with the concerns of a multitude of other sections of the community' It is this *creation* of political constituencies, pulling people in by appealing to aspects of their identities which draw them together

on particular issues - though they may be way apart on others - which surely should be the stuff of politics. Indeed, it will happen willy-nilly, as a result of 'the media' or the pontificating of political pundits, so Labour needs to seize the process into its own hands. The point is that on this and perhaps a range of other issues a different, more radical, Middle England could potentially have been created. Not the recording of opinion surveys and focus groups but the touching of nerves and the turning of those sensitivities into political positions...and political support for a more progressive government than the one we seem likely to get.

Internationalism is another such area of potential. There are few things more horrifying about the current pre-electoral debate than its pathetic insularity. This goes beyond the explicit chauvinisms lurking in any discussion of Europe, or even of BSE (see *Soundings* 3, editorial). It is more the fact that debate over the EU is virtually the only context in which international issues are addressed at all. What is never even formulated as a question is what might be a progressive approach towards the UK's position in the wider world.

There are many elements to this, potential policy-areas to weave together into a coherent position. Perhaps most prominent among them is globalisation. We have already carried debate on the degree and nature of this phenomenon and we shall be taking the argument further in future issues.[4] The character and form of globalisation are - must be - the subject of real argument.

Tony Blair, however, accepts a simple version of globalisation fully as a fact of life. He does so, presumably, in part because it enables him to hold up helpless hands in the face of demands he doesn't want to deliver on. ('Couldn't possibly do that… we're living in a world of globalisation you know.') He may also believe it: that the whole global economy is now in thrall to a few transnational corporations and the apparently uncontrollable (does nobody control them?) flows of virtual money between the financial centres of the world. But to accept this version of globalisation at face value is to refuse to face a whole range of issues.

Perhaps most importantly, it denies the fact that governments too play their part in determining in what measure, and how, the world economy will become globalised. Mrs Thatcher abolished exchange controls; western governments

4. Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson, 'Globalisation: ten frequently asked questions and some surprising answers', *Soundings* 4, pp47-66.

enthusiastically (with a few quibbles over sub-clauses) signed up to the Uruguay round of GATT There was virtually no political debate in this country about either. And Tony Blair, from what one can tell from his pronouncements on the subject, is also totally in favour of 'free trade'. So the globalisation which so unfortunately ties his hands on a number of potential policy issues is, it seems, something of which he is fervently in favour.

Furthermore,globalisation is not only an emerging material fact (whatever its precise shape and nature); it is also a discourse. It is a pivotal element in a powerful political discourse, one which is normative, and which has its institutions and its professionals (the IMF, the World Bank, the WTO, Western governments); this discourse is produced in the North, and it has effects. In the North (the First World), *it* is, as we have seen, the basis for decisions precisely to implement it, and, having done these things, it is an excuse for inaction. In the South it has enabled the widespread imposition of structural adjustment (with all *its* disastrous *effects on* the already-poor, and on women in particular), and the enforcement of export orientation over production for local consumption.[5] Globalisation, in this guise, is not so much a description of how the world is, as an image in which the world *is being made.*

Surely any party which considers itself even mildly progressive should be posing the question 'what kind of globalisation might we be working towards to produce a more egalitarian world *economic* order'? At the moment such a question has no likelihood of being raised by Labour; and yet, during the neo-liberal 1980s international as well as intranational income inequality increased. And globalisation is just one aspect of international questions. What of the arms trade, and our policy on aid? This too is a range of issues on which a more radical politics might connect with the growing feelings of unease which exist in Middle England.

We have touched on just four themes: the question of what is society?; the quality of life; environmentalism; internationalism. These are just examples of the kind of big questions which could be broached now; some of them will have to be addressed at some point, but so far New Labour has failed to do so.

It may be too late for New Labour to raise such questions now, before the

5. See the article by Duncan Green in this issue.

election. They conjure up debates which will take time to mature; they will not lead immediately to rapid rises in electoral popularity. But they are on the agenda, and they each touch deep understandings,if not always acknowledged, of what is wrong with society today. And each could be a focus for the reformulation of political debate on to more progressive ground. It is a shame 'twere not done earlier. But politics will continue after the election. It is time we began staking out the ground.

DM *& SH*