The morning after

It was great that night of May 1st. Labour Day.

Perhaps the most disorienting thing - the feeling most difficult to come to grips with - on that May Day Bank Holiday weekend after the election was that everything had changed and yet so little had been challenged. Not only the political but also the emotional landscape had been utterly transformed. Not only the Tories routed even in the most unexpected areas (Hove?! St Albans?!), but also a feeling of shared exhilaration - amongst friends, with the endless re-telling of the moment of Portillo's defeat, and more widely outside on the streets too. *The Guardian* captured it beautifully: 'yesterday the population went wild, British style. People were seen breaking into half-smiles in public while reading the papers; some thought about making eye contact in the Tube [regrettable London bias here]; others even considered talking to complete strangers, then remembered themselves and drew back' (Matthew Engel, 3 May 1997). Like many others who shared these feelings of uninhibited delight, this journal has had its debates with, and serious criticisms of, the project of 'New Labour'. Yet there was no disguising the joy which the victory, and the scale of the victory, awoke.

And yet of course so little change had in reality been promised. The *Guardian* also argued that 'an 18-year long Conservative experiment with the nature of Britain and the British people was obliterated' (editorial, 3 May). That is not so. Much of the fruits of that experiment both remain in place and will not be challenged. The nature of British society and of British political debate has been reworked by Thatcherism and there is no going back. Many of the institutional changes she and her successor initiated will perforce have to remain in place - they are either

irreversible or too costly at this point to reverse. And much of what in the early years of Tory rule seemed revolutionary has now been accepted by New Labour as common sense. So, no, the experiment has by no means been obliterated and much of it indeed seems set to stay around for some time yet.

So what was it, that May Day weekend, that felt, and made us feel, so very different? First, it was simply the fact that the Tories were gone. All the electoral analysis makes clear this was (as well as anything else) a vote *against* the Conservatives. The high degree of tactical voting and the variations in levels of turn-out are clear evidence of that. But - second - that was itself not just a negative thing. The vote against the Tories was not the result only of the fact of their endless internal divisions and squabbles, nor of the daily, degrading, evidence of their incompetence and corruption. Those things were undoubtedly important, and indeed themselves point to a desire for a basic minimum of decency and order on the part of the electorate. But it was also more than that. The scale of the vote, and the precision of its rejection of the Tories, pointed to a degree of disenchantment and unease with the direction of the Majorite project which was spread even more widely and deeply than we had suspected.

Reworking common sense

We wrote of this disenchantment in our last editorial. On the one hand there is the unease which touches personal lives: the insecurities which result from casualisation and 'flexibility', and from creeping privatisation of the welfare state. On the other hand there is the unease which is born of (the remnants of) a wider sensibility : that there *must* be such a thing as society and we must work out what it might be; that not even' nook and cranny of life should be subject to market calculation; that the new levels of inequality and unfairness have reached the intolerable; that we are doing irreparable damage to the environment and we must - somehow - stop, or at least slow down, and ponder what might be changed. In March we argued that the task of politicians (and others too, but we are concentrating on politicians here) is actively to create political subjects and political constituencies. Not only to ask people, or focus groups, what they feel/think/want *now*, but to touch those nerves, those maybe-still-barely-recognised feelings that can be the fountainhead for change. Mrs Thatcher did that. And, we argued, New Labour should far more actively have done it too. There was abroad, we argued, a kind of unease which cried out for turning into a force for progressive change.

The election results reinforce this argument in spades. The depth of the disenchantment was shown to be deep, widespread, and determined. That reinforces our argument that a project of political creation/conversion should have been begun some years ago (for these things take time).

But there is no point in talking about what might have been. The nature of the election result means surely that it can be attempted now, and with some confidence. In the last editorial we pointed to a number of areas ripe for such reworking: where the terms of debate need to be redefined; where a new political lexicon needs devising. Some will anyway force themselves on to the agenda (the nature of what we mean by the social; the need to replace the purely economic calculus of standard of living with a wider notion of the quality of life). Others need to be addressed by any government which takes seriously a mandate to be even minimally 'progressive' (internationalism comes immediately to mind - and Robin Cook's moves in that direction have already been exhilarating). What we need is a shifting of whole areas of what has come to be seen as common sense. (For, as we said earlier, it is only relatively recently that so much of our present common sense has acquired that seemingly unshiftable status.) This is a medium-term project. (It doesn't even necessarily imply any immediate spending commitments! - we say that not because we are against such commitments but because suggesting them is a guaranteed way to get yourself ignored - another bit of 'common sense' that will, eventually, have to go.)

What had changed that May Day weekend was the atmosphere. There was the relief of'their' departure; but there was also a desire to balance (at least and already) the priorities of the past with new emphases and responsibilities; there was a sense of possibility. There was a feeling (if not an expectation) that the parameters of political discourse might shift. The very scale of the victory itself released a sense of excitement and thereby - surely - enhanced the potential for change. There was space to open up, and to begin rethinking, reconstructing, the collective imaginary.

Imagining 'the nation'

In a tentative way, one element of this imagination has already been shifted by the radical change in the composition of Parliament itself. Election night will also stay in the memory because of the fall of so many men-in- suits, to be replaced by cheery, smiling women. The representation of ethnic minorities is still pathetically low,

but nonetheless a Muslim in Glasgow must present a challenge to thinking nationalism. There will be a woman in a wheelchair, a single mother, another out gay guy. The 'sense' of the nation, and of who has a right to represent it, has shifted remarkably.

Most of this change has come about through Labour's new intake. In a very palpable way the Conservatives on one side, and Labour and Liberals on the other, represent two different versions of what constitutes the United Kingdom.

It is mirrored in the very geography of their votes. It is in fact *not* simply true (as has often been asserted) that the Tories have been reduced to the shires. In temis of the votes of individuals, we have to remember that they still won between a quarter and a third of the votes in most cities. But in terms of Conservative hegemony over local culture and politics, the shires are indeed now their only domain. The expulsion of their MPs from Scotland, Wales and the major English cities has continued (where that was possible : there weren't any of them in some northern cities anyway). But with the reorganisation of constituencies they have now lost also in the smaller towns of the south east (Hatfield, Bedford, Milton Keynes, Harlow Watford, Stevenage, Luton, Crawley, Hemel Hempstead...)... such towns are now Labour, set in a sea of blue. The contrast between urban and rural in these parts is glaring.

It is a geographical irony. The Conservatives have had a much clearer view of 'the nation' than have Labour. They have frequently given voice to it - one of the latest versions being John Major's manufactured nostalgia for a village he never knew : warm beer, spinsters (why spinsters?) riding home on bicycles, and cricket on the village green. It is, of course, a concoction of images which only takes on, even approximately, material form in rural areas, and those mainly in the south. It has nothing to do with the windswept moors of north and west, nor with the windswept estates of big cities. Yet it was the Tories who spoke most of the nation and of the need for its continued (geographical) unity. The fact that they did it through mobilising an image which pictured only a small part of the country never seemed to bother them. And indeed for a long time it worked. It is to this small part of the country that they have now - in terms of representation - been reduced.

Labour, too, of course, in this election spoke much of 'One Nation'. They need now to come to grips with what they mean by it. Socially and geographically their votes bring together the vast array of differences which make up this country. A

rhetoric of one-ness will not cover over the differences and conflicts within it. Constitutionally there are the issues of Scotland and Wales - devolution and new assemblies could be (as could Europe) good exercises in how to think relatedness and difference together. But other divisions will be far tougher to address. The Tories left the people of this country far more polarised in economic terms, for instance, than twenty years ago. It was perhaps (though we doubted it) necessary to construct a notion of one-ness in order, initially, to overcome this and, simply, to win the election. New Labour in this campaign spoke often of how it would never fall prey to the demands of sectional interests (and even while the sectional interests of the City and of business were being lavishly appealed-to, there was always the possibility that all this was necessary as a precondition for doing other things: one bit one's lip).

But it is different now; victory is secured. And the complexity, difference and inequality which makes up the nation(s) of the UK must now finally be addressed. When Tony Blair arrived at Downing Street on 2 May and was greeted by all that unalloyed enthusiasm, the crowd was waving the Union Flag. Actually it was waving hundreds of them, provided I believe by HQ. It gave pause for thought (rather than simple rejection). It can be a strong and inventive strategy to take over the enemies' symbols and icons. And the Tories have surely tried to make the flag their own in recent years. But one doesn't just take over symbols; they have to be re-worked. The strategy really does have to be one of invention too. The Union Flag needs re-signifying if it is to be used by Labour - can it be made to stand for the differences within? and for less imperialist relations without? can there, for instance, be black in the Union Jack? Labour - and we - need to define this 'new' nation.

One hint of the exclusions already implicit in this notion of one nation was already discernible from the election figures. Mixed-in with jubilation at the 'landslide' must also be sober reflection on some of the numbers. First, in absolute terms Labour's landslide was achieved with half a million fewer votes than John Major garnered in 1992. Tactical voting and first-past-the-post mean that some of Labour's support will be showing up as Liberal votes. But nonetheless... Second, turnout was down on 1992, and indeed at 71.3 per cent was exceptionally low - the lowest since 1935. This speaks more of an increasing alienation from politics than of wild enthusiasm in all corners of the land. And third - and perhaps the most important point - the different corners of the land

indeed turned out in very different numbers. My rough-and-ready analysis says clearly that turnout was lowest in (some) Labour heartlands and, especially, in inner cities. In some inner-city constituencies it sank well down into the fifties. 52.5 per cent in Manchester Central, 51.9 per cent in Liverpool Riverside, the mid-fifties from Glasgow Kelvin and Shettleston, and in Birmingham Ladywood. Now there may be many reasons for this. Maybe such areas always have turnouts lower than the national average. The impetus to vote must be less when Labour's majority is huge and assured (indeed for me one of the emotions always provoked as the results come in is wonder at the sheer dogged persistence of the millions who turn out, election after election, to do the same thing: Knowsley South: majority 31,000; Easington: majority 30,000). Moreover, the picture is not a simple one : the turnouts in Blaenau Gwent (maj: 28,000), Rhondda (25,000), Sedgefield (25,000) and Torfaen (25,000) were all *above* the national average.

But, even allowing for all these qualifications and caveats, the low turnout in certain inner-city areas in particular must give pause for thought. How are the concerns of these places to be woven into the new Labour Union Flag?

Life beyond the parties

Indeed, how are the concerns of such places to make themselves felt? Tony Blair's acceptance of much of the rhetoric of individualism means that - certainly up to the election - he seemed to view collective identifications with suspicion. It may be, again with hope, that he viewed them only as an *electoral* liability, in which case doors may be more open now. If they are not, if collectivities continue to be regarded as an alien form, then it will be most likely be as a result of their association with 'old Labour'.

As we have argued before, one of the pieces of Blair's imaginary which must most urgently be jettisoned is that all-too-easy, inaccurate, and harmful distinction between old Labour and new. It is a binary polarisation into which many of us anyway do not fit. Its mobilisation in debate is a gesture which serves to delegitimise but not to answer any arguments. It closes down thought. (And anyway, as all social theorists know, binary thinking is definitely out these days!)

But, seriously, how will voices make themselves heard to this new administration? Where are the popular roots of Blairism? Or, more significantly now, beyond the election and the votes of individuals, how will they make themselves felt? That arena of collectivities and movements, between state and

individual, is attenuated now. During the election campaign the green movement made the news, and there was the fuss about Swampy; there was the churches' call for more attention to issues of inequality and redistribution; but not much more. It was a great disappointment, for instance, that the One World coalition, which attracted some attention a year ago, failed to make any impact at all. The silence indicated in some areas by a turnout of not much over fifty per cent must not remain a silence now that the election is done.

Indeed, the raising of voices and the mobilisation of social forces beyond the parties can be important to the government itself. It can demonstrate support for even minimally radical measures which dare to go beyond the establishment's interests (or even - dare to think the unthinkable - against them). Bill Clinton's attempt at health reform in the US found itself isolated and beleaguered precisely because of the lack of such forces. What appears to have been substantial grass-roots support for the policy had no means of making itself heard above the bellowing and fury of the medical-industry lobbies. In the UK, such 'fury' (in a typical headline - 'fury at government's attempt to...') might well be orchestrated by tabloid newspapers. In its editorial immediately after the election, and in an attempt to nudge the new government into a greater degree of radicalism, *The Observer* wrote that 'Labour should have wised up after the campaign; hysteria from its political opponents does not mean either that they are right or that they command widespread support. It needs to remember and succour the 62 per cent that voted for change'. Quite so. But the very fact that we were surprised at the size of that percentage, and at its canniness in voting tactics, is precisely an indication of its lack of voice outside of the polling booth. How, *between elections,* is this pressure for change going to make itself heard?

In the editorial of the very first issue of *Sounidings* we spoke of the need for a wider conception of politics. That there must be a 'politics-beyond-politics'. That there is more to radicalism than what is accomplished by governments. That political actors, narrowly defined, are normally carried along by these wider currents. New left politics, anyway, must not be confined by being constructed only in relation to formal parties. What develops outside of Parliament will be at least as important, over the next five years and hopefully more, as what goes on within.

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