

Avoiding disenchantment

New Labour has found its own way of sparing those of a leftward inclination from the painful experience of disillusion. This was to devise a programme that was so minimal that it discouraged its supporters from having extravagant hopes in the first place. But our determination not to become locked in a cycle of disappointment reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s has a much deeper root than this. We believe that the political development that we have all been engaged in, since the election victory of a May 1998, is not predetermined in its outcomes. It has been the commitment of *Soundings* since its inception to explore the spaces surrounding the formal political process, and to try to identify growing points which might shape an emergent agenda in the medium term. We remain hopeful that such growing points will in due time emerge.

We also recognise with satisfaction the many aspects of energy and competence shown by the Blair government, of which the continuing Northern Ireland peace process has been so far the most important single outcome. The implementation of devolution is another such step. It is not a negligible thing for a Labour government to have retained its full popularity, and a clear grasp of its own sense of political purpose, after more than a year in office, even though some of us would have preferred a policy script that was different in significant ways, and even though the Government's overriding purpose seems to be to ensure its retention of office for a considerable term.

In our current issue, some contributors take critical issue with the New Labour government, nonetheless. Chantal Mouffe's article, 'The Radical Centre; Politics

Soundings

without Adversaries', identifies the problems of a politics that seeks to avoid conflict at almost any price. The effect of such an all-inclusive idea of consensus, far from drawing the whole population into a process of democratic reforms, is, implicitly, to grant a political veto to almost any interest that can threaten the loss of some fraction of support. Unfortunately, in this calculus, those interests which speak for the power of business have weighed more heavily than those identified with Labour. We have seen a number of examples of withdrawals under hostile fire since the general election. Philip Arestis and Malcolm Sawyer's 'New Labour - New Monetarism' points out the continuities between the economic assumptions underlying Thatcherite and New Labour economic programmes. The government thus accepts its subordination to a global market whose compelling signals are rates of interest and capital flows. These are political and economic constraints which the government has imposed on itself.

These two articles reflect our continuing commitment to create a robust debate around several of the key fault-lines in the New Labour project, even though we acknowledge the possibilities that its political success makes possible. We have already published a sequence of articles on globalisation.¹ This is one key concept on which we wish to transform debate, to call into question the status of globalisation as an unchallengeable 'reality' to which governments and peoples must merely adapt themselves; instead we argue that it should be recognised as an ideological construction, and as the effect of specific social and economic forces. In the same way, whilst recognising the inevitable and (sometimes) productive effects of markets as modes of organisation, we will continue to insist in *Soundings* on the recognition of their costs, and on the need for markets to be bounded, regulated, and sometimes replaced, by more social and democratic practices. We have explored alternatives to such markets in our issue on *The Public Good*. In summary, we see the role of a magazine of the left at this point as being to put in question the currently prevailing ideas of consensus, of markets, of globalisation, of inequality,² and of undivided national and ethnic identities. We shall press New Labour to identify itself as being -

1. By Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson in *Soundings* 4, by David Goldblatt, David Held, Anthony McGrew, and Jonathan Perraton, and in an Editorial by Doreen Massey, both in *Soundings* 7.
2. For example in Richard Wilkinson's article in our special *Next Ten Years* issue of last year.

unavoidably - on one side of the political conflicts which inevitably form around these central lines of division between left and right.

Two articles in this issue explore areas which fall outside the usual agendas of political parties. Mario Petrucci examines the claims of future generations, raising rarely-acknowledged issues of values and priorities. This article contrasts, in a principled way, with the short-termism of most political decision-making. Angela McRobbie writes about the role of popular music as a key form of expression for young people, viewing music as a self-created language through which multi-ethnic identities are created and lived. This kind of engagement with generational difference is very different from the often superficial attempts at cooption we see from politicians. McRobbie's article develops themes which we earlier explored in our (ironically titled) *Young Britain* issue.

The European Left

The theme for the second half of this issue is the European Left. This reflects our commitment to Europe as a potential container for a more democratic and socially responsible form of capitalism than can now be sustained within a single nation state - still less nation states under the hegemony of the United States. The crisis of the most social-democratic of nation states provides one of the main points of departure for the themed section, which was edited in Sweden by Martin Peterson. The vision of a new European left which shapes this issue has three key dimensions. First, that it must include both western, and eastern and central Europe. Articles on Lithuania, Slovenia, and Hungary' identify positive points of departure, as well as risks, from these three national perspectives. Secondly there is the argument that the growth of an autonomous civil society, rooted in social movements as much as in the institutions of class solidarity, has become the key to a progressive politics. The third and most important dimension is the need to recognise and respect the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural character of European society, if its democratic basis is to be secured, let alone advanced. In this European Left issue, the movements of the ultra-nationalist right, whether in France, Germany, Lithuania, or in more localised forms in Sweden, are seen as a serious threat to democracy and social advance. A new European left cannot be built, it is argued, unless this challenge is met, through the development of a multi-ethnic constitution for Europe.

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