

The return of the political repressed

As we complete this issue, the fuel protest has just been called off, the Government has fallen behind the Conservatives in the polls, petrol queues have re-formed and dispersed in response to rumours, and Gordon Brown has been accused of having lied on the *Today* programme. It is a fast-moving situation, and by the time *Soundings 16*, is published, much else will no doubt have happened, just as unexpectedly. Even as we write, a missile is reported to have struck the (illuminated) M16 building on the South Bank of the Thames.

It seems above all that politics is back, and in more dynamic and conflictful ways than have been seen for some years. The signs of class struggle, as some might once have called it, are reversed. Instead of the strikes and poll tax revolts of the 1980s, we see the Countryside Alliance and truck drivers mobilising against the government. (The self-employed have been the vanguard of the right before, road hauliers and truck drivers having been instrumental in the downfall of Salvador Allende in Chile.)

Sooner or later, a New Labour government that was attempting to change anything was going to encounter serious resistance, and we had better become prepared for what follows. Although it was easy to criticise New Labour's control-freakery, etc, there was always some comfort in the fact that they, and not Hague's Conservatives, were the ones in control. High fuel taxes had the purposes of energy-saving, and of discouraging the unsustainable growth of car

and lorry traffic, as well as of raising taxes while nobody (as it was thought) would notice. It will be a setback to transport and energy policy if governments are now forced to lower the cost of energy to consumers. The assertion of the prime importance of the private car and truck will be an ideological victory to neo-liberalism.

It turns out that some bad early judgements have come back to haunt the government. What matters in the Brown affair is the reminder of the earlier murky dealings with Ecclestone over tobacco advertising in Formula 1 - not whether he misrepresented a conversation he had in the back of a car with Tony Blair. Plainly the Millennium Dome is not all it might have been. The Government, having shelved John Prescott's transport bill for two years, only acquired a transport policy a few months ago, and so far citizens have seen few benefits from it. Refusing to increase progressive taxation meant that regressive taxation - which includes petrol tax - had to be increased. Much more significant than the disruption of petrol supplies is the fact that most of the public say in opinion polls that they support a reduction of tax, and not all of this can be put down to biased questions. Increasing taxes by stealth is all very well, but what happens if some 'stealth taxes' are unpopular, and opposition becomes mobilised against them? Wouldn't it have been better if the taxes had been fully explained and justified in the first place?

Geoff Mulgan and Robin Murray presciently argued in 1993 for a greater measure of 'hypothecation' of taxes, that is for closer linkages between taxes and the expenditures which they fund.¹ They argued this on democratic grounds, and as a way of addressing the political problems of tax-aversion. There were always going to be practical difficulties in hypothecation, but its advocates rightly saw the 'democratic deficit' in current tax policy, and the problems which would probably arise from this. Clearer connections will now have to be spelled out between the transport system the government wants to see, and ways in which revenues are to be raised to fund it.

Soundings has never had any doubt that a government of the left-of-centre is going to be about the balancing of interests and contending social forces. We have supported a greater 'pluralism' in politics (for example, through devolution - the theme of a future issue), and in the London Mayoral Election. The New

1. Geoff Mulgan & Robin Murray, *Reconnecting Taxation*. Demos 1993.

Labour government has hitherto preferred to make its judgements about balance in secret, so to speak, without allowing the inevitable seams, rifts and choices to become too visible. Personal rumour and gossip have been filling the space that should have been taken up by political debate. This crisis may have changed that. In a press conference, Tony Blair talked reflectively about the difficult problems of achieving balance between conflicting interests and opposed points of view, and how absolutely central this task of balance was to government. He was right. This 'balancing' is now surely going to have to be accomplished in a more public way. The government can only make progress on energy and transport, and indeed in other fields, if it learns to make its case, and to involve on its side those who support what it trying to do, but who have hitherto been left to sit and watch. It is because we think there need to be more populated and active political spaces that *Soundings* has supported the Government's constitutional reforms, and wants them to go further. A government that 'listens' will show that it recognises different points of view, whilst not giving into every pressure group that takes it on.

The Government retains many assets. It will soon, for example, be able to remedy its neglect of the old, and demonstrate its continuing commitment to ensuring decent living standards for all. But normal political life has now returned, just when many might have thought it dead for ever; and we had all better be prepared for bumpier rides ahead.

MJR