

# Inclusive citizenship

'Our aim has to be to spread prosperity to every part of Britain, every town and village, every estate in our cities. But we recognise to do it not just policy must change, but the fundamental philosophy of government must change.' This assertion by Tony Blair, as he launched the Government's *Opportunity for All, Responsibility from All: A New Commitment To Neighbourhood Renewal* in January this year, is one we might all welcome. Changing the old top-down approach to social progress in order to involve 'neighbours' as participants, makers of their own community, is surely the right approach; the old government divisions, in which separate ministries and agencies dropped resources onto individual wastehaps of misery and lack, are rightly condemned. The naming of Britain's overwhelming social failure as 'social exclusion', and the establishment of a Social Exclusion Unit to pioneer a new government approach to individuals who fail to thrive, demonstrates a new, more vigorous, method of making progress happen.

For professionals - of the state, the voluntary sector, the churches - such commitment to changing derelict areas promises much. But as a means of changing the political trend towards helplessness and cynicism in the poor, the new approach has little to say. The notion of citizenship which has been reiterated by ministers of the Labour government is not fundamentally different from what past Conservative ministers, such as Douglas Hurd and John Major, had to say. The citizen must be an active, responsible individual, who reports malfunctions in his community to the authorities, attends participative meetings to have her say, helps the police with their inquiries and cleans up her dog mess.

The substitution of the word 'community' for the word 'state' was first signalled

in Labour's policy reviews of the late 1980s. Thus flagged up, the ship of 'community' labours on. A myriad of new 'community' quasi-agencies have been set up as part of the process of making us good citizens. Few are able to respond to this chivvying as amateur citizens. Most of us lack the time, or the knowledge, or the hope. The few patches in the media which are part of a citizen process of learning, listening, thinking, deciding may be like the Greek city forum - a market place for the privileged few. Mostly, the media renders politics into an unedifying joust between media and political celebs. Overall, neither media nor news agencies nor community makes us good citizens because there has been no shift in the structure of thinking which makes the people in any neighbourhood, town or village the masters of their own place. Rather, with the Government's preferred mode of targets and performance indicators, we remain answerable to government (13 cwt of rubbish successfully removed here, 13lbs of dog shit there, target met, neighbourhood rewarded); they are not in any practical way answerable to us. The new state experts who drive the state machinery are those who know the techniques of devising and inspecting measurements. It is not part of their remit to find out what people want and then do it.

So far, the impact of globalisation both as an idea, and also as a partial and erratic practice, has been bad for democracy. Attempts to respond to the massive geographical shifts of labour and capital which globalisation entails, as well as to the disappearance of power into faceless corporations and institutions, have been puny. General Motors moves its plant from one country to another, corporations and governments hire ships to dump their poisonous waste somewhere else, and the only powers citizens have to change this lie in the arcane workings of the top-down highly bureaucratic institutions of the European Union. There has been no change in the idea of citizenship to equal those shifts. At first sight, in fact, it seems as though New Labour (like the progressive Tories before them) have simply reverted to the idea of citizenship that prevailed in the early twentieth century, as governments struggled with how to incorporate the newly enfranchised working class into state and society. The answers then were to impress on individuals the need to take their new responsibilities seriously - to follow the political news and the rules of physical hygiene, so that an elite, at least, of workers would be a bulwark against the infections of mob hysteria and tuberculosis.

The agency which in fact made twentieth century democracy possible, and which did more than any government or state institution to incorporate the

individual as citizen, was the mass political party. In time, these new agencies of democracy were themselves incorporated into the working of the state and came to act as engineers of state machinery, not tribunes of the people. It is a defining mark of New Labour that its architects have had nothing to say about the future role of the political party whose role in democracy has virtually withered away.

Can the people ever be 'masters' of even their own neighbourhood in the twenty-first century? Or does the 'new approach' to community regeneration simply mean finding a local elite who will be bulwarks against poor hygiene and a contagious cynicism? The political voices which most eloquently express the sense of being trapped in a corrupt inertia are from the populist right. They too are looking for a new elite, whether that's drawn from fox-hunters or the impatient entrepreneurs of new media and new technology. They are quickly inventing a discourse about corrupt and self-serving metropolitan elites in whose ranks shelter homosexuals, black youth, asylum seekers, man-hating women, the politically correct. New Labour has no discourse of rebuttal of this view.

**W**hat Labour does have, which many veering to the right do not, is the notion that all living in Britain, from whatever city estate or rural village, belong to the same society and have obligations to each other and to the idea of a more egalitarian and just society. This idea, and whatever *practices* are attached to it, is the citizens' bulwark against elites of the populist right sheering off from impoverished communities and denying a common citizenship. But, as Tony Blair could say, common citizenship cannot be imposed from the top down. The experience of sharing resources, hopes, ideas and, indeed, maladies, has to be spread out from the wasted communities to jump the cordons sanitaires around those who think their only problem is proximity to the poor. Neighbourhood renewal and community action zones may be brilliant innovations - but not if they are confined to the poor and resourceless; in which case, like 'inner-city' and 'care in the community' they become mere euphemisms for pariah status.

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