INTRODUCTION

A very British revolution

Gerry Hassan

The re-election of a Labour government was not quite the coronation the party managers and spin doctors had envisaged. Yes, Labour was returned with a triumphalist majority of 167, but on a disastrous turnout of 59.4 per cent, as five million more voters decided to stay at home. Labour's historic second term - a genuine watershed point in the history of the centre-left - was won with a mere 10.7 million votes, an amount Labour has exceeded at every post-war election, with the exceptions of the disasters of 1983 and 1987.

This was no accident, as some have suggested, induced by a campaign that failed to connect (with the exception of Prescott's now legendary punch). Public disengagement with politics has been facilitated by Labour's style of governing, and its approach to some of its key policy issues such as reform of the public services and constitutional change. The public sector reform agenda has now - after the idiotic election mantra of 'schools and hospitals' (inanimate buildings that surely no one is actually against, but which do nothing on their own) - shifted onto New Labour's obsession with modernisation as privatisation. This defines the debate in a conservative framework, between a politics of limited top-down modernisation and a public sector union defence of vested interests. There is no acknowledgement of the need to modernise public services, shift from producer to consumer interests, and develop different mechanisms of involvement and consultation by workers and users. Instead, we have a New Labour Treasury-defined debate which only offers us the failed status quo or dubious public-private partnerships.

The same is true of much of the constitutional reform agenda. It is self-

evident that devolution has changed the political realities of Scotland and Northern Ireland, to the extent that every day citizens notice the difference. People living in Dundee or Derry notice that they now live in places which march to a different political agenda from the rest of the UK, and they now practise politics with a whole set of different rules, procedures and timescales. The rest of the UK has been barely touched by the constitutional reform agenda, and there is a real danger, as myself and Jim McCormick argue in the first piece in this collection, that Labour's next stage of change could see English regional assemblies established which do not connect to people. It has so far been a very British revolution, but it has not really begun to change Britain outwith the political classes (Scotland and Northern Ireland excepted).

The UK general election turnout was not just the product of New Labour control freakery or the politics of spin; that would be too easy an answer and too simple to rectify. It is the product of decades of wear, tear and erosion to the bonds of social capital that inter-connect us and define the communities we live in. Partly, it is a product of an Americanised political culture, whereby the debate is conducted on an agenda of middle-class values and interests, because those are the people that tend to live in marginal seats, are inclined to be floating voters and also turn out to vote. Ten years ago in the UK there was little difference between the social classes in turnout; now the ABs vote 68 per cent and C2s 53 per cent. An Americanised style of political debate results in an Americanised political system.

The political geography of the electoral system aids this process of dislocation. We do not have a fair voting system: not all votes in all places are equal. Labour can afford to discount and disenfranchise traditional Labour voters living in heartland seats, who shift to non-voting, whereas it needs to keep recently acquired ex-Conservative voters in marginal seats. It can see turnout fall dramatically in safe Labour seats, assuming that there is nowhere for these voters to go, but if ex-Conservative voters return to their previous home it would cause New Labour concern.

This all matters. It matters in terms of the legitimacy of the Blair government; it matters in terms of what kind of mandate it has to enact radical change. Remember when the centre-left used to criticise Thatcher for being elected on a mere 42 per cent of the votes, and the fact that a majority of voters had never voted for her. Well, at least she was elected with the support of one-third of the

electorate, which is pretty good compared to Blair's 25 per cent in 2001.

At least some of the American political classes discuss what has gone wrong with democracy; but there has been a paucity of analysis and comment in the UK since 7 June. When Reagan was first elected President in 1980 it was widely seen in the media as a landslide, but he only won 51 per cent of the votes on a 51 per cent turnout of registered voters. This motivated Gil Scott Heron, one of the inspirations behind rap music as a social and political commentary from the 1970s on, to write his legendary song about Reagan, *Movie*. In it he criticised the prevalent view that there had been a mandate for Reagan, as 26 per cent of the registered voters voted for him, concluding that, '74 per cent of registered voters did not vote for Reagan, so there was a landslide, but it was going in the opposition direction'. One can question Scott-Heron's grasp of psephology, but he was right about the fact that American politics were fast becoming a minority interest, and also in articulating the anger in America's black communities about mainstream politics.

Fast-forward twenty years and American politics are no better, but at least a section of the left is still trying to engage with what has gone wrong and offer suggestions. A recent US book, *Why Americans Still Don't Vote* (by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, Beacon Press 2000) examined the historic trends which have produced such disillusion across age, education, income, region and ethnicity. The authors cite US survey evidence as showing consistently, for the last twenty years, that this increasingly 'truncated electorate' is shifting the political debate rightwards, while the disenfranchised majority are Democrat supporters who could clearly have changed election results.

The forward march of New Labour halted?

Few public institutions are safe from the new politics of disengagement. The Conservatives have constantly claimed in their leadership contest 'around 300,000 members', but they have claimed this for the last four years. New Labour's membership levels did impressively buck the trend of long-term decline at the start of Tony Blair's leadership, rising in the pre-1997 period to 420,000. However, recent evidence has shown that Labour's membership has now fallen dramatically, possibly to as low as 229,000 (*Tribune*, 29 June 2001).

This fall in Labour's membership needs to be put into some historic context; this is as dramatic a fall as the decline that occurred during the 1964-70 Wilson

government as a result of devaluation, supporting the Vietnam War, *In Place of Strife* and numerous other unpopular, reactionary politics. Wilson's government was massively unpopular in the country at the time and Labour's lost members never returned, leaving CLPs moribund and politically bankrupt. This Labour government has not endured any period of prolonged unpopularity, yet these figures tell us something about the strength of its popularity.

It would be revealing to find out which members have left and which have remained. Have New Labour's cheerleaders who joined between 1994-97 stayed or quietly baled out? Or is it the hard left and traditional left, who have been so dismissive of the government in the columns of *The Guardian*, that have packed their bags?

Labour's decline in membership is completely understandable given the limited top-down style of politics that New Labour promotes. New Labour's vision is one of conservative modernisation which does not require active constituency parties and thinks that because of the media and modern campaigning tactics, it can do without active, enthusiastic advocates for its message up and down the land. Political parties have become the home of the discredited and the pub bore: the main reason for being a party activist now is surely the politics of self-advancement and the prospects for selection as a councillor or MP. The idea of joining a political party to express solidarity with a certain ideological view or set of values has become increasingly obsolescent.

While political parties are more and more becoming empty vessels, political activity is shifting elsewhere. Not very far from where I live is the inner-city Glasgow constituency of Shettleston. It is a disparate community, made up of bits of Glasgow's East End, the poorest part of the city, and spreading across the Clyde to take in the Gorbals and parts of the Southside. This seat - a Labour seat held by an Old Labour MP, David Marshall, had the lowest turnout in the whole of Scotland - 39.7 per cent - the third lowest in the UK.

Shettleston is by an independent rating the most unhealthy constituency in all the UK, and one of the poorest and least hospitable places to stay in Western Europe.[1] What did Glasgow City Council - Labour dominated to an extent unimaginable in a democracy - do to this battered community? It decided to shut

1. Mary Shaw, Daniel Dorling, David Gordon and George Davey Smith, *The Widening Gap: Health Inequalities and Policy in Britain*, Policy Press 1999.

its local swimming pool, Govanhill Pool, which served the local Asian, Jewish and other communities. Traditionally in a labourist city like Glasgow, the council closes facilities without a murmur - it had already shut several nearby swimming pools. But Govanhill had had enough, provoked by the closure of other facilities prior to the pool. This area of apathy and disillusion decided to occupy the pool - as I write the occupation has just passed 111 days - with the council serving notices of eviction to the protesters. What is interesting is the way this local campaign has energised a community and wrong-footed the council: 26,000 people have signed the petition to keep the pool open, more than the 20,000 who voted in the recent general election. 'Who has the real mandate?', asked one of the campaigners.

The point about Govanhill is that there are lots of examples of this across the country. In Wyre Forest, in Martin Bell's strong showing in Brentwood and Ongar, even in the British National Party votes in Oldham, people are registering their disillusion with mainstream politics. And the Govanhill example has another relevance. This is a decent, respectable working-class community trying to keep its head above water and finding it is getting little support from the local council. There was a perception in Govanhill that really deprived areas like the Gorbals and Castlemilk were supported by the council and Scottish Executive via Social Inclusion Partnership funding, but that middling areas such as Govanhill were left to their own devices: to deteriorate until they got to the point where funding and support would kick in. Is this any way for government and public agencies to act in an age of joined-up government?

Without an overhauling of attitudes and practices by government, constitutional reform will not make any real differences to the lives of most citizens in the UK. Political analysts might like to get hot under the collar talking of things such as asymmetrical devolution and multi-layered governance, but a more fundamental and basic transformation is needed in how government works and delivers. Labour's second term has to be about more than 'schools and hospitals' - it needs to address the vision and values that fill them.