

Rocky times

The Guardian's 'Ten More Years for Tony' campaign, a publicity spoof organised by G2 to coincide with the leader's speech at the Labour Party conference with the help of students from Bournemouth University, included the unlikely sight of banners proclaiming 'Students for tuition fees', 'Unions for PFI' and 'Two Tiers are Better than One', while 'Tony rocks' was printed on bars of Bournemouth rock. 'What do we want?' the students yelled, 'Foundation Hospitals', their mates replied. 'When do we want them?' 'Now'.

The Guardian satire was not as cranky as first thought. It is a measure of New Labour's submission to spin that some delegates believed it was for real, while the party engaged its own students in similar 'I Love Tony' initiatives. But let's take this idea a bit further. Imagine a real demonstration organised by New Labour supporters. What might it include? A group of Basingstoke Social Entrepreneurs waving a banner with the words 'Another Public Sector is possible'. A noisy contingent of middle managers holding up the traffic on Hyde Park Corner demanding more corporate social responsibility? No doubt somewhere along the route we would come across a former President of the National Union of Students, now a columnist on a national newspaper, reminiscing to one of New Labour's youthful policy advisers about demos he attended in the 1970s. 'We used to think these things made a difference', he might chuckle.

The reason why this scene is difficult to imagine is that New Labour has replaced the politics of movements, ideas and social reform with managerialism. Hostile to the new generation of 'new global' activists, either unable or unwilling to comprehend the idealism behind these movements, it has been unable to develop a response to the most pressing question that its social democrat allies in Europe are now asking, namely 'what kind of globalisation do we want?'. Its link with its own intellectual heritage is purely a matter of rhetoric, with figures such as R.H. Tawney, Aneurin Bevan and Tony Crosland brought out at opportune moments as a sedative to those

remaining delegates who joined the Labour Party in the cause of social equality. Its only connection to the social movements of the 1960s is the relentless post-radicalism of its veterans from that era, most notably John Lloyd and David Aaronovitch, whose columns of pro-war and anti-left sentiments increasingly resemble a 1970s confessional.

This means that while Gordon Brown's intervention at the Labour Party conference offered the prospect of an alternative leadership, it needs to be put into some perspective. The main argument put forward by Brown and his supporters was how to reconnect existing Labour policies with traditional Labour values. The avoidance of the terms 'New Labour', 'foundation hospitals' and 'top-up fees' from the Chancellor's speech was his chosen way of making this point. Yet the problem is of a much deeper ideological nature. Social democratic values can't be added as an appendage to New Labour's mission statement.

As Stuart Hall argued in the last issue of *Soundings*, New Labour's project has been the 'transformism of social democracy into a particular variant of new liberalism'. (This article has sparked off some interesting discussion, and we will publish some responses to it in Issue 26.) The New Labour project is simply not amenable to adjustments to bring it back within the fold; its whole trajectory is based on moving to embrace the market.

If there was one defining 'transformist moment', I would pick out the abandonment of the *Commission on Social Justice Report (CSJ)*, which arose from the Gordon Borrie commission set up when John Smith was still Labour leader. The CSJ was an attempt to provide a modern social democratic response to a new era of welfare and education. Rawlsian in its attempts to redefine social justice, it was based on very thorough research and in-depth analysis of the state of the nation. Its report contained a vivid and relatively spin-free account of the main socio-economic trends of contemporary Britain. Its authors involved the social movements - that is the people involved in pressure groups, campaigns and research bodies - in collating the evidence of poverty and inequality. It brought together intellectuals and welfare experts beyond the ranks of New Labour think tanks. It took a holistic, modern and innovative approach to the welfare state, one that was rooted in the traditions of the left.

The rejection of the CSJ by New Labour under Blair's leadership can

now be seen as a result of the economic austerity package put together for its first term. It marked, however, a much deeper shift in its agenda. Not the ‘reinvention’ or the ‘re-imagining’ of the welfare state as the CSJ intended, but, in Hall’s words, its ‘de-construction’ - which he described as ‘New Labour’s historic mission’. It is New Labour’s commitment to the ‘third way’ that has facilitated the transformism into neo-liberalism. Despite its much mooted ‘timely’ arrival in political discourse, and for all its claims about the convergence of different ideological traditions, and its admired pragmatism, malleability and newness, in reality the third way has meant the end of politics. *Soundings* has argued for some time that managerialism is pivotal to New Labour’s third way outlook. Alan Finlayson has argued that managerialism is the core element of New Labour’s agenda; while Chantal Mouffe argued in these pages that the third way represents a ‘politics without adversary’. In this sense, the third way *in practice* is a contemporary take on the old ‘end of ideology’ debate. Who needs intellectuals when you have managers? Why bother with ideas when what counts is ‘delivery’. The ‘third way’ has been unable to engage with the grain of cultural and social change. It has no roots in the new political generation. It has been entirely unconvincing in its arguments that it provides the basis for a modern left. It is decidedly uneasy with the notion of dissent - as its conflict with the BBC over the war has shown; its preference is for ‘managerial populism’, which is now undermining the liberal ethos of that and other public institutions (for a detailed discussion of the future of public broadcasting in Britain, see Alan Fountain in this issue; and for a discussion on New Labour’s inability to break with spin, see Ivor Gaber’s article).

For New Labour’s own ‘disengagement from politics’ we need look no further than the extraordinary silence during the Gulf War of Anthony Giddens, its leading intellectual. In view of the grandiose claims about its global impact that adorn his many books (next to endorsements from leading statesmen), his silence on the war has been all the more remarkable, especially given the significance the third way has attached to global security and the centrality of international law and democratic governance. There really is no third way between war and peace. Indeed it could be argued that the war went some way in reaffirming the importance of left and right. New Labour was the only centre-left party in western Europe to support the war. Most

other social democrats in Europe found themselves reconnected to their grassroots through the vast movements that grew in opposition to the unprecedented unilateral actions of the US. The Progressive Governance conference hosted by Peter Mandelson that immediately followed the war, in an attempt to bring the Western European left together, can thus - and this is the view of some who attended - be seen as the third way's official 'wake'. (And you know that things are getting pretty grim when Mandelson is brought out yet again as the Prime Minister's saviour.)

The recent intervention by the Compass group of New Labour think tanks is therefore to be welcomed, albeit with some caution. Their argument that New Labour needs a new ideological direction, to clarify its commitment to equality, and to offer a different version of globalisation from neo-liberalism, could help to re-establish social democratic ideas on the left of British politics. Perhaps even more significantly, the endorsement of ideology will give life back to politics itself. As Compass argues, ideas and values have too long been subordinate to managerialism and technocracy. Yet this new thinking must engage beyond the ranks of the Labour leadership or indeed the Labour Party itself. It cannot be a private conversation amongst New Labour policy advisers and think tanks: it needs to be one which engages, in a more open and heretical way, intellectuals and activists beyond its ranks. Crucially, any renewal will depend on addressing this need for a different idea of globalisation, a move that would start a dialogue with the new movements and may help facilitate a closer relationship with European traditions of social democracy.

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The prospects for New Labour and the left

As part of our evolving discussion on the future of New Labour and the left, we have started a process of asking a wide range of critics and commentators to make short contributions on the causes of New Labour's having lost its way and what might constitute the basis for a new political direction for the British left. These are some of the responses - there will be more in the next issue.

Donald Sassoon

The point, surely, is not that New Labour has lost its way but that it never had one and never seriously looked for one, unless by 'way' we mean an electoral strategy: the removal of the kind of policies and values which were an obstacle to an electoral victory. This it did very successfully, though we shall never know whether it would not have won in any case in 1997 and 2001 (albeit with a reduced majority). Where it has been successful has been in its handling of the economy by continuing the policies of the previous Conservative administration, which had reduced unemployment with a relatively low inflation rate. It has also been mildly successful in its 'new deal' policies; these, however, do not seem to me to be incompatible with Old Labour (if by Old Labour we don't mean the 1983 Manifesto 'suicide note' but just old-fashioned social democracy). Equally, devolution of power for Scotland and Wales was part of the armoury of Old Labour and would have been implemented by Kinnock or John Smith.

Otherwise it looks grim: 'we shall lead in Europe' has turned out to be an absurd boast. Britain has been unable and unwilling to promote any new initiatives in Europe save splitting it in the face of US policies. Its foreign policy is based on deceit and an extraordinary contempt for public opinion. The whole PFI/PPP story consists in stealing Tory policies at a time when public disaffection with private handling of former public services is at its lowest. Its 'reform' of the House of Lords is laughable. We shall end up as the only democratic country in the world with a non-elected second chamber. And its asylum, immigration and refugee policies are aimed to satisfy a lobby (Daily Mail, etc) which will never be satisfied.

One should ask oneself whether the time has not come to take advantage of the crisis of the Conservative Party and work towards a hung parliament. Perhaps a Lib-Lab majority would feel safe enough and confident enough to think for the longer term and not chase the marginal voter.

Gary Younge

Blair has less lost his way than reached the end of his chosen path. His conduct over the last year has not been aberrant but consistent with the hallmarks of his premiership. His alienation of natural allies, presidential/imperial style, his reliance on spin from Downing Street and rhetoric from Wapping, his attacks on the liberal media and his distance from the Labour Party in whose name he governs, have all been characteristic of his six years in leadership.

Before Dr Kelly's death, Blair's shortcomings were tolerated either as a price to pay for his promised achievements, the inevitable rough and tumble of his position, or the lack of a viable alternative. From now on, he is not so much exercising power as simply holding on to it. The basis for any new direction for the left should be to return to the principles that distinguish left from right - internationalism, anti-racism, equality and social and economic justice. One need not be prescriptive about the manner in which they are applied in order to apply them to all manner of initiatives.

Nina Fishman

As a prudent political veteran, I had no evidence upon which to base expectations - either optimistic or pessimistic - about New Labour in power. But in common with a great many others, I was delighted when they won the 1997 general election. Their victory ended eighteen years of Tory rule, far too long for any political party to be in power. In 1998, I wrote that the Blair government's attitude towards two critical issues would determine my verdict upon them: the decision whether or not to join the Euro, and the decision to support proportional representation for electing MPs. Since the 1997 Manifesto had left these issues open, I opined that it was feasible for an energetic, determined Prime Minister to deal positively with both. I regret that Blair has backed away from decisive action on both. Today, we are much further away from joining the Euro, and achieving PR for the Commons. (Though, there is now PR for elections to the devolved legislative chambers and the European Parliament.) Unfortunately, over the past three years, the culture of timidity has beset this administration. Their horizons have narrowed. The decision to support the USA in the Iraq war, and stand by the 'old alliance', was the most conservative Blair has taken. Regrettably, New Labour has failed to engage with the fluid, unpredictable new world ushered in by the Fall of the Wall in 1989. They have so far failed to understand that the most novel and historic task on their agenda is playing a full part in shaping the enlarged Europe which will emerge in May 2004. There is still time for them to learn, and I hope they will do so.

Richard Holloway

Like many people, I gave Tony Blair and New Labour the benefit of the doubt after the 1997 election. I realised how phobic they had become over Labour's unelectability during the long Babylonian exile of the Thatcher years. So I

expected an emphasis on caution and prudence as they demonstrated to the country that they could now be trusted with the economic management of the nation. But even in the midst of the caution there were some significantly adventurous moves that I applauded: devolution, the minimum wage, the determined effort to get people, especially unemployable young men, back into work. I did not have much interest in the technical debates about PFI and Foundation hospitals, being more interested in good ends than debate about the best means. No, what finished it for me was Iraq, Blair's fifth war. Economics is a notoriously inexact non-science, so I can forgive our leaders for almost anything they get up to in that department. But taking the nation to war is the most profoundly important moral decision any government can take. It must never be done promiscuously. The decision always has to be taken on morally overwhelmingly persuasive grounds. Like most people in the country, I am now persuaded that Blair led us to war dishonestly. Wars put every other element of politics into very distant perspective. Using our children and our taxes to kill other people and disrupt the complex evolution of societies we don't understand is a criminal act. As far as I am concerned, Tony Blair has revealed himself to be a self-dramatising narcissist with a fatal weakness for grandiose foreign interventions that have seriously destabilised an already volatile international situation. As far as I am concerned, that means my support of Labour is on hold until it gets rid of him.

Zygmunt Bauman

Tony Blair's government has presided over further (gradual, unlike in Thatcher's time, yet relentless nevertheless) erosion of the social state - that is a state built on the assumption that, just as the carrying power of a bridge is measured by the strength of its weakest pillar, so the quality of the society it administers is measured by the condition of its weakest members; and a state that endorses a collective insurance policy against individually suffered misfortune. The government also presided over further deregulation of the labour market and so of the rights of labourers. In the light of that experience Blair's winning slogan 'trust me' looks hollow. It seemed appealing at a time when voters read into it a promise to mitigate, perhaps eliminate altogether the gnawing feelings of uncertainty about their future and the precariousness of their present. But these hopes have been dashed: if anything, the sense of insecurity has grown over the years. Little has been done to block its sources and even less is promised to be done;

following the American example, anxiety born of insecurity has been swept under the blunkett - channelled away from its sources and transferred to the Home Secretary's department, having been re-moulded on the way into concerns with personal safety, and re-defined as a problem of law and order rather than of solidarity. Further fragmentation of society and an accelerated wilting of the already frail social bonds have been quick to follow. The tasks of resolving socially gestated and incubated problems have been left to individual acumen and private (mostly missing) resources. Labour ministers seem to repeat after Peter Drucker, the guru of American neo-liberal businessmen, 'no more salvation by society' - thereby sounding a death knell to the defining ambitions of the left. And they sing another sad and sinister song borrowed from the triumphant neo-liberal choristers: 'there is no alternative' ... Isn't there indeed? Insisting that an alternative world is possible was always the trademark of the left. In its heyday, anyway: in its time of glory - and relevance.

Jeremy Gilbert

To see the question phrased in terms of New Labour losing its way makes my heart sink. New Labour has not 'lost its way' because New Labour is doing exactly what New Labour always said it was going to do. To suggest that New Labour has 'lost its way' is to imply that its commitment to implementing a neo-liberal project is somehow incidental to its political identity, and suggests that those asking the question are still living in that residual social-democratic dreamworld which is the only place where people still believe in such fairy-tales. New Labour as such has always been a neo-liberal project. The idea that there was ever, even before the 1997 election, any prospect of New Labour implementing a socially progressive or democratising agenda is a fantasy indulged in by those survivors of the 'soft left' and the New Left tradition still unable to accept how comprehensively we were defeated at the very moment of New Labour's constitution.

The current situation of the British left presents us with a profound irony. New Labour and its radical opponents - the remnants of the revolutionary left, the anti-globalisation movement, the greens - actually share an analysis of the overall global conjuncture and New Labour's position in it. Both sides recognise that in a context characterised by the absence of any organised opposition or countervailing force to neo-liberalism, governing elites will inevitably be driven to enforce market relations across a wide range of social

spheres. Both recognise that without mass action - of a type which New Labour calculate to be extremely unlikely and their opponents seek continuously to agitate - there is no alternative to 'Thatcherism with a human face'.

The only people who do not seem to realise this are those on the respectable left, in think tanks, the press and trade unions, who continue to comfort themselves with the vain hope that the government might be 'persuaded to change direction', without them themselves ever having to dirty their hands in the grubby business of grassroots politics. The recent statement by Compass is only the most tragic example: offering not one shred of evidence that its dream of capitalism 'managed' for the benefit of all could actually be realised, the statement seems to completely ignore all of the lessons of global politics during the past three decades. Where can one find a single example of a government successfully implementing progressive policies without massive backing from a self-consciously radicalised public? Where can one find any evidence to contradict the old marxist hypothesis that social democratic institutions survived only at capital's pleasure? Where is a single reason to believe in the absurd notion that governments might implement democracy from the centre, 'giving up power', as Tom Bentley keeps asking them ever-so-nicely to do, without having it taken from them? Why would a government like this one - pressured day and night by global corporations but barely troubled at all by trade unions - implement egalitarian reforms? Doesn't the fact that neo-liberal policies have been being implemented by governments of both left and right since the beginning of the 1980s demonstrate that this is a forlorn hope? Doesn't the destruction of the social fabric of Eastern Europe, the barbarities inflicted with impunity on third world populations, the recalcitrance of the EU in the face of the most reasonable requests for trade reform, teach them anything? The Compass statement is clear on the destructive effects of capitalism, and it asserts its belief that capitalism can be managed so as to fully mitigate these effects, but it offers not one shred of supporting evidence for this belief. Is it any wonder that the public remains sceptical towards the power of politics to achieve anything, when the political classes continue to produce this kind of insubstantial froth, this ineffectual hand-wringing in the face of the very historical processes which are rendering them irrelevant?

The revolutionary tradition is strategically bankrupt and the green and anti-globalisation movements have yet to begin to grasp what it would mean to build genuine popular support. But they, along with the ordinary non-voters, are quite correct in their assessment that only far more radical forms of politics than those envisaged by Compass or other neo-social democrats could have any hope of challenging the power of multinational capital. The only organisations in the UK which would have the resources to mobilise people around a genuinely democratising agenda are the trade unions, but first they must be disabused of the idea that there is any hope of Gordon Brown riding in on a white charger to save Social Democracy, a myth New Labour is happy to lend subtle credibility to, staving off as it does the threat of more serious revolts from within the labour movement's ranks. They must be persuaded finally to accept that the Labourist dream - one nation, one party, one movement, implementing social justice from Whitehall - is dead. The great obstacle to this breakthrough remains the belief that New Labour was ever anything but a defeat for the socialist tradition and a death-blow to social democracy. The tone of this question, like that of the Compass statement, indicates that it itself remains part of the problem, not part of the solution.

That solution must lie in the willingness to explore the hypothesis that entirely new forms of democratic institution might have to be built from the ground up, that existing institutions might have to be not simply used, but deconstructed: radicalised beyond recognition. It must lie in a willingness to envisage political projects which, while eschewing the old Utopianism of blueprints and final-destinations, are willing to acknowledge that capitalism can only ever be understood as an obstacle to democracy, and that without democracy there can be no advance in human happiness at all.

Kevin Morgan

Under its present leading lights, it is difficult to see New Labour doing anything but become more illiberal, more abjectly Atlanticist, more negligent of the environment, more beholden to large private corporations and more disregarding of public institutions and the values enshrined in them. Only in the field of redistribution and social equity does there seem to be much room for manoeuvre, and it is difficult to think of Brown as Labour's potential deliverer. No doubt Blair is not actually worse than soulmates

like Bush and Berlusconi, but it is we in Britain alone who have to take our neo-liberal medicine with great dollops of nauseating sermonising, as if Rupert Murdoch had bought a stake in Moral Rearmament. With the Labour Party so carefully managed, and the Lib Dems more likely to drift towards coalitionism than radical schemes for electoral and political reform, it is difficult to see the impetus for change coming from within the established party structures. Instead, whether it is from Europe, organised labour or the anti-war, environmentalist and anti-globalisation movements, the best chance of something happening within the Labour Party seems to be something happening outside of it.

Contributors

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To join in the discussion send in your comments to soundings@lwbooks.co.uk

Places and politics

The second main focus of this issue is a look at the relationship between places and politics: Ash Amin, Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift look at the ways in which more fluid theories about spatial flows mean that the whole question of regional policy needs to be rethought; Gerry Hassan and Hugh Mackay write from Scotland and Wales respectively about politics in these still new arenas; Geoff Andrews looks at the long intertwining of geography, history and politics in Sicily; and Francisco Domínguez writes on the growing challenge to neoliberalism in Latin America.