



What is 'new' Labour? What has it done during its first twelve months of government and what has it failed to do? And what are the implications of its enduring popularity for the Conservative Party?

David Selbourne shows that, behind its sub-Orwellian rhetoric, 'new' Labour is a Party of contradictory principles, and too often of no principles at all. And while it has done right as well as wrong, many of its actions – unlike its presentation – have been ambiguous and confused, while others pose a long-term danger to society as a whole.

So while 'new' Labour's recognition of the importance of duty should be praised, so too must its mistakes of judgement, its authoritarianism, its ethical failures and its arrogance be condemned.

David Selbourne concludes that the Conservative Party is now faced with a historic opportunity. Having seen so many of its own policies adopted and even extended by 'new' Labour, the Tories must now rediscover their faith in civic traditions and institutions. Only then will they be able to counter the public relations success story that is 'new' Labour.

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CENTRE FOR POLICY STUDIES

## One Year On

*The 'new politics' and Labour*

DAVID SELBOURNE





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1998

## THE AUTHOR

Educated at Manchester Grammar School and Balliol College, Oxford, where he was Winter Williams Law Scholar, David Selbourne was called to the Bar in 1959, but spent 20 years, between 1966 and 1986, teaching at Ruskin, the college of the labour movement. While still a Ruskin tutor, and in the first years of 'Thatcherism', he wrote *Against Socialist Illusion: A Radical Argument* (Macmillan, 1984). Leaving the college in 1986 after a dispute affecting his academic freedom and in circumstances condemned by the government-appointed Soman Inquiry, he then published a first-hand account of the fall of the East European communist regimes, *Death of the Dark Hero* (Cape, 1990). This was followed by the influential *The Spirit of the Age* (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993) and *The Principle of Duty* (Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994, 1995; 3rd edition, Abacus, 1997). His latest work is his translation of *The City of Light*, the account of the travels of the mediaeval Italian merchant, Jacob of Ancona, which was published by Little, Brown in October 1997, and is being translated into a dozen languages.

*The Centre for Policy Studies never expresses a corporate view in any of its publications. Contributions are chosen for their independence of thought and cogency of argument.*

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Conclusion: 'new' Labour, 'new' Tory

## FOREWORD

DAVID SELBOURNE HAS BEEN described by the *Guardian* as a 'right-wing philosopher'; and as a 'socialist writer' by the Institute of Economic Affairs. It will be clear to readers of this pamphlet that he is neither.

For while those of a Conservative disposition will find themselves nodding in approval with much of this pamphlet, so too, at other times, will they feel a sense of irritation that some of the achievements of the last Conservative governments have been undervalued. To take but one example: many of the Conservative reforms in education and health were inspired by a desire to re-invigorate popular participation in those local organisations – the schools and hospitals – which affect people most directly. These reforms were intended to reverse the effects of the 'nationalisation' of local politics and to encourage the re-birth of what, I believe, Selbourne would call the civic order. They are therefore surely worthy of support, not condemnation.

Yet nor will Labour supporters be entirely comfortable with this examination of Labour's first year in office. For while Selbourne gives the Government credit for some of its reforms, so too does he articulate the deep concerns which (I suspect) many members of the Labour Party have also felt but not expressed.

Selbourne devastatingly examines 'the intellectual void into which all Western left parties fell after the old-socialist



debacle; a void which has been partly filled by a public relations effort'. He asks whether the Labour Party majority stands on doctrinal sands, pointing out that 'strong-arm spin-and-smarm were never leading aspects of its address to the electors, not even under Harold Wilson'.

Selbourne's approach is original, radical. It is above party politics. It recognises that arguments over the management of the economy have, to a large degree, been settled (in the Conservatives' favour). He fervently believes that 'it is the duty of the liberal-minded to defend and improve, not undermine, those institutions of the civic order which sustain our identities as citizens'. He concludes that, as a result, there are new fields of engagement towards which our politicians must now march.

Selbourne argues that a new political and moral agenda lies ahead. If he is right, I have no doubt that the Conservative Party can, as it has before, rediscover its natural position and its reputation as a 'truly civic party, mindful of British history, respectful of parliamentary democracy and free of disabling "new age" illusions'.

This pamphlet does much to explain why it may have no alternative.

Tessa Keswick  
Director, Centre for Policy Studies

## TAILING THE TORIES

IN THE FIRST YEAR of the Labour Government the 'tailing' of Tory policies, wrong policies as well as right, has been extensive. 'Some things', Tony Blair declared before his victory, 'the Conservatives got right. We will not change them... What counts is what works' (April 30 1997).<sup>\*</sup> Indeed, in the run-up to the election, Labour was actually pushing the Tories – Michael Howard, Gillian Shepherd and others – into hurried and often stringent proposals, especially in social policy fields, in order to compete at the hustings with a 'Toryising' Labour Party.

Both right and left misjudged, each in its own way, what was going on. 'I simply do not believe', said John Major, 'that Labour could or would sanction tough spending decisions, stand up to the public sector unions, or carry forward privatisation... Nor can I have any confidence that it would show any permanent respect for enterprise and free markets' (November 11 1996). Wrong. 'If Labour gains power', declared Margaret Thatcher, 'we know what to expect: socialism, red in tooth and claw' (October 9 1996).

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<sup>\*</sup> Dates in brackets following quotations are of publication in the British national press. They do not necessarily correspond to the actual dates on which a quoted statement or speech would have been made; this was generally the day, or two days, before. Where I give a newspaper source, this usually indicates that the reported words appeared only there, or that the article was of particular interest.

More wrong still. The *Guardian*, ten months before the election, in an editorial entitled 'How Labour May Lose', in its turn warned that 'if the Blair agenda continues to sound like a continuation of more or less present government policy... merely administered by a new group of politicians, then Labour will lose and deserve to' (July 1 1996).

It *did* often sound like it and Labour won an 'overwhelming' victory. Or, rather, with 43.5% of the vote, it gained a majority of 177 seats in Parliament. *The Times* epitaph was wrong, too: 'As John Major goes to the scaffold... the era of Thatcherism closes' (April 30 1997).

Since then: on Government spending limits, on public sector pay restraint, on guiding aspects of social security reform, on benefit cuts, on law and order, on the limitation of trade union rights and activities, on the principle and extension of privatisation (as of prisons) and the readiness to sell off government assets, on the private financing of public sector projects, on caps on local authority expenditure, on inheritance tax, on the reduction in long-term capital gains tax and corporation tax, on educational standards, on the retention of selective grammar schools and the charitable status of private education as well as the refusal to impose VAT on school fees, on the principle of specialist schools such as city technology colleges, on student loans and the selling-off of student debt, on the demotion of the state pension and its linkage with the rate of inflation rather than with earnings, on the preservation of the purchaser-provider split in the NHS – that is, the preservation of the 'internal market' – and even on support for the Murdoch interest, the berating of beggars and the praise of Enoch Powell, Labour has followed, emulated or even outbid the Tories. And on Northern Ireland, it has built on the Tories 1985 Anglo-Irish accord, the 1993 Downing Street Declaration and the 1995 'framework agreement' to reach the Stormont Agreement of April 10 1998, brokered by the United States.

In other matters, it has gone further than did the Tories in, say, inviting business to help run 25 'education action zones' in areas of poor performance; or in abolishing student maintenance grants and imposing university tuition fees together; or in drawing up a complete 'Register of National Assets', or new Domesday Book, of government property which may be sold. It has followed closely in the intellectual tracks of, for example, Peter Lilley: it was he, not Tony Blair or Gordon Brown, who declared that 'if poverty is a moral issue, then work is a moral issue too. There can be no bigger challenge than helping people off welfare and into work' (June 14 1996); and, in tandem with the No. 10 Policy Unit, it was Peter Lilley who went on to announce that 'the government is to increase the pressure on single young men to take jobs with a new strategy called "welfare to work"' (August 18 1996). There may be arguments about 'who said it first', but that Labour, to change the metaphor, is singing from the same hymn-sheet in this and so many other respects cannot be questioned.

That Labour has made one ideological volte face after the other, since and including the changes to Clause Four of its constitution, is also not in doubt. Yesterday, (misguided) Tory proposals to cut benefits to single mothers were opposed by Labour. Today, they are promoted (and then compensated for). Yesterday, City Technology Colleges were condemned in the name of the (failing) comprehensive ideal. Today, in the words of David Blunkett, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, 'specialist schools are at the heart of my vision... of an educational system where education caters for the individual strengths of all, rather than assuming a bland sameness for all' (November 6 1997). And so on.

'Every day the Government does something we like', Madsen Pirie, Director of the Adam Smith Institute, has said. 'Tony Blair is doing everything we asked. Why shouldn't we be on side?' (*The Times*, January 23 1998).

Now *there's* a question for the Labour Party!

## LABOUR MOVEMENT

TO BEGIN TO MEASURE THE DISTANCE that Labour has moved, and is still moving, one can gather samples, or droppings, at various points on the path it has taken. For instance, in Tony Blair's first speech as leader to a Labour Party Conference, in the autumn of 1994, he spoke of 'the public services we provide together to improve the quality of opportunity for each of us'. The services which could not be 'left to the market' included education, the health service, the armed forces and the police, the railways and the Post Office. 'These are public services', Blair declared in 1994 to resounding applause, 'they should be run for the public, and they should stay in public ownership for the people of this country'.

Nothing daunted, Labour in office has left the health service and the railways – and much else besides – 'to the market', and continued to privatise the prison service. Yet as late as April 1997, one month before Labour's victory, Jack Straw, about to become Home Secretary, told the prison officers' journal *Gateledge*: 'This is surely one area where there can be no free market. We cannot break contracts which already exist. But we shall certainly make no new ones and, within the existing budget, shall take back into the public service privatised prisons as soon as contractually possible'.

A mere month before the election, this was not (or did not turn out to be) the authentic voice of 'new' Labour; the political caravan was passing on quickly. But it was also not the authentic voice of 'old' Labour either. After all, in 1992,

at the time of the previous election, Labour under Neil Kinnock was proposing to renationalise the water industry at cost, to increase the basic state pension in line with inflation or earnings, whichever was the higher, to abolish the NHS internal market, to restore free eye and dental checks, to abolish selection at 11, to return opted-out schools to local authority control, to impose VAT on school fees, and to 'scrap' the House of Lords and replace it with an elected second chamber.

But if 'what counts is what works', *that* (and Kinnock) plainly did not work.

## THE EVENTS OF 1989-90

IT WAS THE GRADUAL FALL of communism through the 1980s to its crash in 1989-90, and the havoc which it wrought with the old 'socialist project' as a whole, West and East, to which these domestic political uncertainties can also, in part, be traced. If this Great Fall brought 'gangster capitalism' – and widespread disillusion with market economics – to the East, it brought a lost sense of direction to the Western left. It affected, too, those social democratic parties, like Labour, which believed they owed nothing at all of their politics to the kind of command economies and state socialism of the regimes which had collapsed.

Indeed, even anti-Communists on the western left have been disoriented by the effective disappearance from the world scene – North Korea, Cuba and (diminishingly) China apart – of a *dirigiste* politics of centralised economic redistribution and enforced egalitarianism; disoriented by the disappearance of a politics which set its face against the free market and free market institutions, and which saw, or professed to see, the libertine societies of the Americanised West as expressions of the culture of a Babylon, or Sodom and Gomorrah.

The majority of socialists, even the most liberal – many saw no contradiction between the terms – preferred a bipolar world, in which one 'morality' offered some check to the other. The most ardent, on political left and right alike, needed a hated adversary or cultural foe, capitalism for some

and communism for others, in order to give their own value system its focus and purpose. And if it was not there to the degree they needed, paranoia would invent it. This polarity kept, or seemed to keep, the world in its place.

The accelerating disappearance of the familiar ideological landmarks not only put most left intellectuals out of business. It also brought open season for the revision and cancellation of past beliefs to all Western communists and socialist parties, however token or bogus the socialism of most of the latter. Although Gordon Brown, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, still uses the word on special occasions, former left firebrands in Labour's ranks, who in 1968 had seen themselves as putative Red Guards, could now call for the term 'socialism' to be 'humanely phased out' (Kim Howells, September 15 1996). Getting away from its old connotations, I myself coined the term 'social-ism' in *The Principle of Duty*, to signify a social philosophy founded not upon egalitarianism but upon the reciprocal duty of citizen and civic order, and which would be distinct from the 'individual-ism' of the anti-social rights' lobbies.

The truth was that, in the wake of the overthrow of 'real, existing socialism', as it used to be called, the Labour Party, like other Western socialist or quasi-socialist parties, no longer had much idea about where it was headed. Moreover, afflicted by the general loss of historic sense which has accompanied the decline of educational standards in Britain, it no longer had much clue about what it had once been either. 'Class' was out (with a lot of other sub-Marxist baggage) as a criterion of vice or virtue in the individual. 'The State', especially after a decade of Thatcherite hostility to it, now had a negative sense, conjuring up the bunkers of Stalinist oppression, while 'the market' came to be seen, for want of any other viable standpoint 'on the left', as a morally neutral – more or less – expression of human endeavour.

After the fourth electoral failure in 1992, Labour had few choices if it was to avoid oblivion. One option was to espouse the radical but empty left-libertarianism of the hedonistic young, stuck with their desires only for more 'rights'. But this could not win Middle England. Another option was to adopt, usually in the name of 'modernisation', the wrecking impulses of the ex-leftists, mainly Trotskyites, who had regrouped under the banner of 'constitutional reform' and who crazily declared that Britain was 'not a democracy'. This would not do either, even if Labour in office has played around with and to some extent acted on both options – their advocates are well enough represented behind the scenes. Instead, the search for a 'third way' (and the 'middle ground') between free-market or *laissez-faire* dogmas on the one hand, and old socialist or 'state-interventionist' dogmas on the other, was the only realistic choice, or so it has appeared.

To find such a *via media* is not easy. The setting up by Labour in office of more than 150 policy review bodies, at the rate of a new review almost every two days, is some indication of it. The frequently-heard complaint – sometimes justified, sometimes not – that Labour has 'no coherent vision' reveals it also. So does the vagueness, even vacuity, of many of the formulations of Labour's purpose. No one could find the 'radical centre', that ostensible target of Labour aspiration, on any political map whatever. Impoverished terms of 'new' Labour's vocabulary – 'globalisation', 'modernisation' and many others – now stand in for thought.

Indeed, it is in the use of such terms that the effect on Labour of the failure of socialism is clear. For they express a sense of the *powerlessness* of the nation-state, unless 'modernised', in the face of the 'global economy', before which we are invited to stand, or kneel, in awe. The 'global economy' – or, a further refinement, the 'global market society' – was once known, more accurately and concretely, as 'international capitalism in its monopoly phase'; fighting talk, but no more.

Thus, as Tony Blair has put it, 'in a global market today, you are up to the mark with your policies and succeed, or you are found out very quickly and you fail' (January 10 1998); or, more meaningfully, 'we on the centre-left must try to put ourselves at the forefront of those who are trying to manage social change in the global economy' (Tony Blair, February 7 1998); or, more meaningfully still, 'There was communism, socialism, capitalism, Thatcherism, and we have something else now. It boils down to a theory of social justice and individualism in the context of the global market society' (Anthony Giddens, February 5 1998).

With 'global', 'global economy', 'globalisation' and so on, the word 'people' also has an empty prominence in Labour's new lingo, embedded often in declarations an Orwell would have mocked or feared. 'Ours was not a victory of politicians but of people', Blair declared at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton in September 1997; 'the people took their trust and gave it to us'. Or, at the previous 1996 Conference, 'We are back as the people's party and that's why the people are coming back to us', a sentence that Winston Smith might have spoken in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And so we have also had the 'People's Budget', the 'People's Europe', the 'People's Funeral', the 'People's Government', the 'People's Honours', the 'People's Lottery', the 'People's Millennium', the 'People's Money', the 'People's Princess', the 'People's Priorities' and others.

This populist, post-socialist language of the 'Third Way' is also a small part of the price which the left (and the country) has paid for socialist defeat.



## THE PARTY THAT LOST THE 1997 ELECTION

BUT WHATEVER THE WEAKNESSES of 'Third Way' Labour – I will come to its strengths later – its victory in the last election was an easy and deserved one.

The Party that lost had shown, among other things, that issues such as 'the market' and its values, or even the condition of the economy and current levels of taxation, were not sufficient, politically and morally, to engage public sympathy or to address private fears. In relation to what Conservatism had become under its flagging Thatcherite impulses, with 'sleaze' and division superadded, there was no political alternative to Labour.

It was, however, untrue to say, as did the ex-SDP Tory peer, Lord Skidelsky, that the Tories had 'run out of ideas entirely' (*The Times*, December 18 1996). It was, rather, that a party in the grip of a 'small-government-and-low-taxes' dogma, and which seemed to stand for little more than 'value for money' in the name of the 'consumer' of former public goods, possessed a too limited political scope and an insufficient ethic to be called back to office. The reduction of personal and other taxes is not the chief end of government. Moreover, that 'the State should progressively disengage and do less, but that what it does it should do well', as John Major put it (September 19 1996), had nothing to say to those who feared for the nation's social fabric, and for whom 'the market' was no panacea.

Worse still for the Conservative Party, there were some Tories who continued to pretend, as their political boat foundered, that their alleged 'conservative' respect for Britain's public and civic institutions was compatible with disposing too many of them to the four winds. Moreover, the previous Government was perceived as wishing to sell parts of the national patrimony (and to cut welfare) in order principally to reduce personal taxes; and as celebrating the dispersal of public goods in the belief that some kind of state-free utopia, or Nirvana of individual freedom, beckoned to them on the political horizon.

It was a true nadir for a once-great civic party to have come to be seen as 'the nation's pawnbroker', as the *Guardian* described it (January 28 1997). It also made it almost impossible for Conservatives to persuade the country of the 'dangers of devolution' to the integrity of the United Kingdom, when that 'integrity' – or wholeness of its civic identity – had itself been undermined by other aspects of Tory policy. By the time that Michael Forsyth was proclaiming that 'the United Kingdom is in mortal danger [from Scottish devolution]', and that 'we must reclaim our birthright... and win back our country' (October 9 1996), there was only a shrinking band that paid attention.

No wonder. Even Stephen Dorrell was calling before the election for 'an end to the system whereby most local authorities have a monopoly over the delivery of care for the elderly and children' (July 9 1996). The Government was also said to be considering privatising the road system (July 17 1996), selling Britain's social security offices (July 30 1996), 'hiving off' the adoption services (December 27 1996) and selling the whole of the Inland Revenue service (January 28 1997). Education had become a 'market' and its outcome a 'product' (*The Times*, first leader, January 29 1997); and the Party had greatly advanced the commercialisation of Sunday in the name of market freedoms, while simultaneously

## ONE YEAR ON

blaming the Church of England for being 'reluctant to preach morality' (John Redwood, December 24 1994). This, in fine, had become a non-civic and non-Conservative Party, which had dissolved London's government and sold County Hall to the Japanese; had closed so many city hospitals, often in origin charitable institutions, and for long the objects of voluntary endeavour; had abandoned to the streets in the name of 'care in the community' many individuals who were in need of residential supervision; had in other words acted too offensively, and too often, against that sense of British propriety which is civic. To sell the 999 emergency service, as was done for a song, was simply not on.

Other proposals – such as to sell the Port of Dover (to the French), the Royal Naval College, the royal observatories, the air traffic control system, the Patent Office and other public institutions – were resisted. But many others, which were carried through, had struck at parts of the civic order within which the national civic identity, an often impalpable but definite thing, is found. The citizen is a member of a supra-market public order where private interest should have no part; you may not sell the body politic itself – its limbs, its arteries, its life-blood – to the highest bidder.

Such actions allowed Labour, although it had offered little resistance to them in opposition, to present itself the more easily as the party of the nation. Moreover, certain hurried sell-offs, especially of the former public utilities, were perceived (rightly) to have been at too cheap a price and to have unduly enriched certain individuals at the expense of the public good. There might be, it was true, 11.5 million private shareholders in 1997, where there had been only 3 million in 1979. But, after 18 years of privatisation, public spending was still taking more than 40% of national income, while the net worth of the public sector – after sales of public assets to the tune of some £64 billion – had simultaneously fallen from 49.8% of GDP in 1990 to 11% at the time of the

## THE PARTY THAT LOST THE 1997 ELECTION

election. This was described as a 'shocking decline in public wealth' – that is civic wealth – 'equivalent to some £5,000 for every man, woman and child in Britain' (Anatole Kaletsky, *The Times*, May 2 1997).

The Party that lost the election had also clashed too often, and to no wise end, with the Churches; made a messy battlefield of necessary educational reforms; dissolved the national railway system to the disadvantage (often) of the travelling public; and foolishly provoked and antagonised the judiciary and the medical and teaching professions. The Tory Party did not lose the election because it had been 'uncaring', divided on Europe, or accused of 'sleaze'. It lost electorally because it had lost its civic sense, its sense of the public good – that sense which had once made the Conservative Party the 'natural party of government', but which for the foreseeable future it has ceased to be.

And because the election was not principally about the economy, the Tories' economic successes counted for little.

## THE PARTY THAT WON

THE PARTY THAT WON sought, with astuteness, both to arouse the electorate's hopes and to dampen them. It presented itself as a party that had shaken off the incubus of state-socialism in its old Labourist form. Its 'Third Way' melange, as put forward at the election, was open-minded on markets, pragmatic on the public sector, tough on moral standards in public life, youthful in manner, manipulative of the media and the public mind, and equally concerned with poverty and company profits, 'social exclusion' and enterprise, 'social justice' and competition, chalk and cheese.

It would not only be 'positive' on Europe and understanding of business, but do its duty by the deprived, the poorly-paid and the old, protect public health and welfare, and act toughly on educational standards and public order. It would be the party both of the culture of youth and the protection of tradition, be both in tune with the spirit of the age – as it saw it – *and* defender of strong families and established values.

There would be improvements to public services and 'new money' for health and education without adding to the tax burden; 'modernisation', but without sufficient capital investment; and redemption of the social order with snake oil and mirrors. There would also be respect for national institutions and a 'radical programme of constitutional and democratic renewal' (April 26 1996), including devolution and local government restoration. The welfare state would be

simultaneously *reformed* in 'unthinkable' ways and *protected* by a party which understood it. Camelot, utility profiteers, tobacco advertisers, sleaze-merchants and quangos would severally be put in their places; class sizes and hospital waiting lists would be cut; and there would be nursery provision for all 4 year-olds who required it.

It was common sense, decency, seriousness, practicality, balance, energy, change, prudence, modernity, morality, openness and youth, politically embodied. Or, rather, it was a politics which, in stylish suits and modish haircuts, transcended party and the parliamentary process. It was an anti-political politics which soared above the humdrum of 'ideology' and mere local manoeuvre.

For the 'Third Way' not only led out of Britain's labyrinth of almost irremediable social and moral problems to the ending of poverty and exclusion, but on towards the empyrean, that realm, linked end-to-end by the 'information superhighway', where those who seek to master and benefit from the 'global economy' command the world.

At home, the name of Labour's 'new' society – for all was to be 'new', except that which was old – was, variously, the 'compassionate' society, the 'decent' society, the 'dynamic' society, the 'giving' society, the 'inclusive' society, the 'learning' society (and economy), the 'outward-looking' society, the 'self-confident' society and the 'young' country. It would be 'cool', 'dynamic', 'modern', 'pivotal', 'rebranded', 'rebuilt', 'remoulded', 'successful' and new, new, new: new age, new ambitions, new Britain, new contract, new deal, new era, new Europe (led by new Labour), new generation, new learning, new Labour, new members (of the Party), new millennium, new patriotism, new society, new vision. This newness would require 'cohesion', 'compassion with a hard edge' – even 'tough compassion' – 'fairness', 'flexibility', 'hard choices', 'high ideals', 'inclusion', 'long-termism',

'modernisation' – lots of it, again and again – 'openness', 'pragmatism', 'renewal' and 'responsibility'.

George Orwell, in his 1946 essay 'Politics and the English Language' (*Collected Essays*, London, 1968, vol. 4, pp. 127-40), described how certain terms – such as those I have listed – 'anaesthetize a portion of one's brain'. Political language, above all, is 'designed... to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind'. Indeed, in the grip of its (mediocre) wordsmiths, Labour has smothered its purposes and benumbed thought with a continuous outpouring of slogans. Harold Wilson's 'white heat of technology' merely aroused laughter. Now, when Labour – and it is usually Tony Blair himself – is made to speak of an 'Age of Achievement... built on new technology' (Labour Party Conference, October 1996), or of a 'crusade for competitiveness' (September 10 1997), or of Britain as a 'beacon for the world' (Tony Blair, November 27 1997), or of 'bringing the country together at its heart' (Tony Blair, December 8 1997), or, most emptily of all, of 'reinventing government' (Tony Blair, February 7 1998) and so forth, then, as Orwell observed mordantly, 'one... has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human body but some kind of dummy'.

All politicians do it. But in its first year – very early days – Labour has often seemed to deliver itself over to unmeaning, to a blur of multiple but out-of-focus purposes, to a persistent resort to smoke-screens of imposing verbiage in which nothing much can be clearly made out.

'People judge us on their instincts about what they believe our instincts to be', Blair told the 1996 Labour Party Conference. 'My utter conviction', he announced to the equally helpless TUC Congress, 'is that modernisation is the route to a more just society', a ringing declaration without graspable meaning. 'We are defining ourselves by the future' (November 22 1997), Peter Mandelson has also informed us.

In all this there are grounds for serious discomfort, even if some of the non-sense and sloganising can be explained by the intellectual void into which all Western left parties fell after the old-socialist debacle; a void which has been partly filled by a public relations effort. It compounds, especially for critics *inside* the Labour Party, the feeling that the Party's majority might stand on doctrinal sand; while to those who feel guilt at the (necessary) abandonment of many of its old shibboleths, this newspeak is doubly repugnant. Social democracy of the old Labourist type was, of course, also tricky and 'pragmatic'. But public relations' strong-arm spin-and-smarm were never leading aspects of its address to the electors, not even under Harold Wilson.

The personal rivalries and hostilities among leading members of the Government, and the residual class animus felt for the 'Islington elite' by, among others, the salt-of-the-earth proletarians who find themselves stranded in the Government's upper ranks could have been anticipated. Indeed, class hatreds within the Labour Party, often expressed as accusations of a 'sell-out' or 'betrayal' of socialism, have not abated since Labour's victory. Primitive 'grass-roots' feuding has also continued behind the 'globalising' and 'modernising' facade. Nor is it surprising. The unease felt by large numbers of Labour Party members at the 'crypto-Toryism' of many Labour policies and measures is a large matter. For 'new' Labour's praise of 'the market' and its alliance with 'big business' – as it is seen at the 'grass roots' – together with its disdain for the trade unions, mean that, whatever the Party's parliamentary strength, the 'labour movement', as it used to be called, now no longer exists.

'The death of Clause Four' may have 'put the life in New Labour', as Hugo Young has maintained (*Guardian*, December 16 1997). It has also left the Labour Party with conflicts and dilemmas over how to assert social control over swathes of the economy – public transport for instance –



which non-Islingtonians are unwilling to leave to the mercies of market forces. Yet the hesitations in Labour's first year over, say, the fate of the railway system – planning in effect to privatise the infrastructure of the London Underground on the one hand, and to take an equity share in Railtrack on the other – and the finding of the right balance between the public interest and the private, are only a small part of the post-socialist confusion about the claims of the market and of public spending limits on the one hand, and the old ethics of the left on the other.

Thus, there is the conflict (or muddle) between an attack on 'welfare dependency' and a philosophy of 'inclusion' for all; between the tough-minded cutting of benefits to the weakest and the compensatory desire that 'no one in need will suffer', which threw Labour's policy on single mothers into confusion; between a 'learning society' on the one hand, and the abolition of student maintenance grants, the introduction of tuition fees and the philistinism towards the arts (pop culture aside) on the other; between an 'ethical foreign policy' and market-driven arms supplies to Turkey and Indonesia; between a pledged ban on tobacco advertising in the name of public health and a knuckling-under to the motor racing and tobacco interests; between the philosophy that 'what counts is what works' (April 30 1997) – a statement made by Tony Blair to a *City audience* – and the ethical, pre-election pledge, made by Blair a fortnight earlier to an audience of rank-and-file Labour supporters, that 'we will ensure that in all our debates the question "Is it right?" is asked persistently and that we get a clear answer before we take the decision' (April 17 1997).

But, despite its outcome in a (provisional) settlement of the Northern Ireland conflict, there was not much morally *right* in treating as equal partners – between killings – with the representatives of psychotic Belfast gunmen (of both Catholic and Protestant traditions), or in refusing the

extradition to Germany of Roisin McAliskey when the upholding of the rule of law demanded it.

'Old' Labour had its own contradictions, which were the product of hypocrisy, as well as of wishful thinking. Among them, was the hypocrisy of its 'egalitarianism', now best embodied in the figure of Baron Hattersley of Sparkbrook; the hypocrisy of its objections to 'the bourgeois'; the hypocrisy of the public school leftist with his revolutionary gestures, of which Paul Foot is one of the last exemplars. Indeed the middle-class leftist always needed the working class more than the latter needed him (or her). But if these contradictions have been swept away by the 'new' Labour dispensation, an uncertain sense of moral priority, in a party which at bottom still sets store by its ethics, has replaced them.

Moreover, the old left intelligentsia, self-important but doughty, has fallen into silence and its own confusions. Its place has been taken in 'new' Labour by unelected backroom strategists and image-consultants, on the one hand, to whom 'old' Labour principle is alien, and on the other by clusters of *arrivistes*, striking modish poses and seeking their own preferment, to whom Labour's polices, old or new, are of no real interest.

And wherever the fire of real truth about all this is in danger of breaking out, media enforcers are quickly on hand to extinguish it, or seek to manage it to the Party's advantage. On every hand, too, there are the credulous, the over-enthusiastic and the outright sycophantic, ready to sing the Party's or the leader's praises. Melvyn Bragg 'wanted a Labour victory so badly that I feared to want it too much' ('Is Jerusalem Being Builided Here?', *The Times*, August 11 1997). The normally measured Hugo Young thought Tony Blair, with his 'dancing lightness' (*Guardian*, March 17 1998), 'an artist, perhaps the Franklin Roosevelt of our age' (*Guardian*, October 1 1997) and esteemed the 'wonderful' Gordon



Brown to be a man of 'high seriousness', 'reflective and creative', his 'range... capacious' and 'his understanding deep'. He was, declared Young, 'the greatest' of the three 'immensely able' Scottish politicians – Irvine and Cook being the others – in the Government (*Guardian*, March 17 1998).

As for the Chief Rabbi, he has not merely commended the Prime Minister for his 'intuitive grasp of the new politics of the 1990s' but vouchsafed (for good measure) additional words of approval even for the philosopher John Macmurray, by whom Blair has said that he was influenced (*The Times*, October 4 1997). Melvyn Bragg thought a lecture by Gordon Brown on 'British History and Culture' 'exhilarating'. 'It will surely become', he added, 'a key text in public thinking on this enormous subject' (*The Times*, November 10 1997).

One of the few certitudes in an uncertain world is that it will become no such thing.

## WHAT 'NEW' LABOUR HAS DONE RIGHT

THE TROUBLE FOR THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY is that, despite Labour's contradictions and uncertainties of direction, its Orwellian slogans and other matters still to be discussed, Labour has done at least as many right things as wrong in its first year, and might establish a long lien on office.

First, Labour has espoused the moral 'principle of duty' – the idea that the individual not only has rights but responsibilities as the ethical 'price' of citizenship and its benefits – and it has been both a courageous and correct step. The Tories toyed ineffectually with the idea in their last years in office; Labour has put, or has seemed to put, it at the centre of significant aspects of its policies, especially in penal, educational and social security reform.

That is, Labour has grasped, or re-grasped – since the notion of individual duty was always a strong part of the Nonconformist tradition upon which the Labour Party was founded – that no society can rest upon claims to rights alone. (It can rest even less securely upon the libertine morality, now found on the mutant Tory 'right' as well as on the mutant Labour 'left', that individual self-realisation through unimpeded freedom of action is the highest good of life itself).

Labour, rather than the Tories, saw during the early 1990s and began to say from 1993 onwards – Blair, in particular, who was then shadow Home Secretary, leading the way – that citizenship represents more than a mere bundle of rights and claims against the state and others. For

it is also a moral status which demands something from the citizen by way of responsibility to self and to others. This kind of perception helped to set Labour on its path to victory. The Tories might claim defensively, as did John Major, that 'duty, responsibility and community' had been 'fundamental to Conservatism as far back as you can go' (*The Times*, April 1 1995). But it was the then newly-elected Labour leader who took the initiative further, giving the idea of the individual's moral responsibility a clear and definite place in his speeches.

'Duty', Blair declared in a *Spectator*/Allied Dunbar lecture, taking the clothes that Toryism had once so comfortably worn, 'is an essential Labour concept... the cornerstone of a decent society. It [sc. the language of duty] is the language our nation needs' (March 25 1995).

This was, for once, more than rhetoric, since it displaced the long rule of the politics and culture of rights, rights and more rights in Labour's post-1960s thinking. The victorious Blair put it as plainly and boldly as could be, and to the private discomfiture of the rights' lobbies, at the 1997 Labour Party Conference: 'A decent society is not based on rights. It is based on duty. Our duty to each other' (October 1 1997). This is, as I have indicated, an old, not a new, Labour ethic, but it was one that had been largely forgotten in the Party for three decades. More important to the election, such restatements of Labour's moral purposes – the Orwellian slogans apart – gave Labour the edge over a Tory Party battling with allegations of 'sleaze', and which was stuck fast with the subordination of Conservatism's true purposes to the morally-atrophied dictates of the 'free market'.

What Labour was beginning to say was something which the Tories, chary of 'ideas' and chastened by the ill-conceived Back to Basics campaign, were unwilling or unable to say loudly and clearly enough: namely, that the state, while fulfilling its own duties to the citizen, especially

through public provision, is morally entitled to hold the same citizen to account for dereliction of his or her own obligations, including the obligation to work. The *duty to work* (among other duties) had, astonishingly, replaced the *right to work* as a leading term in the vocabulary of Labour.

In a short essay on the duties of citizenship, written in 1990 as old socialism collapsed ('Who Would Be A Socialist Citizen?', in *Citizenship*, ed. G. Andrews, London, 1991, pp. 91-104), I had asked 'Who, in what remains of left circles, would dare argue... that a right to welfare-protection carries with it certain duties, including duties to the self? Such obvious arguments are now almost unheard of on the left', adding that it was 'only when the liberal-democratic (and anti-socialist) consensus comes to be openly embraced by the left, and the left ceases to be socialist, that a left politics of the rights and duties of the citizen might acquire a true legitimacy and a real content'.

In the event, something like this has happened. 'New' Labour has indeed 'ceased to be socialist', embraced the 'anti-socialist consensus', and begun to give 'real content' in its social policies to a new balance between once-overblown rights and long-forgotten duties. It is here that Labour's advance, such as it is, towards becoming a civic party has been made, and here that the Tory Party, having lost sight of its own civic roots, faces its greatest test. From this shift have come Labour's new-found aversions to duty-dodging parents, troublemaking tenants and work-avoiding welfare claimants.

The work ethic, a civic ethic if ever there was one, has returned to Labour's pantheon of virtues, and rightly. Labour never was, and was never intended to be, the party of 'dutiless' welfare hand-outs; or, as Harriet Harman crudely put it, 'Life is about work, not just benefits' (December 11 1997). Gordon Brown has here been more subtle: 'the tax and benefit system', he declared in his March budget speech, 'should reflect the value we place upon the responsibilities

and rewards of work' (March 18 1998), correctly giving primacy to the principle of duty. Labour has thus come round again to seeing the truth of Beveridge's emphatic point, made in 1943, that 'to give a man an income while he is doing nothing is an entire misuse of the whole idea of unemployment insurance', rather than making such provision 'during short interruptions of earnings' (*The Pillars of Security*, London, 1943, p.87). The welfare-to-work programme, the desire to 'make work pay', the tax and benefits system reforms to that end – including the income-related tax credit to be paid to those in work – shift the emphasis of state assistance from the subsidising of unemployment to work-inducement.

The Labour Party has also perceived that without *sanctions*, including the withholding of benefit, the principle of duty (in a national culture of claims and demands) is easily dodged. It has therefore been right to follow the Tory prescription in refusing benefit, in whole or in part, to the young unemployed who themselves refuse work and training options that are on offer. Provided that there is a fair system of review in place, it is true social justice to meet one refusal with another.

And if, by following the principle of duty, the work ethic has been brought back to the party of Labour, it has also been right for Frank Field, the minister for welfare reform, to begin to make *duty to self* the ground for rejecting 'welfare dependency' in favour of the 'spirit of self-improvement', especially in the matter of social insurance. For it is a spirit as close as the work ethic itself to the morality of old Nonconformist Labour, before middle-class pseudo-egalitarians and dole-distributors, working-off their own class complexes, got their hands on the Party.

It was certainly never intended that not-working – or, for that matter, not-marrying – should be rewarded by the state, nor that the cult of victimhood, sustained by the state,

should be permitted to do so much harm to individual (and national) self-regard. The assumptions of 1945, when the benefit provisions of the welfare state were being discussed, were always that there were dangers of lead-swinging, that there was need for discrimination and care in public provision, that there was need to preserve personal initiative, and that citizens had their own obligations to look after themselves.

Out of Labour's moral return to this kind of sense has come, dangerously for the Tories, the recognition that it is correct in principle, always allowing for exceptions, to limit the duration of welfare support; correct in principle to target benefits to those who need them and not to those who do not, a principle now broadly supported by the public; and correct in principle to seek to restore as large a measure as is possible and fair of voluntarist self-help and individual provision against the ills that beset us.

Labour in its first year has begun in some measure – but without consistency or much sign of strategic direction – to apply all these principles. Out of it, if Field succeeds, the attempt will be made, following in Tory tracks, to disperse some of the burden of public provision through varieties of self-insurance and saving (or thrift), induced and buttressed by the state – including through a 'second-tier' personal pension, which may be compulsory for the self-employed. And if a revived friendly society movement were to partner such an evolution, Labour would be returning even closer to its (pre-first war) ethical roots.

Yet, in addition to its other errors in handling welfare reform, to which I will come later, Labour has failed – an intellectual failure for which public relations cannot compensate – to explain adequately and coherently, whether to itself, its own followers or to the country at large, what it is doing (and why). Nevertheless, despite the bleating of pseudo-egalitarians that Labour's social security reforms will 'divide society' (John Gray, *Guardian*, January 26 1998), or

plunge millions into workless destitution, it is at least clear enough to the public that there are too many claimants of welfare benefit – two-thirds of the total – who are of working age. It is a proportion which has doubled in the last 50 years.

To tackle all this was thus long overdue, as the Tories knew. But for *Labour* to have begun to tackle it, employing a combination of undeveloped Tory notions and its own Nonconformist instincts about our responsibilities to ourselves and others, has been morally right, economically necessary, and politically shrewd.

#### The Home Office

The resuscitation by Labour of its old value system in pursuing social security reform has been seconded at the Home Office. In the .22 handgun ban, in the plans for legislation against not only the takers but the *givers* of bribes in public office, in moves to regulate the private security industry – which has been wrongfully permitted to spread its net across almost the entire face of once-public, or civic, administration – and even in the instruction to probation officers by the Home Secretary that they stop calling offenders ‘clients’, an important awareness has begun to return. It is that a *civic order* exists, as well as a market and a world of private licence and private interest, and that the former requires to be defended and strengthened.

In this respect, Jack Straw’s Crime and Disorder Bill could be one of the landmarks of post-war civic legislation. Following fragmented Tory efforts of a similar kind – the 1985 and 1996 Housing Acts, the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, the 1996 Noise Act, the 1997 Protection from Harassment Act – the Bill justly reacts to increasing public anxiety about what our fellow citizens, including the young and always younger, are prepared to do to others in the free pursuit of their ends, however aberrant. In seeking to tackle

head-on the problem of chronic anti-social criminal behaviour, in particular, Straw has had the moral courage to face down the squeamish (post-1960s) recoil in his own Party from adopting the means to protect community life from its foes.

The problems of family delinquency, youth violence, child crime, vandalism and the rest of it have come to seem intractable, and perhaps they now are. Decades of vast public expenditure on education, housing, health, social security and social services – social provision all – have failed on a large (and increasing) scale in the liberal democratic West to produce the new social man, social woman and (now) social child of fond post-war expectations; the same kinds of expenditure failed to produce ‘socialist’ man and woman in the undemocratic East. But out of this failure have come offences to be punished and forms of asocial behaviour to be restrained, rather than being explained away or justified by experts who are little less amoral than the malefactors themselves.

The Crime and Disorder Bill justly abolishes the common law presumption that 10 to 13 year-olds do not know right from wrong; gives powers to arrest those who terrorise and harass their neighbours; makes provision for ‘parenting orders’ to ensure (among other things) that children attend school, and ‘reparation orders’ against those who vandalise, or fail to stop their children vandalising, the ‘communities’ in which they live. It also speeds up the processes of youth justice.

At the heart of the Bill is a distinction, answering that made in some of Labour’s social security reform plans, between the good citizen and the bad, between civic right and civic wrong. This is courageous in a Party whose mutant ‘culture’ has until recently refused all such distinctions. It is also a response to the public sense that our fragile civic society must not be permitted to be tested to breakdown, whether by ‘market forces’ or moral disorder.



In seeking specifically to tackle dereliction of parental responsibility for acts which harm others in the community – young people between 10 and 17 account for a quarter of all known crime – Labour is once more being true to the old Nonconformist sense that there is a duty to live a neighbourly and ‘decent’ life, whatever the hardships that afflict us. It has correctly given short shrift, again, to the rights’ lobbies, which have been quick to call such measures ‘parent-bashing’ (Paul Cavadino, *Guardian*, March 5 1997). For the neighbours most frequently harmed by the anti-social acts in question are likely, as on a council estate, to be already the vulnerable and the disadvantaged.

Nevertheless, all this has been called ‘authoritarian’, or worse, by both libertarian ‘left’ and libertarian ‘right’. But then these are the same forces of corrupted liberalism which earlier helped to sap the electoral prospects of the Labour Party, as they now bid to sap the future electoral prospects of the Tories. Yet without measures which halt the processes of social dissolution the body politic cannot cohere. That there should be common ground between the parties on such ‘authoritarian’ social measures to protect community order is therefore to be welcomed.

But Labour’s penal policies have been balanced by equally welcome signs of a rejection of the Tory nostrum that ‘prison works’. 61% of women in prison are (wickedly) the primary carers of children. To jail a woman, with domestic and child-rearing responsibilities, for non-payment of a fine, say, is prima facie both an anti-civic and a useless act. This the Home Office under Jack Straw has recognised. Similarly with the steps taken to permit a youth offender to be named in open court in order to shame him in the community’s eyes – if the sense of shame remains. Also correct is the increased emphasis on ‘community punishments’, including by loss of the licences and access-to-place which the good citizen enjoys. Civic default

demand appropriate civic penalty – and not just a cruel custodial reflex – if the civic order is to be restored.

Here, too, the Tories should beware. Many of the penal policies of the two main parties now overlap. But if Labour, having cast aside its misplaced instinct to find excuses for the dangerous malefactor and the youthful thug, now pursues coherent and imaginative civic ends in imposing the sanctions of citizen duty, Tory penal policy – for ever seeking to outbid its rivals in retributive ‘toughness’ – will come paradoxically to seem a thin thing indeed.

### Education

Despite the obstacles of entrenched interest, many of them previously associated with or allied to Labour itself, Labour in its first year has also begun to do some of the right things in education. Above all, it has tried to face up to the destructive lobbies-for-ignorance – such as the National Union of Teachers (NUT) – whose resolute support for failing educational methods helped to bring down the state primary and secondary school systems. Indeed, of all the truly progressive educational developments in the last three decades – and there have not been many – the gradual decline in the influence of the NUT, which has lost half its members since 1970, has been among the most important.

‘New’ Labour’s pursuit of educational reforms, most of them initiated by the Tories, has been carried on with greater diplomatic skill than the Tories showed. The teachers, despite seeing their cherished malpractices being further assailed (though not overthrown), have not, this time, been up in arms against a Government which, despite continuing internal opposition – sometimes from the Secretary of State for Education and Employment himself – has now begun to espouse many of the ideas of the Chief Inspector of Schools, Chris Woodhead.



But with one in five 7 year-olds in three inner London boroughs discovered in March 1996 to be unable to read a single word, with British state primary pupils lagging years behind most of their European contemporaries in maths, with 40% of 11 year-olds, despite recent improvements, persistently reported to be unable to read well enough to cope with the secondary curriculum, and British teenagers rated among the least literate and numerate in Europe, time had run out. It had run out also for lobbies which saw the principal task of the educator less to teach than to promote 'self-esteem' and 'self-expression' and to cast out 'rote-learning', as education had come to be called.

Indeed, so great has the turn-around of the lobbies in Labour's first year seemed to be, that even the *Guardian*, formerly the NUT's house journal, was lamenting a mere eight weeks after Labour's victory that under the old, failed educational regime 'desks were swept away, blackboards removed, and children allowed to work at their own pace'. These were methods, declared the *Guardian*, which, unchecked, had 'condemned hundreds and thousands of children to an illiterate and innumerate future' (June 24 1997).

On the same day, similarly turning turtle, Nigel de Gruchy, one of the teaching lobbies' leaders, was complaining in *The Times* of 'the methods imposed on [teachers] in the 1960s and 1970s', which, he said, were 'either wrong in themselves' or 'impossible to operate'. Only 12 months earlier, when the Tories were in office, the NUT's assistant secretary was speaking of the 'ignorance' of the Chief Inspector of Schools (John Bangs, *Guardian*, June 28 1996), and the NUT's General Secretary of the 'obsessions of far-right policy advisers' (Doug McAvoy, cited in *The Times*, September 24 1996). (Others had spoken even less rationally of 'a reign of terror' conducted by the schools inspectorate). Now, with modest extra resources – and knighthoods – made available to schools by Labour, even the argument about 'underfunding' has been silenced.

What has happened, unfairly as may be to the Tories, is that the tide has seemed to turn the quicker now that it is *Labour* which is following many of the formerly reviled policies of its predecessors. Thus, it is Labour which is now advocating – with what true determination only time will tell – whole-class teaching, setting by ability, reading by phonics, more time allocated to 'the basics', improvement targets for all schools, faster procedures for sacking dud teachers, the 'naming-and-shaming' of failing schools, inspection of the many ghastly teacher-training institutes, increased teacher powers to expel disruptive pupils and other measures.

Moreover, at the core of all this is the incorporation by Labour of the use of various sanctions against failures of *educational duty*; sanctions of duty which complement those introduced in other areas of reform, such as the 'parenting orders' provided for in Home Office legislation, and which can now be said to command national assent. In the classroom, the 'real heart of darkness' in Woodhead's words (February 25 1998), resistance continues, and the vested political influence of the local education authorities, with their persisting capacity for doing harm to the cause of reform, remains. But the tide may at long last have begun to turn.

For Labour, after wasted decades of egalitarian posturing in putting *structural* educational reform before pedagogical standards – and this I say as a former Ruskin tutor – has grasped, as in the matter of council estate mayhem, that it is the already socially disadvantaged who suffer most from such policy myopia. The behind-the-scenes bullies, and front-of-house fumbler, who have been left by Labour to explain its social purposes to others have made a poor and incoherent job of it, and many other strategic errors have been made. But in Labour's social security, penal and educational policies, the emulation of some Tory measures, and the partial making good of others that were misconceived, or mishandled have been essentially right things to do.

And in one respect above all, post-socialist Labour has the ethical edge over the Tories and, for the time being, greater trust from the public. For, being at bottom wariest about 'market values' – despite its new-found acceptance of them – it is in principle less likely to seek to 'marketise' social provision in any wholesale fashion, and thus less likely to push the civic order further into free fall.

### Labour in 'Europe'

In this most complex, and potentially most disastrous, of all the issues facing Britain, Labour in its first year avoided internecine party conflict; just as it has avoided the Tories' battles with the judiciary or the teaching profession, while often pursuing similar policies to those of the Tories. Its justified cautions about the 'European project' have been skilfully handled, if only in the sense that it has managed simultaneously to suggest both whole-hearted commitment to 'Europe' – as in the Prime Minister's address to the French National Assembly (March 25 1998) – and a prudent reserve.

Since the notion of 'European integration' is a rank absurdity, as is the idea of a 'common citizenship' of the European continent, Labour, by seeming to take both of them seriously while entertaining as many doubts about them as common sense demands, has (temporarily) been able to have the best of both worlds, those of Euroscepticism and Europhilia. In this it is doing precisely what the more cunning and less nervous among its European partners have done all along; and what the Tories failed to do, to their own political cost. There is a need, and a reason, for ambivalence on 'Europe', rather than dogmatic rejection (or acceptance) of its pretensions.

In other words, although Labour is *historically* a deeply insular and parochial party, ill-at-ease – as Robin Cook reveals – beyond Britain's shores, it has so far avoided

impaling itself on the horns of the appalling European dilemma, and in this it has acted correctly. Above all, it has not made the mistake of thinking that we must either be British or 'European' and that we cannot be, or pretend to be, both. All the other nations in the 'European Union' do it, and so must we.

Whether Labour also knows that it is a matter of supreme indifference to most EU members whether Britain is 'in' or 'out' is another question. It perhaps does not, since it also aspires, or pretends to aspire, to a 'leadership role' in continental Europe. But even if such a role were possible or desirable, it would not in any foreseeable circumstances be permitted to exercise it. For the truth is that Britain could never occupy more than a marginal place in the 'Europe' which its principal partners, the French and the Germans, have sought to build.

We do not share Germany's – and, to a lesser but still real extent, France's – desire to bury its past in a 'united Europe', nor do we share Germany's justified fear of its unanchored self. We cannot share France's view of 'Europe' as a counterweight to Anglo-America, nor Italy's readiness to cede powers to Brussels in preference to government by its own corrupted institutions and politicians. Neither do we desire to steal from common European funds, unlike some of our kleptocratic partners who have built theft into the system. Moreover, by instinct or tradition, we prefer diversity (or our own identity and institutions) to transnational harmonisation in pursuit of an end – 'European political integration' – which is unreal on the one hand, and which we cannot accept on the other.

It was not for nothing that in his essay *On Liberty* (London, 1859, p.130) John Stuart Mill asked, 'What has made the European family of nations an improving, instead of a stationary, portion of mankind?', and answered 'Their remarkable diversity of character and culture. Individuals,

classes, nations have been extremely unlike one another... Although at every period' – as now, at the end of the 20th century – 'those who travelled in different paths... would have thought it an excellent thing if all the rest could have been compelled to travel his road' – today, the road of 'European monetary union' and German-led 'political integration' – 'Europe is in my judgement wholly indebted to this *plurality of paths* for its progressive and many-sided development' (my emphasis).

This remains as persuasive, and as true, now as when it was written. Yet the fact that history shows us the fragility (and risk) of currency unions, and discloses the dangers of such a 'concert of powers' as the 'European Union' is urging on its culturally and politically disparate members, are insufficient grounds in themselves for adopting a rigid and self-excluding antipathy towards 'Europe'. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, the claimed political and economic benefits to Britain of integrating ourselves in its ventures, and the alleged perils of withholding ourselves from them, are also insufficient grounds in themselves for endorsing the 'European project'.

For we stand both to lose and gain, and are thus over a barrel with 'Europe'. We are damned if we do and damned if we don't. All that is open to us, therefore – as the loss of legal and parliamentary sovereignty over our own civic order continues, haemorrhage-like – is to try to find the right balance in our relations with 'Europe' and for as long as possible, or until the project, as that for 'monetary union', fails. This is a tight-rope balance of calculation and *realpolitik*, in obstructiveness or compliance, and governed by where the national interest lies.

Thus, to commit our foreign exchange reserves to the European Central Bank in pursuit of currency union is likely to turn out to be an act of supreme folly, losing us even more of our control over national economic policy, making it

harder to manage demand, and (with an overvalued pound) leaving us at a serious competitive disadvantage with richer European nations. But at this point, when it is not possible to see one year ahead in Europe, let alone a *decade*, it was not much less silly for the Tory Party to have imposed a ten year embargo on joining the 'Economic and Monetary Union'.

Although it cannot go on forever, or even for very long – the 'Euro' will be in use from January 1 1999 – Labour's balancing act, whether by accident or design, has been broadly right. Labour's pretence to Europhilia (which remains skin-deep, whatever the postures), its surrender of the veto, and its agreement to adopt the 'Social Chapter' – whose provisions on parental leave and the maximum length of the working week the Tories ought not to have allowed to become bugbears – have lost them very little in room for political manoeuvre.

This has been the art of pragmatism in a tight corner. And if, as I believe, withdrawal from the whole farrago is impossible and we are trapped in its Franco-German embrace, where *realpolitik* not principle governs almost every move, we are bound to stay and make the best of it, by co-operation real or feigned, until the whole bogus (and politically dangerous) enterprise comes to its destined sticky end.

And if Labour has a real feel for these realities, it deserves to be applauded. If it does not, it has, so far at least, avoided the Tories' self-destroying errors.



## MAKING THE WRONG MOVES

THERE HAS BEEN NO SUCH FINESSE in Labour's mistakes of principle and judgement, its party authoritarianism and meaningless slogans, its post-socialist muddles of direction, and its breaches of duty – in the name of welfare reform – to those in greatest need of care and protection.

Right to stop, hesitate over, or amend the Tories' grosser privatisations of public institutions, such as the Post Office, it has been muddled – for comprehensible reasons, as I have sought to explain – about whether, and how, to maintain public oversight of once state-owned civic and other assets. It has, thus far, been vacillating and inconsistent in face of the destructive commercialisation of the BBC; mistaken in principle to permit government departments to sell their assets, retain the proceeds and use them to finance capital spending; and quite wrong, after having given repeated pledges (May 27 1994, March 8 1995, April 1997) not to do so, to continue with the privatisation of the prison service.

The administration of punishment by incarceration of our fellow-citizens is, perhaps above all others, a civic task. It is a task to be carried out not for private profit under the rules of market competition, but by public officials for civic benefit under the rule of law. Indeed, any civic order whatever depends upon the exercise of certain public duties on behalf of the citizen-body as a whole, and funded by its taxes, into which the motives of private interest cannot be permitted to intrude. Of such public duties, those relating to punishment sanctioned

by law and to the preservation of the public peace and security are most clearly in the public realm. Despite this, and quite apart from the issue of 'private' prisons, there are now in Britain at least twice as many private security guards – insufficiently accountable and subject to insufficient regulation – as there are policemen and policewomen.

In this crucial area of public policy, Labour had – and as quickly lost – the opportunity to act as the true guardian of the public interest, to abate part of the high civic price already paid for Friedmanite doctrine, and to be the kind of civic party that the times demand. The Tories at least sought to justify with reasoned, if unsatisfactory, explanation – in terms of a coherent, if often wrong, political theory – the dispersal of public goods and civic functions to the market.

Labour, by contrast, has not only acted against its specific and repeated pre-election undertakings, but has done so without coherent explanation. Moreover, it is arguable that the Securicor or Group 4 guard, as a mere private employee of a private interest, has no legitimate authority under common law to conduct me, a fellow-citizen, to court, or to supervise my loss of personal freedom. It might well be said, therefore, that the pregnant prisoner (on a charge of theft of £27) who was chained to a radiator for almost five hours at Leeds magistrates' court, by an employee of Premier Prisons, was the victim of an unlawful detention and of common assault by one private citizen upon another (January 28 1998). More serious still, an inquest has found that a prisoner was 'unlawfully killed' – allegedly by warders – while detained in a privately-run jail at Blackenhurst, near Redditch in Worcestershire (March 27 1998).

But by proceeding with further prison privatisations, Labour has, at a stroke, disastrously deprived itself of the moral grounds on which it might in the future need, as a party, to resist and reverse the civic harms wrought by the privatisation of such public functions. The lapse presents an opportunity to a future reformed Toryism.

**Ethical error upon error**

If more than £5,000 million is spent in a year on the National Lottery, surely only a killjoy could object? It is not so simple.

When a private monopoly makes profits of millions of pounds every week from a nation's gambling; when effective operational control is placed in the hands of an American company which, despite a buy-out, continues to supply the Lottery's 'systems and services' (April 2 1998); when attempted bribery is shown by court action to have been associated with the lottery administration contract; when domestic charitable giving falls (Institute of Fiscal Studies, June 30 1997); when the whole exercise is a disguised form of taxation; when Britain has one of the lowest personal savings rates in the industrial world; when the odds against winning are astronomically large; when the compulsion of it falls upon the poorest to wager relatively the most in hope of wealth; and when even welfare claimants are estimated to spend £140 million of their state benefits on lottery tickets (Mintel, *Sunday Times*, July 28 1996) – it is not so simple. Yet Labour, for all its ethical pretensions, has declared the 'People's Lottery' a 'success'. In breach of undertakings not to do so, it is also drawing on lottery funds for state capital expenditures on health, education, the environment and child-care provision.

At the same time, this 'ethical party', which has rediscovered and begun to act upon the principle of duty as it applies to citizen obligations, was quick, in its first announcements on welfare reform, to ride rough-shod over government's reciprocal duties to society's most vulnerable members.

It has subsequently sought to make exaggerated amends for its confusions of purpose between its 'Toryising' and its older ethical instincts, confusions which in its welfare reforms bid to cancel each other out; the 'unknown future costs' of the new child-care credits, for instance, 'may well be into billions quite soon' (Polly Toynbee, *Guardian*, March 18 1998). But the

initial freezing and cutting of benefits to lone parents – the 'Lilley cuts' – as well as the benefit cuts to the disabled and the elderly retired suffering from the consequences of old industrial injuries, were gratuitously harsh and wrong. To cut child benefits for embattled single mothers in the cause of encouraging the latter to work, or to scrap disability allowances for 65 year-olds and hospital patients, was to know nothing of true obligation in the civic order, even allowing for the extent of post-war lead-swinging in Britain.

For it is every civic society's duty, like it or not, to help its citizens meet their essential needs when, through no fault of their own, they cannot meet them themselves and, unless helped, become citizens only in name. Furthermore, the civic bond between us is sustained not merely by the citizen's actions but, again like it or not, by the state's actions also, in a mutuality of obligations which 'new' Labour, here, crudely failed to discharge.

This default was equally crudely described by Labour as a 'public relations' disaster, which in the March 1998 budget it sought in part to repair. But it was no such thing. To reform the welfare state and 'universal welfarism', and to deny benefit to those who do not need, or falsely claim, it is one thing, and essential. To go for the weakest among the first, and with such poor explanation and clumsy ostentation, was another. Moreover, despite the huge post-war scale of malingerers' sickness benefit claims, or the very high – but now falling – proportion of never-married, jobless, single parents who are dependent on state benefits, there are many single mothers who, for very good human reasons, do not wish to, or should not, go 'from welfare to work'. This is not least because of the long-standing paucity and worsening quality of much existing child-care provision in Britain. In the real world – generally a different place from the fantasists' 'new Britain' – it will take time and great effort to repair.



The March 1998 budget sought – under pressure less of the principle of duty than of Labour back-bench rebellion – to ensure that the children of lone parents do not suffer, whether the parent is in work or not. This was just, but something ethically unpleasant remains after all the heaving and pushing. A society's 'impatience' with, or moral disapproval of, single mothers (especially where there are multiple fathers) may be, and for many is, legitimate. It is just that they, and the fathers, should at least not benefit *more* than others by their choices, and in some carefully weighed, discretionary circumstances, that they, and more especially the absent fathers, should *lose* by them, provided only that their children do not suffer. But society also cannot act with a disproportionate – and often hypocritical – moral aggression towards those for whom it has in the first place a duty of *care*, and only secondarily a duty to try to redeem, through education or gainful employment.

Wrong in similarly unethical ways with disability benefits – which increased substantially under the Tories – and wrong in different, but also socially harmful, ways in the scrapping of student maintenance grants and the imposition of tuition fees, Labour's 'tough' but amoral and ill-considered stances on these sensitive issues deepened the unease in its ranks to which I referred earlier.

Moreover, these things were done to the (in general) genuinely needy by a Party whose foolish, walking-on-water 'presidentialism', its hands-in-the-till greed (on the part of some) for the perks of office, its bullying of the media, and its inquiries into its own corrupt practices in local government were, between them, undermining its claims, explicit and implicit, to political virtue.

### The question of 'new' Labour 'sleaze'

'We will be tough on sleaze and tough on the causes of sleaze', said Tony Blair in October 1996, at his last Labour Party Conference as Leader of the Opposition. But there is 'sleaze' and 'sleaze'.

By the time that the sordid Ecclestone imbroglio was upon him in November 1997 – 'I would never ever do something wrong', Blair said at the time – and the interests of Formula One racing, contributions to Party funds and the Government's public health policy were in the ring together, the new Kennedyesque Camelot, absurd as such an image was, had begun to lose its shine.

Inquiries, some still continuing, into a wide range of local government malpractices by Labour in Birmingham, Coventry, Doncaster, Glasgow, Hackney, Hull, Lambeth, Merseyside, Paisley, south Tyneside and elsewhere – including into intimidatory faction-fighting, cronyism, illegal land deals, misuse of budgets, expenses fiddles and the rest of the 'old' Labour way of life – have not helped, despite the proposals for a 'stringent new code of conduct' (March 4 1998) and for the appointment of independent investigators (April 4 1998) to deal with incompetent or corrupt councillors and officials. Nor did the criticism, by the parliamentary commissioner for standards, of Geoffrey Robertson, a Treasury minister with responsibility for tax and savings matters, for his failure to register his family interest in a multi-million pound, tax-free, offshore trust.

Cross-over job movements of civil servants (with specialised knowledge) from Whitehall into the private sector – condemned by Labour in opposition – have continued. So, too, has the giving of peerages in return for help with the financing of the Party. Indeed, boardroom donors are, step by step, moving in to replace the trade unions as major sources of Labour funding. Substantial 'blind trusts', of necessarily uncertain provenance, funded the private offices

of Labour shadow Cabinet Ministers, Blair's included, and after the election continued in some instances to do so. The seeking of cash in return for access to No. 10 Downing Street has also reared its head (March 30 1998). The Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, claiming an ugly local Party 'vendetta' against him, was caught up in March 1998 in unfounded insinuations of family benefit from the cheap sale of council houses in his Hull constituency (March 8 1998). All such matters, as the Tories found, are politically expensive, even if contested or unproven. 'Telling single parents to pull their socks up', declared the *Sunday Times* (January 25 1998) with justice, 'while plastering Lord Irvine's walls with paper when they could more cheaply have been covered with Scottish £1 notes is enough to make cynics of us all'. This was not a 'new beginning', but a fall.

#### A warning of danger

It was also, relatively speaking, trivial. There are more serious matters afoot.

For Labour's hollow slogans and behind-the-scenes bullying of the media, the infantile aping of an American presidential style, the concentration of powers in the Cabinet office, the confusion of Party and Government, the inner-party authoritarianism and the acquiescent, even zombie-like, performance of so many 'new' Labour parliamentarians, together with the many-sided losses to the sovereignty of Parliament and the constitution-wrecking influence over Labour of the 'modernisation' and 'rights' lobbies, are a dangerous political combination.

The mode of 'new' Labour's (non-collegiate) management of the national and Party agenda has been that of political 'overkill'. It is as if it has wished for – but failed to achieve, as the fierce resolutions of the Scottish Labour Party Conference in March 1998 disclosed – oversight and control of

all that moves within its ranks, and the suppression or curtailment of genuine debate in the Party. A stringent code of conduct was introduced by Labour before the election in order to curb dissidence. In office, rational or principled objection has too quickly been seen as insubordination or 'treachery', as the expulsion (without regard for natural justice) of its 'wayward' MEPs, Ken Coates and Hugh Kerr, in January 1998 revealed. Expectation of loyalty is one thing, a demand for blind obedience in 'carrying out the Party's manifesto' (Peter Mandelson, BBC Television, May 11 1997) is another.

The new powers taken to diminish constituency consultation, to impose shortlists, and to cancel or by-pass local endorsements, in the name of 'vetting' the selection of Party candidates for Westminster and local elections, merely carry further the processes of control. So, too, will the 'list-system' for candidacies under proportional representation for the 1999 European elections and for elections to the new Scottish Parliament; similar manoeuvres are likely in the selection process for the London mayoral election. All these developments are intended to give the Party leadership – or, rather, the Party managers – additional means by which 'trouble-makers', the independent-minded, and principled dissentients alike can be 'weeded out'.

Authoritarianism and intolerance have always been deep-rooted in Labour culture, as I discovered myself. But today's impositions of party order, carried out by a 'praetorian guard' of mediocrities who would be laughed out of court (as the absurd figures they are) but for the fear in which they are held, are a different matter. When debate is attempted to be stifled within a ruling party with an unassailable parliamentary majority, and one which has concentrated decision-making and policy-formation in a largely unelected clique, one must begin to take stock. For it now provides a strong *democratic* ground for hesitation about the dangers of Labour's larger purposes for the country.

It is here that the excessive powers and influence (and foolish conduct) of the Labour Lord Chancellor, that Pooh-Bah of the executive, legislative and judiciary, become germane. He is the professional patron of the Prime Minister and his wife, simultaneously most senior judge, appointer of judges, *ex-officio* speaker of the House of Lords, senior Cabinet Minister, architect of Labour's 'constitutional reforms', chairman of two cabinet committees and three sub-committees and a key member of five others. He is in charge of a Human Rights Bill which will cede a crucial part of parliamentary sovereignty to judges whom he has the power to choose. His position and comportment, set in context, are unacceptable in what still remains a parliamentary democracy, as large numbers of Labour backbenchers have made clear.

If in Lord Irvine is embodied the negation of the separation of powers, then in the Prime Minister, rarely voting – on average once in every 20 divisions – and neglectful of Parliament, are the beginning presumptions of a president. In Parliament there is a loss of sovereignty – and not merely to 'Europe'. In full Cabinet there is a loss of authority, and among the great bulk of Labour's parliamentarians an anxiety to toe the line. In the Labour Party as a whole, and despite the cosmetic setting up of 'policy forums', there is a loss of role in policy formation. Moreover, for its local activists there is diminishing regard, while among its unaccountable and largely invisible cliques of strategists there is a persistent *political* over-reaching.

What we have here, in sum, is a stylish-seeming political arrogance, concentrating its powers and settling in for a (hoped-for) lengthy period of office. In seeking on the one hand to suffocate and even to delegitimise internal party challenge, and on the other to disable the prospects of external political challenge also, by (for example) the manipulation of the Liberal Democrats' desire for a place in the governmental sun, Labour plainly aspires to be the single

party which expresses, in authoritative and authoritarian fashion, the interests of the nation as a whole.

It is only in this setting that the significance of the gradual erosion of the powers of Parliament can be properly grasped. For example, the critical announcement by the Government that the Bank of England, in the name of Orwellian 'long-termism', was to become independent – reducing the role of Parliament – was not made in the first instance to Parliament itself. Likewise, the rescinding of the ban on tobacco sponsorship, reversing Government policy, was disclosed first not to Parliament but to the press. Thus it is not only transfers of sovereignty to Brussels but the *unparliamentary* actions of the governing party itself – to which the Speaker of the House of Commons has herself raised objection (April 9 1998) – together with the contempt for Parliament and parliamentarians fostered (with the aid of Tory misconduct) by both the tabloid and 'quality' press, which are between them reducing Parliament's standing and functions.

To this anti-democratic process, it is, arguably, the influence of the media in general which makes the largest contribution to Parliament's diminution. As Anthony Howard has pointed out, politicians 'no longer have to exercise command over the House of Commons. Instead they have to know how to look after themselves when summoned before the microphone or the camera' (*The Times*, February 21 1998). This becomes doubly significant when 'new' Labour and its leadership, at democracy's cost, are already so much a media confection.

It is thus not from 'reaction' but in general defence of the integrity (and future) of the parliamentary process itself that objection can be made to Labour's handing over – *from Parliament* to the Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Bank of England – *de facto* control of a major aspect of the management of the national economy, interest-rate policy, and of accountability for it. Or, as Hugo Young has put it,

'the Chancellor is more accountable to the MPC than the MPC is to anyone' (*Guardian*, March 17 1998). For the same reason (among others) it is constitutionally objectionable, from a parliamentary democratic point of view, to give primacy in the matter of 'human rights' to the courts *over Parliament*, as a result of the incorporation of the European Convention of Human Rights into British law.

In the latter case, Parliament's historic function – yet another – as the protector of the citizen's freedoms and the redresser of the citizen's grievances is clearly to be diminished. By giving judges the right to declare that parliamentary enactments offend the terms of the European Convention, it would make the urgent amendment by Parliament of such enactments obligatory at the judges' behest. Yet is it not wrong that a presidential and media-driven administration, in many critical matters led by unseen and unaccountable advisers, and with a Lord Chancellor who has lost the respect of much of the public, should be the sloganising architect of such constitutional changes?

A similar question may be asked of Labour's federalist devolution of powers to Northern Ireland, to Scotland and, to a much lesser extent, to Wales. Correct in principle, since such devolution will enhance the sense of local citizenship, the changes in the Irish and Scottish cases are constitutionally drastic. For they will again diminish the powers of the Westminster Parliament, and are likely in Northern Ireland and Scotland to lead to gradually increasing demands for Irish union on the one hand and independence on the other. And once more the whole enterprise is being steered by a Government which unnervingly prizes its cosmetic image, and often vacuous political style, as much as its custodianship of the public interest.

Similarly, the moves by Labour towards, and the further toying with, proportional representation, including for general elections, must be set in their full political context. Thus, any

break in the traditional link between the constituency and its directly elected representative, a lynch-pin of Britain's democratic system, would facilitate the concentration of powers in the hands of Party officials. It would also encourage further the dark arts of manipulative horse-trading with minority interests and parties, in order to produce coalition majorities which had no direct mandate to rule, while the combination of proportional representation with a Lab-Lib Dem pact could see off the Tories from election to election.

'It may be that the era of pure representative democracy is slowly coming to an end', Peter Mandelson has suggested (*Guardian*, March 16 1998), citing 'plebiscites', the Internet and 'citizens' movements' as alternative 'democratic' methods and structures. In this there is rather more of Mosley than of Herbert Morrison. Indeed, with its overdone leader-principle, its party centralisation, its slicked-up – but sometimes rough – acolytes quick to abuse their powers, its supine party members, its insufficient respect for Parliament's role, its newspeak slogans and its claims to be constructing a new order, uncomfortable historical parallels can be found for certain features (the Greenwich Dome included) of 'new' Labour's rootless style.

But, even without such foreshadowings, these measures, *taken together*, are not the unproblematically 'democratic' and 'modernising' steps that they may at first sight, and *taken singly*, appear to be. We surely cannot afford a ruling party authoritarianism, millennial fantasy about a 'new Britain' and a weakened Parliament together.

#### **Constitutional reform and the politics of 'rights'**

Underneath much of the 'new' Labour radicalism on the constitution, on the reform of institutions, on devolution, and on the incorporation of the European Convention there lies paradoxically – given the attempted stifling of dissent within

the Labour Party itself – the politics of ‘rights’: ‘human rights’ (as if we did not have them already), rights of minority representation, rights for the regions and so on, almost *ad infinitum*. Moreover, we are told by the Kafkaesque rights lobbies that our institutions are ‘in decay’ (Charter 88, *The Times*, June 6 1996); or, a greater hallucination still, that our democracy is more shadow than substance, making us not citizens but ‘subjects’ (Demos, ‘Open Letter to Tony Blair’, *Guardian*, September 27 1994).

Reform is certainly required to remedy some of our civic ills, as by the restoration of effective city and local government and of local civic pride, and the redemption of our atrophying rural life. But it is a wrecker’s lie to argue that we live under conditions of ‘parliamentary absolutism’ or that ‘the old constitution is well and truly bust’ (Anthony Barnett, Charter 88, *The Times*, December 17 1997). In both instances the opposite is the case. ‘It is hard’, declares the same voice of untruth, ‘to describe ourselves as a democracy’ (*Independent*, August 20, 1996). On the contrary, it is not hard at all.

Yet the zealous lobbyists who urge constitutional reform upon the Labour Party do so with this kind of falsehood and half-truth (at best) as their point of departure. Worse still is that much – although not all – of the driving-force for reform has come from ex-left malcontents turned born-again libertarians who, after the defeat of communism and old socialism, had no other cause remaining to them. It is they who, projecting their death-wish for the parliamentary democratic and civic society upon others, would push their constitutional-wrecking arguments for rights and reforms to their very limits: that is, to the point of the very undoing of the civic order which guarantees such rights in the first place.

‘New’ Labour has listened to, and acted upon, some of their arguments, as for the reform of the House of Lords, and resisted others. It has been bolstered in its self-defence against

the more deranged of the ‘rights’ pressures by re-assuming the Nonconformist ethic of countervailing personal responsibility or *duty*. But it remains the case that a confusing mixture of populism, good sense and ‘modernising’ meretriciousness informs Labour’s projects for British institutions.

And when false premises and hollow political purposes are at work on the ‘reform’ of a democratic, if flawed, constitution, while the governing party’s authoritarianism increases and parliamentary powers recede, democrats – remembering the example of Weimar in the thirties– have good grounds for alarm.



## TORYISM'S THREADBARE CONDITION

UNHAPPILY, THE TORY PARTY, with its reduced influence and lost sense of direction, is in no position to resist what it does not like, nor to take up distinctive grounds of principle when it is no longer clear what its principles are. But what is plain is that its anti-Conservative espousal of the 'free market society' as the centre of its creed can offer no bulwark against harm to institutions which it thinks are sacrosanct or serve the common good. It has damaged too many of them itself.

Indeed, it cannot (for the time being) convincingly be the defender of any faith at all – whether in the constitution, in the rule of law, or in the Established Church – when it has given overriding *moral* status, as well as dogmatic importance, to 'market approaches' to public provision, social policy, education, Sunday trading, public order, and even government administration itself. This will remain to Labour's advantage, notwithstanding the latter's own 'tailing' of Tory policies, since Labour, for all its defects, is more than a party-of-the-market. As for the crass equation made by (non-Conservative) Tories between 'the state' *as such* and a 'collectivised order', or the implication that almost any state action is an act of 'state control' or represents an 'interference with personal liberty', they will never butter enough electoral parsnips for a Tory return to office. Too few British citizens aspire to live in a Friedmanite Garden of Eden.

Rather, a gradually reformed Tory Party will have to learn, during its wilderness years, that the 'regulation of civic

society' is *not* a 'persistent socialist error' (*The Times*, leader article, January 4 1997). Such 'regulation', to a greater or lesser degree, is the duty of any government in any free society whatever, if we are not to return to a pre-civil Hobbesian state of nature. Moreover, for every citizen who calls for the 'right to be left alone' (Ferdinand Mount, *Sunday Times*, June 15 1997), there are certainly two or three who understand, and silently assent to, Hobbes' proposition that 'from the not-knowing of civil duties proceed the greatest calamities of mankind' (*De Corpore*, chap. 1, s. 7).

These are self-evident truths. Lobbyists of the non-Conservative libertarian right deny them. Like their death-wishing left *alter egos* who once did the same sort of thing to Labour, they urge upon their defeated Party *more* of the hair of the electoral dog that bit them: 'downscaling the state', 'low-cost government', low taxes, more 'choice', more liberty and all the rest of it, as if political annihilation were preferable to the surrender of a dogmatic position. In defeat, and with no real sign of revival, they urge the Conservative Party to be 'more radical still' (*The Times*, November 22 1997), as if there were a victory to be gained from the pursuit of further failure.

The old left thought so too. 'New' Labour did not, and, occupying the centre ground, has come near to wrecking the Tory Party.

### The need for Tory rethinking

In consequence, the right's 'loony left' fox has been shot. It is no use Tory conspiracy theorists seeing a crypto-collectivism, or crypto-'Marxism', in today's Labour Party, since such astigmatism will disable every prospect of a Tory return. The time for such parodies is past. A 'new' Toryism, if there is to be one, could not be grounded in such misjudgement, while reflex name-calling – as the old left discovered – is no substitute

for rethinking. Thus it will also be no use, when the next election comes, seeking to terrorise electors with the old spectres of 'socialist regulation', or the 'nanny state', or similarly worn-out political clichés. 'New' Labour has moved on.

Nor is the Prime Minister a 'salesman without a product', as William Hague has suggested (January 23 1998). The reverse is true, and the boot is more nearly on the other foot. There is also no point in merely scoffing at Labour's 'cynicism' or 'incoherence' when, in its first year, nonsenses and contradictions notwithstanding, it has done as many right things as wrong. Furthermore, it is to Toryism's *own* intellectual impoverishment that Conservatives must look if political recovery is to be achieved.

Thus there is as little good sense, or even as little meaning, in Maurice Cowling's prescription that 'a Conservative intellectuality ought to be negative, sceptical and intolerant, especially of compassion and communitarianism, before it is positive' (*The Times*, July 26 1997) as there used to be in the defeated old left's prescriptions for 'class struggle'.

Lower down the Olympian slopes towards the Plains of Sense, there is also nothing much now for the Tories – given where 'Toryising' Labour stands itself – in repeated appeals to the spirit of 'competition', 'enterprise', 'freedom of choice' and 'wealth-creation', as if all that the citizen wished was a world of contented producers and satiated consumers. The pursuit of self-interest in the market-place, however rational such pursuit may be, or appear to be, is at best a necessary but *not sufficient* condition for the maintenance of the general well-being. And fear of ideas – or of 'abstract ideological debates', as John Major puts it (*The Times*, February 11 1998) – offers nothing at all.

Indeed, unless a 'new' Tory Party engages with 'new' Labour upon the key questions of how best, and to what extent, the state should discharge its obligations to its

citizens, and how best, and to what extent, the citizen shall be brought to discharge his or her obligations to self, fellow-citizens and society as a whole, it will miss the central point of today's political agenda. For as our civic societies move further towards disintegration, and the obligations (and even the very fact) of our citizenship are neglected and forgotten, it has become the prime duty of government to discover how best to protect and cherish the civic order which is the matrix of our rights and liberties, and which gives us our local habitation and name. We are not Robinson Crusoes, however much we may wish to be.

To protect the citizen's private property, promote his isolate rights, ensure his 'freedom of choice' and facilitate his personal enterprise is not enough in libertarian democracies where the civic bond lies broken. The relish expressed by James Dale Davidson and William Rees-Mogg (*The Times*, April 8 1997) 'as the modern nation-state decomposes', as politics is 'downsized', as the 'sovereign individual' rises – he rose long ago – and as 'civic myths' are exploded, will do nothing to repair it. On the contrary, they will keep the true citizen on his knees, despairing.

## 'NEW' LABOUR, 'NEW' TORY

AFTER A YEAR IN OFFICE, and with all the defects I have noted, it is clear that Labour has at its 'ideological' core a 'responsibility'-driven (as well as a media-driven) project. According to it, in return for the inducements of government encouragement and support, and the (patchy) discharge of its own ethical obligations to the citizen, free individuals and free institutions are expected to act responsibly in the first case, and efficiently in the second, for both the private and the public good.

There is an embryonic civic philosophy in this. But Labour, notwithstanding its achievements, has consistently subordinated the political and moral imperatives of what it is doing in its social policies – the ground on which future electoral battles will be won and lost – to the call of public relations and 'presentation'. Even the Crime and Disorder Bill is presented less as a restorative civic measure, which it is, than as 'giving *power* back to the people in law-abiding communities' (my emphasis, December 4 1997). This was a sound-bite formula, both empty and untrue. The 'power' of 'people' (as ever) does not come into it. Likewise, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has described his welfare-reforms as 'inspired by the need to have a modern system that meets the needs of people' (*The Times*, December 23 1997). This was yet another empty resort to the public relations mantra of 'modernisation', with the ubiquitous word 'people' again thrown in for good measure.

It has therefore remained unclear to most, despite the energy of its actions, what Labour's real ends are, important as some of them may be. Its explanations of purpose, being mainly in 'media-friendly' slogan-form, are mistrusted or brushed aside. Much of its work, while going astutely with the grain of public opinion, is therefore undercut by its own manner and lost in its deeper effects on the public mind. But its ratings *faute de mieux* remain high. It is a parable for our times.

It is also a Tory opportunity. For it remains open season, despite Labour's first-year successes, for the discovery of many further means to civilise our battered society, to bring the citizen's best self to life, and to repair our community life and ravaged civic order. Here Labour, building the 'new Britain', has failed to distinguish between those public institutions which require to be reformed, and those institutions, many of them traditional and deep-rooted in the civic soil, which provide the citizen with his or her sense of identity and of affiliation in place and time, and which therefore require to be supported and strengthened.

Moreover, whoever at heart despises the very notion of the 'nation-state', as do the 'globalisers' in Labour's ranks, or is uncomfortable with the idea of 'civic society' itself – as being a Tory rather than a universal idea – is not best fitted to lay down the ground-rules for 'citizenship education', as Labour is proposing to do (March 27 1998). 'Citizenship' is a particular matter of national (and local) identity and belonging, of specific obligation and entitlement. As for the 'global citizen' of whom 'new' Labour's advisers have begun to speak, he or she is yet another rootless abstraction, as well as a contradiction in terms. Hence the word 'citizen' and its full significance remain to be understood by a truly civic party, mindful of British history, respectful of parliamentary democracy and free of disabling 'new age' illusions.

This is also a large Tory opportunity. If Labour were able to move beyond its welfarist reflexes, timidity about

crime, submissiveness to anti-educational lobbies, and acceptance of trade-union featherbedding under the old order, Toryism should be able to transcend the limitations of its own (non-Conservative) dogmas in order to re-find its political direction. Unless it does so, it will not easily regain a position from which it can challenge Labour in teaching society the 'rules of civil life', as Hobbes called them.

I believe that there is now a silently agreed, cross-class, political and moral agenda. Uniting a large swathe of the British people, 'new' Labour is capable of commanding this agenda by default, having successfully taken some of the Tories' clothes, while refusing the narrowness of the latter's non-Conservative vision. It is an agenda to raise the nation's educational standards; to halt and reverse the assaults on community peace and order; to revitalise regional and local civic identity, and to restore city government; to revive the ethic and status of public service; to support the principle of duty and the mutuality of obligations between citizen and state; to encourage, by might and main, the volunteering spirit in support of the civic bond; to help protect the environment from destructive intrusion and predation; and to begin to make good the growing social destitution of village Britain.

Indeed, when nearly half of Britain's 10,000 rural parishes, with populations in each of up to 10,000 'citizens', have come to have neither school nor Post Office, and almost three-quarters neither general store nor bus service, and over 90% neither bank nor police station (Report of Rural Development Commission, February 12 1998), there is enough for any Party – in particular an ostensibly Conservative Party – to do in city and countryside to help reverse such disastrous, community-dissolving trends. The £50 million promised by Labour in the March 1998 budget for investment in rural transport is a mere token of what is required.

True citizens want to live in a cohesive and neighbourly society under the rule of law – not the law of the

jungle – which dignifies not degrades them in the belonging. At St. Luke's infants' school, Wolverhampton, where a machete put a stop in blood to a children's party, the shrubs and trees in the playground had *already been dug up* as a security measure in order to 'eliminate hiding places for intruders' (July 10 1996). Together we have come to a sorry civic pass. But the 'true citizens' to whom I referred will not rediscover their civic sense – their sense of citizenship – on the Internet or as players in the 'global market'. Moreover, to be dignified rather than degraded, such citizens and their public institutions require to be protected alike from the ravages of Toryism's 'market values' and the misplaced ardour of the callow Labour 'moderniser'.

For true citizens are much more than 'customers' and much less than political zealots. They know that life is more than a commercial venture, and (for the most part) are patriots and internationalists together. It remains an open question whether defeated Toryism, taking hold once more of its lost civic traditions and ideals of community service, will understand all this in good time; or whether 'new' Labour, which has in its first year already seen and acted on part of it, will continue for a generation to make political hay in the absence of a true opposition.



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