

PEOPLE AID

A new politics sweeps the land

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First Band Aid. Then came Live Aid. Now we've had Sport Aid. Geldof and co have captured the imagination of the nation. A new political agenda has been forged.

POLITICS IS certainly unpredictable. Who would ever have thought of Bob Geldof - a Boomtown Rat who had seen better days - as one of the key political actors of Thatcherite Britain. More to the point, who would have guessed, in 1979, or even perhaps 1983, that the plight of the Third World would become one of the great *popular* movements of our time?

The triumph of Thatcherism represented the triumph of an ideology of selfishness and scapegoats. National failure was believed to be the result of individual profligacy. The road to salvation lay through people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps. The only acceptable motive for action was self-interest. What the unemployed needed was not handouts but initiative. In this view of the world, there was little sympathy for the casualties of the crisis at home, and no concern at all for less fortunate nations. People - and countries - were expected to put their own houses in order.

For some months now a sort of running battle has been going on between this creed of selfishness and the attempt to put together a broad, alternative vision, around the notion of a 'caring society'. Some of the recent turning-points in the fortunes of Thatcherism are related to this struggle to polarise the field of social ideologies. Now, with the rise of the BandAid/LiveAid/SportAid phenomenon, the ideology of selfishness - and thus one of the main ideological underpinnings of Thatcherism - has been dealt a further, severe blow.

The erosion of Thatcherism's influence

Thatcherism arose partly as a way of thinking about recession. Its account of recession is, however, one-sided. Recession is not only about tightening belts. It is also about structural change and who is to

carry the costs. It is about change and its consequences: within industry, as between declining and emergent technologies and communities of skill; within countries, as between the rise of some regions and the decline of others; and, internationally, in terms of the re-ordering of relationships within and between the so-called 'three worlds'. It is precisely these structural

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aspects of recession which have assumed increasing political importance.

The first, structural industrial change, is a growing area of political conflict, of which the miners' strike, Wapping and the shift of the tide against Thatcherism on unemployment and the unemployed are all manifestations. The most obvious expression of the second is the growing division between the declining north and the more prosperous south. So far as the third strand is concerned, though the reassertion of US power under Reagan has stimulated a flowering of the peace movement, the questions of Third World poverty, underdevelopment and the vicious circle of debt have stubbornly refused to assume a popular political character. However, the groundswell of political resistance in South Africa coupled with the rise of the 'famine movement' has begun to turn the tide here, too.

Thatcherism's account of recession - and, with it, a certain Thatcherite vision of the world order and Britain's role in it - has taken a drubbing. Selfishness and greed have been, if not eclipsed, then to some



Omar Khalifi, the Sudanese athlete, was the central figure in SportAid.

Photo: Mary Mackay/WireImage

extent displaced by altruism and conscience.

BandAid/LiveAid/SprbtAid encapsulates this shift more dramatically than anything else. One effect of a Thatcherite-dominated recession was to reinforce a narrow nationalism, helping to breed a reactionary mood of 'Little Englandism' and to nourish the roots of popular racism. A lifting of the popular horizons beyond our own shores, beyond even the boundaries of Europe, to Africa thus represents a crucial turning point in the erosion of Thatcherite hegemony.

Reaching the unreached

The political significance and power of the 'famine movement' was enhanced rather than weakened by its origin and authorship. It came from *outside* the Left, however widely you define it. Its mobilising reach was quite different even from CND's. SportAid, while resembling CND's age profile, attracted a youth constituency which, for the great part, had never previously been on any kind of demonstration. It reached the previously unreached. The famine movement's capacity to mobilise *new* forces has thus helped to shift the political centre of gravity. In 1979, a majority of young voters identified with Thatcherism, saw it as a vision for the future. In 1986, there is a new mood amongst contemporary youth. A sea-change has taken place.

This capacity to mobilise new constituencies is bound up with its character as a movement, the way it has evolved and, above all, its deep roots in contemporary popular culture, especially the culture of rock music.

Geldof's former career as a rock star was in no way coincidental to the movement's success - his rock connections *were* his political credentials (a guarantee to the fans that, at least from him, they were unlikely to hear a replay of the old-style lyrics of the professional politicians). The famine movement only really took off with the coming-together of some of the biggest of the contemporary British pop stars for the BandAid single, 'Do They Know It's Christmas?'. Since every fan knows how much it costs a star to give a free performance, this gesture helped to put 'caring for others' on the map as a value that belonged to the world of rock culture.

LiveAid

This was followed in July of last year with LiveAid, the one-day, open-air pop extravaganza in London and Philadelphia with



Bob Geldof has become the voice of a new mood amongst the young.

global television coverage. The garnering of such a broad cross-section of pop stars for such a universal cause had enormous pulling power. The rock music connection gave the cause a national - indeed international - stage which it otherwise could not possibly have enjoyed. The combination of culture and politics, altruism and fun, was irresistible. The link between rock culture and politics is not, of course, new - it was a powerful element in the politics of the 1960s, and Rock against Racism, the GLC's cultural politics and Red Wedge are more recent examples from the Left. But the sheer scale and ambition of LiveAid was unprecedented. Never before had 'pop politics' created and shaped a whole social movement in this way.

No other cultural form could have played the political role that rock did in the BandAid/LiveAid phenomenon. Its ubiquitous presence in the lives of young people gives it an unparalleled mobilising power. When politics makes contact with this culture, it finds itself in touch with the cultural language which, for the majority of young people today (and for many not-so-young people, too), most authenti-

cally expresses how they experience the world. The rise of Geldof as the representative figure of the movement is a good illustration of this point. It's not just that he is a very talented politician: he became its cultural representative. He symbolised the fusion of two worlds usually kept well-segregated.

Nothing more graphically illustrates this than Geldof's visit to the European parliament and his meeting with leading EEC figures. His dress and appearance was of the street not the committee room. His language was direct and uncomplicated. His demand was uncompromising. He was the representative of something new, a political movement born of a youth culture. This has enabled him to polarise the politics of aid in a new way: direct democracy versus bureaucracy. The nearest parallel to this mobilisation was the 60s, when the fact that youth stood so massively on the side of radicalism was due, above all, to a rare and powerful crossover between politics and culture.

Run the world - or across your room

SportAid, like LiveAid, also built on a popular cultural form. Unlike LiveAid, however, SportAid used a form which placed a premium, not on spectatorship but on participation - that is, in the doing (ie, running) as well as the giving. 'Run the World' was an appeal to everyone, if somewhat Utopian. The growing popularity in recent years of jogging, fun runs, 10 km races, half-marathons, marathons and

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what have you offered an ideal participatory form. It drew on one of the most progressive sporting and cultural traditions of the last few years, and through it, also on a growing ecological-environmental consciousness connected to the 'politics of health'.

The London marathon, for instance, is an event *of the people*: anyone can run (not only the 'professionals'). It goes right through the city. Communities as well as groups of friends and individual runners of all kinds and ages turn out for the occasion (allowing for a variety of forms of parti-

cipation not a feature of demonstrations, the Left's preferred mass cultural form). The emphasis in SportAid, moreover, was no longer on a single national event, but rather on doing it where you are: 'let a hundred runs run' as it were (even if it was only across your own living room).

Another key feature of the BandAid/LiveAid/SportAid phenomenon has been its capacity to transcend national frontiers. LiveAid was staged on both sides of the Atlantic: the stars belong to a highly internationalised market and audience: the concerts were beamed by satellite to many countries. By using the global networks of rock music and television, the movement was able to be, at once, both national and international. For a movement where the key issue is about the relationship between the First and the Third Worlds, this was not only appropriate but added significantly to the power of the appeal.

SportAid built on this international dimension in a number of different ways. It was sponsored by SportAid and Unicef. It was timed to have maximum impact on the UN Assembly debate on Africa, which immediately followed it. It was preceded by a week of activities across the globe, in the West, in the East and in Africa itself. The main focus of the event was the Sudanese runner, Omar Khalifi. The 10 km run itself was staged at the same time in over 270 cities in 78 countries. Brisbane, Budapest, Leningrad, Paris, London,

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Ougadougou, New York, Nairobi, Rome and many more. And, like LiveAid, it was televised across the world. Unlike Live Aid however, which at the end of the day was primarily focussed on London and Philadelphia, SportAid engaged in a more direct and active manner with the Third World, and Africa in particular. Africa was not just an object of a movement in the developed world, it was also, at last, one of the subjects.

Shifting the political agenda

So what has the BandAid/LiveAid/SportAid movement achieved? Its greatest success has been to change the national and, to a rather lesser extent, the international political agenda. The plight of the Third World has never been a national

political priority. Nothing has symbolised this more clearly than the low priority which has always been accorded to expenditure on aid, the patronising and forked-tongue way in which it is usually discussed. Britain's aid contribution - as a proportion of national income - has always been miserable, especially when her past contribution to undeveloping the underdeveloped world is borne in mind. And when the era of paring down public expenditure arrived, aid was high on the list of sacrificial lambs. Under Thatcher it has been ruthlessly pruned back. Now, for the first time, expenditure on aid is a big political issue.

Of course, it isn't simply a question of aid. 'Aid', in fact, is a very inadequate way of thinking about the relationship between the developed and the under-developed worlds or the causes of world poverty and famine. Some genuine reservations have been expressed about the limitations of the kind of 'famine consciousness' which has developed in the wake of LiveAid/SportAid. It certainly cannot yet be said that the majority of people in Britain, or even the majority of the participants in 'Run The World' have properly grasped the dynamic relationship between 'us' and 'them' across the North/South divide.

The largest chunk of 'aid' imaginable in any one year will not create the conditions in which Africa can feed itself if world commodity prices, the terms of trade, interest rates and Third World indebtedness to the international banking system remain unchanged. No act of charity can heal the breach within poor nations when the superpowers are exploiting those divisions in the attempt to recruit them into their side in the cold war which is being conducted on a worldwide scale.

However, the record of the famine movement on this aspect is not as inadequate as it is sometimes depicted and is manifestly improving. In highlighting the causes of African poverty, Geldof and co have drawn attention to the underlying economic relationships between the First World and the Third World, questioning not only the levels but also the forms of aid, singling out the squeeze in which the Third World is caught by the debt problem, and ridiculing the absurdity of grain and butter mountains in Europe and famine in Africa.

It has been argued that, although the famine movement is beginning to highlight these deeper aspects of the problem, it has, like the older aid and emergency agencies, portrayed Africa simply as vic-

tim linked to the charity of the West in what is essentially a paternalistic relationship. Again, there is something in this: it could hardly be otherwise, given the way our imperial history has shaped our political and cultural traditions. But the Third World as victim no longer seems the dominant image. SportAid did indeed talk

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about the responsibilities of the First World to the Third World, and Africa was, as we have seen, a participant. Aid is moving from the realm of charity to the world of politics. In generating a popular movement around this, it has given internationalism a new content.

It's worth adding too that, although the UN debate yielded little tangible result, international neo-liberalism was exposed to quite new pressures. Not only has the Thatcherite 'put your own house in order' attitude towards the African crisis been shaken dramatically, but it has been placed on the defensive, internationally. Shultz's lecture to Africa on privatisation and more initiative by private enterprise and less by the state was revealed for the hollow, cynical sham it certainly was, an excuse to do little or nothing.

Charity and politics

Another achievement of the SportAid movement is the way it has combined charity with politics. Again, this has been a controversial aspect of SportAid on the Left. The traditional Left has long regarded charity as a sop, which eases the conscience but does not tackle the problem at the root, and which moreover makes such matters appear to be the responsibility of private individuals rather than of the state. Of course, it is true that famine cannot be permanently averted in Africa by charity alone.

But this partly misses the point. For Third World poverty is the responsibility of people *and* governments. Politically, the state is not likely to do much unless the people are pushing it. But for the people to mount an attack on the current set of national priorities and to engage in the enormous task of mobilising public opinion so as to create a new political agenda, they must find ways of identifying with and committing themselves to the cause in some public and socially validated way.

Personal giving is one important way of relating to an issue, though it may not be enough to constitute a whole politics. But it implies commitment. We must not underestimate the role of movements, which have their base within civil society, in creating a current or movement of opinion which has a shift in state policy as one of its ultimate objectives.

SportAid was essentially a civil society movement, arising outside the state and formal politics. That was a major part of its attraction. It was therefore participatory in its whole thrust - getting ordinary people to do something, to give directly, themselves. But, in addition to raising a great deal of money, it also placed new and quite dramatic pressures on the government to take the aid question seriously and to act. Far from being simply a sop, charity in this context has become a powerful political weapon. It seems unlikely that a broad-based, anti-Thatcherite popular politics can be built without politicising the charitable impulse.

In this context, it is worth noting the story of the government's attitude towards Geldof and the famine movement. At the time of LiveAid, the government simply ignored it. But such has been the success of the famine movement, and the changed popular mood, that when it came to SportAid, the Tories were no longer able to remain so aloof. Now, grudgingly, a knighthood has been found. Meanwhile, the hectic search is on for a mega-star of the pop world more politically acceptable, more amenable to The Leader's whim - and preferably, no doubt, English rather than Irish. Richard Branson of the Virgin record and travel empire and 'LitterAid', is the latest candidate for this role.

Abstentee Left

This brings us, finally, to the attitude of the Left. Sadly, the Left's attitude has

been, at best, praise from the sidelines; more usually, grudging support, with a good supply of sectarian sniping. By and large the organised Left has been almost totally *absent* from the whole movement and process. The Left has sought no popular points of entry into it. To cite just two examples of what might have been. Following LiveAid, there was a series of initiatives such as FashionAid, FoodAid and ArtAid. But no UnionAid. A popular initiative from the unions last year with LiveAid *el al* could have raised large sums of money from within the unions, increased awareness amongst union members about Third World issues, created

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new links between popular cultural figures and the unions, enhanced their public image, and enabled new forms of mobilisation and creativity within the unions themselves. And when it comes to SportAid, everybody seemed to be falling over themselves to join it except the labour movement. True, Denis Healey was seen on the tv screens in his 'I Ran the World' t-shirt, limbering up on the House of Commons grass with other MPs. But where was the Labour party NEC or the TUC general council?

This absence is not accidental. The continuing suspicion about 'charity' and about youth culture amongst sections of the Left is no doubt one reason. Another is reservations about the way Africa is portrayed. But the most important reason is surely a profound cultural sectarianism which still pervades the Left. The real reason, one suspects, why there has been no relationship with BandAid/LiveAid/SportAid is because the initiative came

from *outside* the Left. It was not 'ours'. If it had been Nicaragua, Chile or South Africa, it would not doubt have been different. But here was an initiative which came from quite new quarters *and* on an issue on which the Left has traditionally had precious little to say beyond slogans.

Yet the capacity of the Left to act as a national force cannot only be about its own creations, its own capacity to initiate. It must also be about its ability to relate positively to others, and the initiatives of other forces. That is what hegemony is about. Otherwise our model of society is that the only things worth getting involved in are our own things; others are not capable of creating movements and currents which deserve our support, enthusiasm and intervention. This is a very patronising view of the world.

By absenting itself from a popular movement like SportAid, the Left thereby also largely deprived itself of a voice in the direction of that movement and of the debate which has inevitably followed, and thus once again isolated itself from the mainstream of national-popular life which, on this occasion, seems - like the great swarm of anonymous runners - to have passed us by somewhere along the way.

This is inexcusable for another reason. The famine movement has asserted at a popular level the need for a new relationship between Britain and the Third World. The peace movement of the 80s has been more internationalist and less parochial than that of the 60s. Taken together with the reassertion of a more traditional strength of the Left - solidarity movements with Third World struggles, now dramatically expressed in the context of South Africa - we can now detect the emergence of something new, a number of parallel popular movements all of which are about a different post-imperial role for Britain. •

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