

Power To The Person

Thatcherism has appropriated the individual and choice.

Charlie Leadbeater argues that the Left needs a new progressive individualism if we are to win them back

In much of the postwar era socialist progress was measured by the progressive expansion of the public sector, through nationalisation, public education, and health and welfare spending. If socialism is to be renewed in the next decade it must adopt an entirely different index of progress: the progressive expansion of the sphere of individual rights and responsibilities.

If the Left stands for one thing, it should be this: people taking more responsibility for all aspects of their lives. Whatever issue the Left confronts, its question should be this: 'How can people take more responsibility for shaping this situation, determining its outcome?' It should not be, as it often is: 'What can the state, the council, the expert professionals, do to solve this problem for people?'

Thatcherism's conservative individualism is giving the desire for autonomy, choice, responsibility, freedom from the state, a reactionary form. But there is nothing about these desires which are intrinsically Thatcherite. It did not create those desires: it responded to them, and has sought to appropriate them.

The Left offers no alternative. It needs a socialist individualism at the core of its vision of how society should be organised. Socialists should not get trapped in a stale debate, in which they are painted as collectivists seeking to restrain Thatcherite individualists. They should not confine their case to the socially-divisive consequences of Thatcherite individualism. They should confront it directly by offering an alternative, progressive individualism.

Thatcherism builds up its vision of how society should be organised from a narrow account of the acquisitive, defensive drives which motivate individuals as consumers. The Left should build its vision of how society should be organised from an alternative account of individualism, an appeal to a culture of individual citizenship rather than individual consumerism.

The choice the Left should offer is between Thatcherism's constrained, narrow, materialistic individualism, and an expansive individualism which offers people rights to influence decisions in production as well as in consumption; political and civil rights as well as the right to buy; access to a set of universal rights to health care, education and training.

Under Thatcherism the credit card has become the symbol of citizenship, the entrance ticket to consumer society. As an alternative the Left should not offer credit controls. It should offer a wider idea of citizenship based on a much more extensive set of rights and entitlements, which are not purchased through the market, but delivered as part of citizenship.

Expanding the sphere of individual responsibility will require collective action. The aim and expression of socialist policies must be to expand





individual rights and responsibilities. But individuals will be unable to achieve this on their own. Many obstacles to individual security and advancement - for instance the inadequacy of investment in housing, education, training and health - will only be overcome by sustained collective action.

The Left has to renew confidence that collective social action is accountable to, and designed to fulfil, individual needs. It has to renegotiate the contract between those who finance collective services, those who provide them, and those who consume them, to ensure they provide value for money, efficiency, flexibility and choice.

The Left's agenda for the 1990s should be formed around these twin themes. Expanding the sphere of individual responsibility, but in tandem renewing a culture of social responsibility, and collective provision.

It is **the lack** of a vision of an individually-based collectivism, which underlies the Left's faltering in the 1980s. For it has been unable to respond to the decay of the old social-democratic order of Fordism.

Fordism was characteristically associated with regulation of the economy and social life by the social-democratic state. The social-democratic project was founded upon the assumption that the state could legitimately act as the representative and guardian of collective social interests.

Full employment and welfare spending were meant to ensure that economic growth had a wider social purpose beyond narrow profit. Tripartite policy-making and public ownership were meant to ensure economic decisions reflected wider social interests. Public spending, state intervention in the economy, were the distillation of social interests: the state was acting on our behalf.

But during the 1970s trust in the state's ability to act on society's behalf withered. Its interventions in the economy seemed an excuse for inefficiency. Its welfare policies ensnared clients in a demeaning web of bureaucracy and delivered poor quality services. It stood as a paternalist landlord over the people it was meant to serve.

This has created a major problem for the Left. Society should be more than an economic jungle of acquisitive consumers. There is no widespread support for society being remade in the image of *Howard's Way*, the BBC soap opera about over-sexed entrepreneurs on the south coast. Collective action will be vital to restore social justice. But most people simply do not trust the large, distant, unaccountable, uncontrollable state to do that job. It is not just that many people think the state cannot act efficiently. They do not believe the Left's claim that it can *represent* social responsibility.

The 'mass' aims of the social-

democratic state in providing services and housing were founded upon the 'mass' interests formed by the character of production and work. The Fordist era of mass-production workers, and mass consumers confirmed the sense that individual interests could be read off with some confidence from the great social blocs formed by production.

For too long the Left has been addicted to a set of theological guarantees which seemed to allow it to read off individual interests from larger collective interests. There was the historic guarantee that as society developed it would create the conditions for the unity of the working class, a natural constituency for socialism, which would arise from history. It would not arise evenly. It might be impeded by different class cultures. But it was imminent. This was reinforced by some guarantee of linearity: that from the interests formed through work other social interests would emerge. This was matched by a moral guarantee, that not only would the working class see socialism as a necessity but also as a moral vocation. These guarantees amounted to a political insurance policy that the Left could complacently, arrogantly rely upon: that a part of society would always be ours, even if it did not appear to be.

But changes in the character and distribution of work have undermined the unifying tendencies of production and work under Fordism. The economic restructuring of the 1980s has produced deep divisions within the working class. Established occupational, sexual and cultural identities, sources of solidarity and common identification are dissolving. The old demarcation lines between blue and white-collar workers, the skilled and the unskilled, are being superseded by much more fundamental divisions. The long-term unemployed are separated from the employed; part-time, temporary workers from full-timers; those trained to work with new technology and those left behind; the workers in the south east from the rest of the country. Many of the Left's assumptions about its constituency are forged around the idea of the male, manual, manufacturing, unionised worker: the classic Fordist worker, living in the shadow of the shipyard, the pit or the factory chimney. In the 1990s the largest group in the workforce will be white-collar, non-unionised, women working in the service sector.

In addition, in recent years the social theatre of consumption has become more important. Choice in consumption, lifestyle, sexuality, are more important as an assertion of identity. The dynamic area of most people's lives is where they can assert their difference from others.

These developments in attitudes towards the state and class have created an enormous problem at the very heart

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of the Left's sense of its historic purpose. The Left's project depends on a central equation: individuals' security, rights, and standards of living, can only be secured in the long run upon a foundation of collective, social action. The Left's case stands on that link between the individual and the collective. The trouble is that for many people that link has been broken. As a result the Left is adrift.

The link has been broken by these three developments: the loss of trust in the state's ability to act as the guardian of collective social interests; the decay of traditional sources of solidarity and common identity forged through work; the growth in the importance of individual choice in consumption, the revolt against centralising sameness, the pursuit of diversity.

This leaves the Left unable to solve a central paradox. Britain has become a savagely-divided country under Thatcherism. More than at any time since the second world war, there is a need for collective action, redistributive policies, a culture of social responsibility to overcome the poverty, deprivation, insecurity, and inequality which will be the legacy of the 1980s.

But achieving that sense of allegiance to a common purpose, renewing a sense of social solidarity and responsibility is perhaps more difficult than at any point since 1945, because the sources of that sense of common purpose have been so weakened. What is most needed - a renewal of the links between individual interests and collective solutions - is most difficult to deliver.

The routes through which the Left has traditionally offered some symmetry between the common advance of individual interests and general social interests are closing down. While the Left rested on a complacent belief that the links would remain strong, Thatcherism, on the back of the decline of Fordism, has attempted finally to break them with the promulgation of a narrow, conservative, ideology of individualism.

Thatcherism's ideology of individual choice runs far beyond consumerism. To argue that the Left needs an alternative individualism is not a plea for greater attention to consumer choice. It is an argument for putting individual interests at the centre of socialist strategy. For that is how Thatcherism has succeeded, by articulating a vision of how society should be organised which has individual morality at its centre.

Thatcherism's individualism is vital to its economic ideology. It justifies not merely the market economy, but the marketisation of society more generally. For Thatcherism the market is the hegemonic principle to guide the organisation of economic activity. Market choices are not merely a requirement to ensure resources are distributed efficiently. They are vital to the pursuit of higher efficiency. People work

harder with the incentive of expanding their opportunities to consume; businesses are made more efficient if entrepreneurs are freed to choose how to organise production. The ideology of choice also fits with structural changes within the economy - the explosion of consumer credit, the marketing and retailing revolution of the 1980s, the stress on product differentiation.

Thatcherite individualism has sanctioned a gorging materialism among the well-off. But it would be wrong to dismiss it simply as hedonism. Conservative individualism is not just about consumer choice, about people buying and selling. It incorporates those everyday acts, within a much wider social philosophy. It has asserted the possibility of individuals becoming agents to change their worlds through private initiatives. Aspirations for autonomy, choice, decentralisation, greater responsibility which were met with mumbling paternalism by the postwar social-democratic state, have been met by Thatcherite encouragement in the 1980s.

Individual choice implies people have the rationality and discipline to interrogate their desires and aspirations, to determine what they really want. Not just what they want in the supermarket, but what they want for their lives, what kind of people they want to be, where they will live, how their children will be educated. The fulfilment of these choices implies that individuals have a measure of power over an external world. In other words it is an ideology which centres not merely on pleasure but on rationality, discipline, responsibility and power. It creates a vision of individuals as autonomous agents, who have the power to remake their worlds.

This offer of remaking the world is dynamic, radical in a way. But it is enveloped by a conservative, but equally powerful, vision of the relationship between individuals and society.

For Thatcherism society is constituted by individuals: it is nothing other than a set of human atoms. One can only determine what society is by going back to its basic, indissoluble constituents - individuals. Individuals are not intrinsically social, their characters, resources, abilities are not formed in a social setting.

For Thatcherism society becomes merely a meeting place for a plethora of individual wills, an arena for individual satisfaction, a set of opportunities for individual achievement, advancement and enjoyment. Society is merely a tool and aid to help people achieve their pre-determined individual ends. People co-operate for purely instrumental reasons, to achieve their chosen ends more efficiently.

Thus all allegiance to collective solutions becomes vulnerable to break-aways. People are not encouraged to feel any sense of belonging or obligation to a wider collective. They are

encouraged to examine collective provision entirely instrumentally: 'Am I better off staying with the NHS or going for private health care?' Individualism fosters the myth that people can and should be self-sufficient. They should rely only upon themselves and owe as little as possible to others. It always encourages people to think of opting out of collective provision - for instance in education.

It thus sets up a simple dichotomy between the sovereignty of individual choice and the illegitimacy of attempts by collectives, and particularly the state, to limit those choices. Thatcherite individualism becomes an aggressively defensive view of the individual. The private space, provided for by hard-earned income, is sacred, to be protected against the unwelcome encroachments of the state, with its spurious claims upon individuals' resources.

This protection of the private space for the home-owning consumer incorporates people within a defence of private property in general which strengthens support for private ownership and control in the economy. It also incorporates people within exploitative economic relations. Its message is: if you have an economic asset - savings, skills, willingness to work - exploit it to the full. Thus it justifies the propagation of exploitative behaviour: everyone can have a stake in private property, everyone can make something through exploitation.

Thatcherism's individualism is not merely an economic ideology, but a moral vision of how society should be organised. From a view of individuals as assertive but narrow consumers it generates a much wider vision of how society should be ordered, which justifies the market, private property, the values of tradition and an attack on the public sector. It has become the moral marching song of the rising classes of Thatcherite Britain - the socially-mobile, affluent working class, the entrepreneurial classes, the private sector middle classes, the young urban professionals. This narrow individualism is Thatcherism's most fundamental and extensive privatisation: the privatisation of social aspiration, obligation and responsibility. It explains the fundamental nature of its attack on socialism, because it attacks the very sense of the social upon which *socialism* is based.

How should the Left respond, not only to Thatcherite individualism, but more importantly to the weakening of the traditional left links between the individual and the collective? While Thatcherism's ideological vision of society is founded upon the building blocks of individual desires and demands, the Left's vision seems to start with social structures and then fit individuals into them.

Socialist analysis is meant to explain a

range of macro-social processes - class formation, class alliances, social conflict, the historical trajectory of society's development. But if it is to explain social change it must be clear how these forces systematically affect, and in turn are affected by, individual actions and choices.

Thatcherism's strength is, that it has an ideology which makes people feel powerful in a tangible way. The Left's great weakness is that its vision of social organisation seems to leave little room for individuals other than as the passive, powerless bearers of larger social structures.

None of this disables the Left from having a powerful and coherent critique of Thatcherite individualism. Consumer choice does not amount to consumer power. Markets may provide for some choices, but they can deny diversity, and do not accommodate a range of choices which it is unprofitable to service. Thatcherism does not understand the importance of collectives. People do not work in shops, offices and factories as individuals, they work together. They are bound together in some underlying way. It is not socialism which promotes collective cultures and attachments, but the collective conditions of production, work and consumption. It cannot extinguish the collective cultures around the NHS and education.

Moreover it's clear that Thatcherite individualism's command of the moral high ground is essentially contested. It is extremely vulnerable to criticism of the social harshness of its individualism. For it has actually sanctioned an enormous dereliction of social responsibility. Indeed many who have benefited from Thatcherite policies are opposed to the state jettisoning its responsibilities to the poor and the sick.

But the power of this critique in turn raises a troubling question: if it is so powerful why has it failed so miserably to *dislodge* Thatcherism from the ideological high ground?

The answer is that by itself this critique is not enough. It is not enough to point to the consequences of Thatcherism, not enough to remind people of the enduring importance of collective cultures. For the Left is caught in a dichotomy which it cannot break out of without a reorientation of its appeal.

Thatcherism has created a powerful dichotomy between on the one hand state and collective provision, which is associated with uniformity, inefficiency, indignity and lack of choice; and on the other, the market and private provision, which is associated with self-sufficiency, choice, efficiency and rising living standards. Underlying this is a deeper dichotomy, which Thatcherism promotes, between a social life in which free individual choices are sovereign, and another where bureaucratic state control seeks to limit individual choices.

If the debate is conducted in these terms Thatcherism is bound to win, by

counterposing freedom of choice against bureaucratic restriction. For socialism's role seems to be to limit individual choice and responsibility.

There are two ways to loosen the grip of this vice. The first is to challenge Thatcherism's individualism directly, with an alternative individualism. The Left should counterpose a democratic individualism against Thatcherism's consumer individualism. While Thatcherism distributes individual entitlements according to whether people can afford them, the Left's stress should be on universal individual rights. While Thatcherism confines individual choice within the market, the Left should stress the importance of wider social individuality, diversity and plurality in lifestyles which cannot be delivered by the market.

The second route is to develop a new agenda for collective action. This should involve a decentralisation and democratisation of the state, and the devolution of state power to autonomous collective bodies, independent of the state. It should also involve a much stronger appeal to emerging collective interests, for this generation's environmental responsibilities to future generations.

The Left's agenda should aim to expand individual entitlements, rights and responsibilities. That should be the focus and measure of socialism's progress. What might that mean in practice?

It implies a basic recognition of the importance of choice in consumption. Economic strategy has to clearly deliver that choice. That means the market will play an important role in left economic strategy, simply because it is the best way to co-ordinate lots of decentralised economic decisions. That does not necessarily mean the market should be the dominant force within the economy; it does not mean that competition should not be regulated. But it does mean the Left has to acknowledge the obvious: the market, competition, can be useful economic tools to deliver consumer choice.

But ensuring consumer choice implies much more than that. It -means the public sector has to become much more consumer-oriented. Providing the standards of the high street in the benefit office will require more resources, but it will also require a managerial and retailing revolution in the public sector. In addition it means that public provision has to become more democratically accountable to allow clients to have more say over how services are designed and provided.

The Left should not allow Thatcherism's view of consumers to go unchallenged. Consumers' rights to standards of service should be considerably strengthened: for instance every British Gas customer should be able to claim a rebate if the gas engineer fails to appear at the appointed hour. A Labour government should stand on the



When the going gets tough: Dummies go window shopping

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side of the consumer against the price-fixing cartels in the credit card, petrol and other markets. Consumer assertiveness should be politicised to challenge corporate power.

But beyond that the whole idea that consumption is about buying and consuming goods needs to be challenged. The Left should adopt a much wider definition of consumption: time free from the necessity of work. Thus policies to reduce and reorganise working time should not primarily be conceived as workers' demands against employers. They should be seen as the demands of consumers, of parents. A clear instance of what social control of the economy should mean is the reorganisation of working time around the needs of the domestic sphere, as well as the needs of production. The promotion of such policies, to ease difficulties over care for the old, the young and the sick, would be a major public investment in expanding private, domestic spaces.

The dynamic of individualism should be expanded to production. If people can own their homes, if they can choose where to invest pensions, why should they not have a right to own the machines they work with? Individual rights to consultation and participation at work should be written into contracts of employment. Moves towards social ownership should be based on the idea that individual workers have a right to own a share of the assets of



vidual right to a guaranteed place on a high-quality employment and training programme. Again it should be written into individual contracts of employment that once someone is made redundant they can automatically trigger that entitlement.

This stress on rights in turn implies that people should carry responsibilities. The main responsibility is clear - a responsibility to seek and take up reasonable offers of training and employment, to accept reasonable measures of labour flexibility.

Beyond that the Left's individualism needs to foster individuality, diversity and plurality in civil society. Thus a stronger set of civil rights to freedom of sexual orientation are not a side issue. They are an emblem for the kind of civil society the Left should be aiming to nurture.

When Mrs Thatcher talks about individuals she usually talks about 'individuals and their families' - in other words male heads of households. Thatcherism's individualism is substantially trapped within the social assumptions of Fordism, that wage-earners are men. In the 1990s half the workforce will be women. Thus individual rights to equal pay for work of equal value, rights to childcare provision, would directly address the collective social needs of a majority of the workforce.

The link between these individual entitlements and collective provision is threefold. Firstly, these rights should generally be conceived and argued for as universal rights, for the well-off as well as the least well-off. Only then will these demands bridge and unite different segments of society. Thus there would be something collective written into this individualism: people need and would defend these rights as something they had in common. Thatcherism offers an atomistic individualism, the Left should offer a social individualism. People's interdependence, their mutual obligations, would be written into the rights they share in common.

Secondly, securing these rights will require not merely collective action but redistribution. For instance, a universal employment right to childcare provision would benefit both two-earner households and single parents. But it would disproportionately benefit single parents. Thirdly, this should be a democratic individualism as opposed to a consumerist individualism, in the sense that part of the fundamental picture of individuals on offer is that they are rational and reflective, capable of making informed decisions about how society should be organised around them.

This has important consequences for how collective action should be organised. If something is collectively guaranteed and financed, this does not mean that it then has to be *provided* by the state. These themes should guide

the Left's approach to the role of the state, and collective, public bodies.

The image of the state's role should be founded on the public park: a publicly-provided, regulated space, in which a range of private activities are possible. Some the state will provide directly (boats on lakes); many others may involve companies (ice-cream vans) or simply individuals doing what they want with the state's help (sunbathing). The state is vital to ensuring a space continues to exist and is developed; but beyond that its direct role depends on whether it is the most efficient provider of services.

In tandem the Left needs to focus on the creation of autonomous collectives, outside the state, which operate much more closely with their clients. So for instance, childcare provision could be built up from the informal networks which abound among women. An institutionalised, state solution would probably not be flexible enough. So power and responsibility for providing such a service, delivering an individual right, could be contracted to bodies regulated by the state.

In the economy a similar message applies. Local regulatory bodies for instance, could be set up to oversee the operations of major companies. These could become the democratic focus for collective views about industrial development - for instance environmental concerns. Ofel, the body which regulates British Telecom, has managed to change its approach with a sustained attack on its standards of service. Many exasperated telephone subscribers would regard Ofel as their only champion, the only representative of the collective interest over telephone services. The same focus should be provided for gas, electricity, drug, food and other companies.

Thatcherism starts with a view of individuals as consumers and works outwards to a view of how society should be organised. The Left has to offer an alternative view of how society should be organised. But to do so it needs to start with an elaboration of a different view of individuals.

The Left should start with an idea of social citizenship, a democratic individualism, which offers an expansion of the protected individual space of rights, entitlement and responsibility. From that it can establish how society should be organised to fulfil and empower individuals - regulated markets; collectively-financed social guarantees covering health, education, training, childcare, housing; strengthened civil and political rights; decentralisation and devolution of state power; redistribution of resources and economic power.

The Left has to renew the links between individual interests and collective action to shape society. It will not succeed by asserting collectivism ever more fiercely. It will only succeed if it starts asserting an alternative individualism.©

companies they have built up. If, as Thatcherism tells us, individuals are responsible, rational, disciplined, why should these qualities be confined to the high street?

Britain desperately needs a much greater investment in training and education. But the point of such a policy should be conceived and expressed individually, for instance in a right to 10 days off-the-job training a year, or to periodic study-leave after the school-leaving age. Both moves would amount to collective action to correct a social problem; but they should be conceived and delivered not as grand programmes, but simply as an investment in a wider package of individual entitlements.

Underlying all these moves must be an attack on poverty and low pay. The greatest denial of choice Thatcherism has delivered is through its promotion of inequality. Britain needs a new incomes policy, not to be drawn up with union leaders, but formed around a publicly-declared minimum standard of living. It is unlikely that everyone would reach this threshold individual minimum income, even after several years of a Labour government. But an individual entitlement to a minimum level of income should be the fundamental measure of how civilised a society Britain is.

The best way to provide such an income is through providing reasonably-paid work, or training leading to work. Thus there should be an indi-

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