

# Debate Smaller Worlds

In this month's *Manifesto For New Times* debate, **Giorgio Napolitano** welcomes the global challenge of new times, **Gordon Brown** draws out some economic-policy threads and **Cynthia Cockburn** questions the balance of power

**T**he *Manifesto For New Times* represents an important effort to rethink the problems and prospects of socialism, an effort which is called for everywhere. In Britain it responds to the need to find a successful answer to the phenomenon of Thatcherism, the development of which, moreover, has taken on a more general significance, embodying a real model of neo-conservatism. Neither in Britain nor elsewhere is it possible to combat the forces of neo-conservatism, or to offer valid alternatives, if we limit ourselves to mere denunciations, or if we appeal to traditional values and old programmes of the Left and of the labour movement. Everywhere we must come to terms with the extraordinary changes of the 1980s which are in full swing in Western capitalist societies and on a world scale.

I find the very concept of 'new times' a happy invitation. It urges research free from past schemes, free from ideological taboo. It commits the British Communist Party and left forces to face up to reality, it presents the future as difficult and exciting, calling for great intellectual and political courage.

I am not in a position to undertake here an analysis of the *Manifesto*. I only want to note that the questions it deals with are the same as those which we are now discussing in the PCI and are being discussed in many areas of the European Left. What is social progress in the age of the threat of environmental catastrophe? Is socialism just a part of a much wider conception of universal human values and progress? What should be the division of labour between national and international politics, change in civil society and state intervention?

In this respect I think there is much work to be done on the problem of a new coming-together of class interests, national interests and those concerning the survival of the species, as a basis for a new vision of socialism. Among our interests in the survival of the species are avoiding nuclear war, any other destructive war, environmental catas-

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trophe, and also overcoming the growing imbalance between the world's North and South.

Increasingly we cannot do without the processes of 'regional' integration in various parts of the world, and forms of world economic co-operation that lead to a real interpenetration of different systems. The causes of justice and solidarity, of the redistribution of power and wealth within the developed countries, ought not be separated from justice and solidarity between the rich areas of the world and the poorest.

The *Manifesto* reviews many traditional positions on the Left, in particular in Britain, in order to outline an alternative to a Thatcherism seen as regressive modernisation and not simply as right-wing resurgence. Looking not only at Britain but at Europe, and drawing the necessary conclusions from the dramatic crisis in the systems built by communist parties in power, the *Manifesto* denies that you can map out 'a detailed organisation of socialist society, its laws and institutions'. I too am convinced that we must abandon such an attitude and that instead we must place the accent on the aims and values of socialism, developing them in terms valid for the 90s and translating them gradually into concrete objectives of struggle and of government.

For countries like Britain and Italy, much will depend in the 90s on the directions which prevail in the realisation of the Single European Act. If I may be allowed to make one critical observation, I would say that the *Manifesto* ought perhaps to pay greater attention to the timetables and dilemmas faced by the European Community.

*Giorgio Napolitano*

Translated by Ian Twigg.



**'The questions the *Manifesto* deals with are discussed in many areas of the European Left'**



**S**lowly but inexorably British socialism is being reinvigorated. Much of its new insights are tentative, and its ideas speculative, but socialism is moving forward again.

No one concept, book or thinker sums up the new developments. British socialism has never had its *Das Kapital*, or single visionary genius. It has always been at its best syncretic and inclusive, so it would be surprising if any single source of thinking were to dominate now.

But from the writings of Nove, Hodgson, Leadbeater, Hirst, Gamble, even the non-socialist David Marquand with his idea of a developmental state, and many others, it is clear that left thinking has been evolving right across the spectrum. To this the *Manifesto For New Times* is an interesting and, at times, an original contribution. Like much of the recent work it is more useful for its analysis than its prescriptions, more interesting for its historical breadth than for its minute particulars of policy, but it is both stimulating and a broadly-ranging synopsis of many of the new insights.

In common with most contributions to the debate about the future, the *Manifesto For New Times* is clear about what has changed. The economy is global, companies are transnational, capital flows are instantaneous, the mass-production hierarchical factory is but one of the economy's commanding heights (among which are retail and service companies and businesses producing custom-built, technology-driven precision products for niche markets), the class structure has been modified, new political forces, not least the women's movement and green politics are in play, and the rapid growth in poverty, inequality and division require urgent attention.

The requirement that people control their own destinies is no less central ('We believe that economic and political power in this country and internationally will have to be transformed'), but the means whereby it will be advanced has had to be reappraised.

There is a broad agreement among new writers that if individuals are to realise their full potential - bridging the gap between what they are and what they have it in them to become - then society must become more than a huge marketplace of individual buyers and sellers. Instead of the Hayek vision of selfish individuals endlessly competing against each other stands a socialist view of a community of citizens pursuing objectives they hold in common.

Other principles follow: that socialists cannot ignore the clear division between those who have power over others through ownership and those who need to be empowered by policies that promote equality; that socialism's distinctive feature is not to abolish markets but to recognise and tackle their limitations and that to achieve common objectives the community must

act together; and that in whatever forms collective action is embraced the state must be accountable.

**The *Manifesto For New Times* appreciates** that the nation-state is now too small a stage for resolving the big issues and too big a stage for resolving the small ones, supports the pressing case for decentralisation and devolution throughout Britain, and accepts that the principle ought to be that decisions should be made as close as possible to their point of impact. But that means that, in a global economy, popular power will have to be exercised internationally, nationally and locally, appropriately and according to constraints and requirements.

Recognising that the nation-state is an all-too-ineffective barrier against transitional capital, the *Manifesto For New Times* rightly calls for 'a new international settlement'. But in a world where 80% of capital flows are speculative, where the global company has taken over from the multinational, and where, astonishingly, the flows of capital are from South to North, rather than North to South, it is the precise forms that international co-operation and co-ordination must take - and the new international financial institutions that are required - that needs to be addressed in detail.

Equally, the challenge is to develop new forms of popular decision-making at a local level, relying less on the invisible hand of the market and more on the visible hands of people making decisions for themselves. At various points in the *Manifesto* there is a call for 'a decentralised state working in alliance with groups in society', 'popular control over economic decisions of importance', and a 'decentralised, open, enabling state'. Yet at the same time the *Manifesto* affirms the need for 'a state capable of taking determined strategic action to sort out problems'. That does not mean a centralised state and a command economy. But nor is the concept of 'an enabling state' sufficiently accurate to describe the multiple and diverse roles that the community expects of its institutions at a local, national and international level. As with a national government, a local authority will have, at various times, to function as an owner, regulator and contractor, and at other times, as catalyst, co-ordinator, financier and partner with others, active in many areas but necessarily accountable in all.

To achieve that accountability, the new popular socialism must not only guarantee individual rights and choice but be participatory. And it will be based on more than the right to citizenship, for not only are political and social rights in need of strengthening but economic rights too. Working out what we mean by an equal right to participate in the decisions that matter at every level is a major task for socialists over the coming years.

*Gordon Brown*

**Gordon Brown, 38, is labour's Treasury spokesperson. After an early bout of infamy as troublesome student rector of Edinburgh University, he was a presenter for Scottish TV for a period, becoming an MP in 1983. He gave up smoking in 1986. His latest book, *When There Is Creed (Mainstream)*, was published earlier this year.**

**T**he *Manifesto For New Times* marks a break with the past in numerous ways. It was written by a group of whom almost half were women. It doesn't forget class, yet it allows room for our other identities as women, black people, gays. It has its feet planted firmly in everyday life so that flexible, responsive and universal childcare, for instance, becomes the justification for the grander gestures (abolishing the House of Lords, inaugurating a constitution) rather than flowing from them. The *Manifesto* moves on from the redistribution of resources attempted in the postwar welfare state to something that project forgot: the redistribution of power. It speaks of empowering women relative to men, the local against the central, the individual against state and corporation.

**Why is it then that my ungrateful soul** responds with a string of protests: 'Hang on there!', 'Just a bit', 'But, but...'? I think it's the feeling that in 'new times' the enemy has gone away. What brought me into left politics as a young woman was a sense of danger. There seemed to be terrible forces ranged against the simple pursuit of everyday life for everyday people. I didn't particularly want to spend my evenings printing leaflets and haranguing the council but there seemed little choice. Things were being taken away, something was pushing people down. Later, I didn't particularly want to lay my (by then older) body on the road in front of police horses outside airbases. But there was this feeling that desperate dangers called for risky response.

The *Manifesto's* vision for the 1990s is a set of progressive 'settlements' resolving the central problems of British society. It is all very measured. There will be an international settlement, a democratic settlement, a settlement between men and women. Lovely. The usage echoes the common phrase for the arrangements of the 1945 period: 'the postwar settlement'. Then, however, the working women and men of Britain had just won the war for the ruling



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**'Today, I don't have the feeling the City banks or the multinationals or even men, are casting around for the white flag'**



class. They had to settle with us. Today, I don't have the feeling the City banks or the multinationals or even men, heaven knows, are casting around for the white flag. The advent of Gorbachev may give us a break. But danger still seems all around. Has the CIA given up dealing in drugs to finance assassinations? Are the multinationals no longer using up young women in Third-World factories, making them old before they have a chance to be young? Has fundamentalist religion not got designs on us?

The proposed means for making the new times work for us is 'campaigns': consumer campaigns, anti-privatisation campaigns. Many readers will surely cry: 'We're doing that already.' Yes, campaigns develop awareness, they soften the blows, they moderate the harshness of the policies imposed against us. The forces ranged against the changes we want, however, are adaptable and clever. Perhaps we had a little influence in getting nuclear missiles out of Greenham, but they are being redeployed as sea- or air-launched weapons. And have we even touched the international arms trade? Women's refuges (praised as a model by the *Manifesto*) have helped many women. But they haven't made a dent as yet in the regime of male violence or the pornography market.

The *Manifesto* is not altogether blind to 'unaccountable concentrations of power'. And it introduces a nice post-modern perception: that power cannot usefully be smashed or stolen, only 'unravelling'. Through the new social movements we have a better sense today where the loose ends are. My worry is that this old tangle of yarn has a habit of pulling back.

*Cynthia Cockburn*