

Despite appearances, Blair is stuck in the past, says Martin Jacques

Good To Be Back

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Marxism Today closed in December 1991 when it was still riding high. That, by the conventional standards, of British culture, where nothing is allowed to die, was a rather unusual act. We felt it was time to move on. Then, towards the end of last year, we began to discuss the idea of publishing a one-off issue of the magazine: its appeal, not least, was that it was, again, a rather unusual thing to do. More substantively, a great deal had happened in the seven years since the magazine had closed.

The reason for, and theme of, our return gig is the 'Blair project'. We should declare an interest. From the late 70s onwards, *Marxism Today* argued that the left was in a far more serious state than it recognised: in the path-breaking 'New Times' analysis of the late 80s, we argued that the left had lost touch with modernity, that the secret of Thatcherism's success was its understanding of modernity and its ability to appropriate the latter for itself. Unless the left moved onto the ground of modernity, and

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thereby transformed itself, it was destined for perpetual decline. We have no qualms about Blair's embrace of modernity: on the contrary, it was what we ourselves advocated over many years. It was fundamental to the *Marxism Today* 'position'.

But this did not exhaust the *Marxism Today* position. Modernity - globalisation, the new individualism, post-Fordism et al - was not neutral, but could be inflected one way or the other, towards greater inequality, deregulation and increasing fragmentation, or towards greater equity, more social intervention and enhanced social solidarity. For Thatcher, there was only one response, that of the right. There was, indeed, no alternative while the left remained steadfastly in the past. But once it was prepared to shift with the times then the meaning of modernity could be shaped and contested - providing, of



course, the latter was not seen as some neutral, non-ideological phenomenon. In this context, the idea that left and right are now obsolescent, superfluous or irrelevant is dangerously misconceived. Of course, left and right, as traditionally defined, do not, as we have said many times before, exhaust the political agenda or the repertoire of responses - but the difference between them still lies at the core of many of the most fundamental choices that confront society.

It is here that the Blair project becomes fuzzy and - in the view of many authors here including this one - seriously wanting. Blair for the most part has resisted the use of the term 'left', preferring to describe his position as 'radical centre': and he seems to believe that ideology belongs to the past. Having embraced modernity, he sees government as about professional management and problem-solving, rather in the manner of a modern corporate executive. But the task facing Blair was, and is, not simply to embrace modernity, but to offer a different view of modernity and how it should be addressed, one which marked a fundamental break with the neo-liberal era. For a quarter century, modernity has been characterised by a profound loss of social control consequent on the free-market regime of globalisation introduced from the late 70s, together with a huge increase in social inequality and a decline in the sense of the social. None of this was inevitable, a fact of nature. It was the deliberate creation of the Thatcher/Reagan era. Blair's central task was not to

acquiesce in that condition, but seek to reverse it.

The argument here is not whether this government is better than the last: it is competent, it is compassionate, it is in a different league from those feeble Major administrations. And should we have any lingering doubts about this, the still-fresh memory of the recent Tory Party conference should immediately lay them to rest. The scale of this government's achievement in eighteen short months is impressive: Scottish and Welsh parliaments, welfare-to-work, the Irish peace agreement, the minimum wage, the adoption of the Social Chapter and much else besides. But the Government has claimed that it has a new and distinctive project, that it is creating a New Britain which marks a fundamental break with the past, not just with Labour's own history but with the Thatcher era itself. That 1997 was Year Zero. Somehow, with one bound, New Labour believed it had stepped beyond history and moved into a new zone, no longer bound by the old constraints.

This is a grand historical claim. The Big Picture is the crucial question here. During the weekend seminar in September, which acted as the test-bed for this issue and which got widely reported in the press, Geoff Mulgan, former *Marxism Today* author and now advisor al Number 10, suggested that the question was no longer the Big Picture - that was sorted - but one of detailed policies. That is surely wrong: we need both. Wonkery without the Big Picture runs the risk of not seeing the wood for the

trees. The central question at issue here is precisely that Big Picture: has Blair broken with the parameters of the neo-liberal era or is he still operating essentially on the same terrain? For this reason we start the issue with a section entitled the Big Picture.

For all the hyperbole, it is the continuities rather than the ruptures that characterise the Blair era: the refusal to raise income tax, the acceptance, for the first two years, of the Tories' spending plans, and, perhaps most starkly of all, an acquiescence in the idea that nothing can be done about globalisation: for Tony Blair it has the force of nature. This, indeed, was the conventional wisdom until a few weeks ago, but extraordinary events in the real world are now overturning once sacred beliefs. The crisis which started in East Asia - and which western commentators were smug enough to explain away in terms of 'crony capitalism', believing that it would have little effect on the global economy, let alone the west - is now reverberating round the globe.

History, remember, of course, ended once before - in 1989 to be precise. But the End of History lasted just nine years as the Great Neo-Liberal Experiment in Russia came crashing down in September, the casualty of the same kind of voluntaristic thinking that led to the ultimate failure of the Bolshevik experiment. Blair would have us believe that 1997 was the end of an era. Events suggest that 1998 is a far more likely date. For not only has the brief history of free-market Russia, 1992-1998, come to an abrupt end, but the regime of free-market globalisation is now also under immense pressure; not only from Russia and Malaysia but also from the likes of George Soros. Jeffrey Sachs and Paul Krugman, all of whom are proposing far more radical reforms than New Labour has dared utter.

New Labour did not herald the end of neo-liberalism; on the contrary, for the most part it acquiesced in its *nostra* because it believed - politically and intellectually - that nothing else was possible. Yet eighteen months later, we can now per-

ceive the end of the neo-liberal era as the present global crisis demonstrates to one and all that markets are not self-equilibrating, that they can capsize economies, that they do, indeed, need controlling. To read leading American commentators, including former neo-liberal apologists, is a revelation: they are calling for the most radical reform of the global financial system and the establishment of new global institutions. Meanwhile, alas, New Labour is still singing from the old hymn sheet (see the *Blair Today* programme interview on p26), its proposals for reform amongst the most timid on the international scene.

New Labour did not usher in a new era but more properly belongs to the end of the previous one. Of course, in its glorious first year, when we were all so relieved to be rid of the Tories, when the energies of the people were released, when Blair was demonstrating his instinctive populist touch, when the economy was thriving, when the government faced no opposition, when it enjoyed more room to manoeuvre economically and politically than any government this century, we seemed to have entered a new era. But we were wrong.

New Labour likes to trumpet the idea that it is leading a new wave of change. It is certainly true that it has attracted a great deal of international attention and that it is part of a much wider phenomenon of centre-left governments. But the idea that, in the present climate, the Clinton-Blair axis is the way of the future seems most unlikely: Clinton has been humiliated and Blair is simply too conservative for the new anti-free market era that is now unfolding. The London/Washington version of the Third Way has conceded far too much ground to neo-liberalism. The Jospin and Schroder governments are both more radical - not least because of the presence of the Greens and a stronger left - while the recent election result in Sweden provides further evidence that there is a rising tide of support for a more radical left.

Although one cannot but be impressed by the sheer energy and élan of Tony Blair, there is,

at the heart of New Labour, a profound pessimism. The fundamental architecture inherited from the neo-liberal era cannot be disturbed: globalisation cannot be controlled or tamed: growing inequality can only be at best mollified. We are, in short, at the mercy of nature and the market. Outside this discourse, the picture is different: the Irish agreement has shown just what this government is capable of. In contrast to the pessimism that imbues the central tenets of this government's strategy, this issue of

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Marxism Today strikes an optimistic note. While the verdict on the Blair project is negative (Eric Hobsbawm and Stuart Hall), there is a sense throughout the issue that the present global crisis offers the possibility of a sea-change in attitudes, that the *laissez-faire* mentality that has been hegemonic for the last quarter century is now under serious threat all around the globe, that it is possible to control what we have been told is uncontrollable.

No doubt there will be those who, while admitting that *Marxism Today* is persuasive about the Big Picture, will argue that we offer little else. Wrong. Read David Held and Gerald Holtham on globalisation. Read Will Hutton and Richard Wilkinson on inequality. Read Anthony Barnett on constitutional reform. They offer not just a critique of New Labour, not simply a different approach to that now being pursued, but also serious proposals as to what should be done. Welcome to the new Window of the Left. Of course, this is only a beginning, but it will not be sufficient to dismiss the arguments contained in this issue on the grounds that there is not enough wonkery and therefore no alternative. As the Blair government enters increasingly choppy waters, as the ideological climate internationally begins to change, so, one must hope, will New Labour. For we can now glimpse the end of the long era of neo-liberalism.

Marxism Today Online

Utilising the wonders of modern telecommunications, this issue of *Marxism Today* is being complemented by a presence on the World Wide Web. In association with Online Magic, an [AGENCY.COM](http://www.ge97.co.uk/mt) company based in London, and their highly successful General Election '97 site, *Marxism Today* will be providing interaction and links related to this issue of the magazine.

The site address is <http://www.ge97.co.uk/mt>. One element of this site will be a *Marxism Today* Debate Forum. Here you can discuss and debate the issues raised in the magazine with your fellow readers and some of the writers themselves. These threaded discussions on a variety of topics will be accessible and readable by people around the world.

There will be excerpts from some of the articles in this issue which will be supported by hyperlinks to relevant topics and subjects. It will be an interactive resource for all who have access to the Internet and want to carry on the issues raised here and learn more about them.

Online's magic GE97 site was a major success before and during the May 1997 election. It was cited by *Internet Magazine* as the Site of the Year and *New Media Age* magazine named it 'Best Use of the Web' in July 1997. On election night, 4m users from around the world visited the site for up-to-date results and opinions. Before the election, online chats were organised with Paddy Ashdown in his Westminster Office and a live video interview was done with then Shadow Cabinet member of IT, Jeff Hoon.

Today it serves as a time capsule for students and other members of the general public to follow the news, opinion and colour of the run up to the May 1997 General Election. It was produced by Online Magic, an [AGENCY.COM](http://www.ge97.co.uk) company, and sponsored by CompuServe, Microsoft and Yahoo.

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