The Great Moving Nowhere Show

Tony Blair has talked much about 'the project'. But what precisely is it? Stripped of the hyperbole, the continuities with Thatcherism are all too obvious. Stuart Hall examines a great missed opportunity.

W hat is the political character of the Blair regime? Is New Labour a radically new response to the core political issues of our time? Is it perspective as broad in sweep, modern in outlook and coherent as Thatcherism's neo-liberal project, only different - because it is breaking decisively with the legacy and logic of the Thatcher years? Or is it a series of pragmatic adjustments and adaptive moves to essentially Thatcherite terrain? Since taking office, New Labour has certainly been hyperactive, setting policy reviews in place here, legislating and innovating there. A careful audit of the achievements and failures of these early years remains to be made. But that is for a different occasion. Here, we want to stay with 'the big picture'. Where is New Labour really going? Does Mr Blair have a political project?

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historical rupture - the onset of late-late-modernity - which Thatcherism first mastered politically but certainly did not originate or set in motion. This is where Marxism Today's 'New Times' analysis and its call for the reinvention of the left began, all those years ago. So much is indeed shared territory.

But when we move from the intellectual to New Labour's more political and strategic version of the 'Third Way', we are less on the terrain of political strategy and more, as Francis Wheen recently observed, in some 'vacant space between the Fourth Dimension and the Second Coming'. The 'Third Way' has been hyped as 'a new kind of politics'. Its central claim is the discovery of a mysterious middle ground. More than anything else, 'the Third Way' means something between and beyond Right and Left. As Ross McKibbin recently remarked, although most people 'do believe that society should be based on some notion of fairness', they also believe 'that the rich and powerful can only be made to acknowledge that there might be structural interests preventing our achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth and life-chances'.

'The Third Way' speaks as if there are no longer any conflicting interests which cannot be reconciled. It therefore envisages a 'politics without adversaries'. This suggests that, by some miracle of transcendence, the interests represented by, say, the ban on tobacco advertising and 'Formula One', the private car lobby and John Prescott's White Paper, an ethical foreign policy and the sale of arms to Indonesia, media diversity and the concentrated drive-to-global-power of Rupert Murdoch's media empire have been effortlessly 'harmonised' on a Higher Plane, above politics. Whereas, it needs to be clearly said that a project to transform and modernise society in a radical direction, which does not disturb any existing interests and has no enemies, is not a serious political enterprise.

The 'Third Way' is hot on the responsibilities of individuals, but those of business are passed over with a slippery evasiveness. 'Companies,' Tony Blair argues in his Fabian pamphlet The Third Way, 'will devise ways to share with their staff the wealth they know-how creates.' Will they? The 'Third Way' does observe accelerating social inequality but refuses to acknowledge that there might be structural interests preventing our achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth and life-chances. As Ross McKibbin recently remarked, although most people 'do believe that society should be based on some notion of fairness', they also believe 'that the rich and powerful can only be made to acknowledge that there might be structural interests preventing our achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth and life-chances'.

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One of the core reasons for the 'Third Way's semantic inexactitude - measured by the promiscuous proliferation of such troubling adverbs as 'between', 'above' and 'beyond' - is its efforts to be all-inclusive. It has no enemies. Everyone can belong. The 'Third Way' seems most unlikely that the shifting inclusions and ambiguities in the ambiguous formulations of the 'Third Way' offer us clear guidelines for assessing the underlying thrust of the Blair political project. For an answer to our original question, we will need to look at the Blair performance overall, sifting the strong tendencies from the ebb and flow of everyday governance.
trying to disinter from its practice its underlying political logic, philosophy and strategic direction.

In the global context, New Labour has brought a sweeping interpretation of globalisation, which it regards as the single most important factor which has transformed our world, setting an impassable threshold between New Labour and Old, now and everything that went before. This is crucial, because in our view, it is its commitment to a certain definition of globalisation which provides the outer horizon as well as the dubious legitimacy to Mr Blair's whole political project.

New Labour understands globalisation in very simplistic terms - as a single, uncontradictory, uni-directional phenomenon, exhibiting the same features and producing the same inevitable outcomes everywhere. Despite Giddens's strictures, New Labour does deal with globalisation as if it is a self-regulating and implacable Force of Nature. It treats the global economy as being, in effect, like the weather. In his speech to the Labour Party conference, Mr Blair portrayed the global economy as moving so fast, its financial flows so gigantic and so speedy, the pace at which it has plunged a third of the world economy into crisis so rapid, that its operations are now effectively beyond the control of nation states and probably of regional and international agencies as well. He calls this, with a weary finality, "the way of the world". His response is to 'manage change'. But it seems that what he really means is that we must 'manage ourselves to adapt to changes which we cannot otherwise control' - a similar sounding but substantively very different kettle of fish.

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is the high priests of global neo-liberalism - Jeffrey Sachs, Paul Krugman and George Soros - not Blair and Brown, who have led the retreat towards regulation.

New Labour appears to have been seduced by the neo-liberal gospel that 'the global market' is an automatic and self-instituting principle, requiring no particular social, cultural, political or institutional framework. It can be 'applied' under any conditions, anywhere. New Labour therefore, if anything, is more neo-liberal hot-gospeller than New Labour has accordingly largely withdrawn from the active management of the economy (in the long run, Keynes is dead!). What it has done, instead, is to set about vigorously adapting society to the global economy's needs, tutoring its citizens to be self-sufficient and self-reliant in order to compete more successfully in the global marketplace. The framing strategy of New Labour's economic repertoire remains essentially the neo-liberal one: the deregulation of markets, the wholesale refashioning of the public sector by the New Managerialism, the continued privatisation of public assets, low taxation, breaking the 'inhibitions' to market flexibility, institutionalising the culture of private provision and personal risk, and privileging in its moral discourse the values of self-sufficiency, competitiveness and entrepreneurial dynamism.

Economic Man or as s/he is to be called, The Enterprise Subject and the Sovereign Consumer, have supplanted the idea of the citizen and the public sphere. As the government's Annual Report boldly reminded us: 'People are not only citizens, they are also customers'. The most significant breaches in this neo-liberal edifice were the statutory minimum wage and the Working Time directive - commitments New Labour would have been too abject to abandon. It has, however, set the minimum wage at the lowest politically-negotiable level, excluding the sector most at risk to structural unemployment - young people between 18 and 21.

Giving the Bank of England its independence may have been a good idea. But only a touching faith in economic automatism can explain why this meant restricting its brief, effectively, to one dimension of economic policy only - inflation - with, in effect, only one tool of economic management - interest rates. It suggests that Labour has been quietly seduced by the neo-liberal view that, as far as possible, the economy must be treated like a machine, obeying economic 'laws' without human intervention. In practice, what is gained in credibility by being able to say - 'The Government is not involved!' Rising interest rates, an over-valued currency, falling order books and rising regional unemployment have nothing to do with us. They are unfortunate 'facts of life' which folks must simply put up with. You can't buck global trends" - is lost in terms of strategic control. Whether New Labour acknowledges
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produce new kinds of subjects, kitted out energy seeking to change ‘the culture’ and society, and more in terms of supplying the last analysis, less by the commitment to riveted to work and paid employment.

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it can and does expend enormous moral energy seeking to change ‘the culture’ and produce new kinds of subjects, kitted out and defended against the cold winds that blow in from the global marketplace.

To this source also we must trace the reremoralisation of the work ethic, and the restoration of that discredited Victorian utilitarian distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor. The New Deal subsidises training and Mr Blunkett attacks class sizes and expands nursery places for lone parents willing to seek employment - very commendable, and about time too. New Labour will not, however, intervene to ensure that there are jobs, though its entire welfare reforms are riveted to work and paid employment. Since it must depend on the private sector to provide them, it can only morally exhort. Hence the paradox of Jack Straw holding parents exclusively responsible for their children’s misbehaviour. To Work insists that anyone who can move ‘to-Work insists that anyone who can move ‘to-Work insists that anyone who can move

Mr Blair represents his welfare reforms as a continuation of the spirit of Beveridge, but this is simply not the case. For Beveridge understood that welfare systems reflect and have profound effects on the wider social framework. He knew that the principle of ‘social insurance’ was not only efficient but a way of underwriting citizenship; that ‘universalism’, despite its costs, was essential to binding the richer sections of society into collective forms of welfare. He anticipated Galbraith’s argument that the whole system would be in danger as soon as the rich could willingly exclude themselves from private provision. Man, as ‘poor, bare, for’k’d animal’, isolated and at bay before the elements.

Mr Blair’s image of the citizen is of the lonely individual, ‘set free’ of the state to face the hazards of the global weather alone'.

his ‘law’ is already manifest in education - though New Labour has systematically failed to implement it. Buying the children out of public education and into the selective private system has become a habitual middle-class pastime, which New Labour’s own leaders have indulged as lightheartedly as any other ordinary, unreflective, Thatchcrite, possessive individual. ‘Targeting’, ‘selectivity’, ‘means testing’, which Mr Blair has surreptitiously slid into place as his great ‘principles of reform’, are destined, as surely as night follows day, to deepen already existing inequalities, to increase marginalisation and social exclusion, to divide society into two unbridgeable tiers and further fragment social integration and reciprocity.

Hence the muffled confusion surrounding the Harriet Harman/Frank Field fiasco. Mr Field bats with the best of New Labour in terms of self-righteous moralism about poverty and the desire to do to people things which are good for their souls. His Methodist spirit is riveted by the fantasy of the great leap forward and the Feckless Work-shy. But he understood that the principles of contributory social insurance and ‘universalism’ had to be preserved, however
we won a bigger battle today: the battle of values.’ (Blackpool, 29.9.1998)

Since the election, we have heard less of ‘Middle England’ and more of ‘The People’. This is the great body of unknowns, the Essex Lads, the ‘Babes’, hommes et filles moyen sensuelles. ‘The People’, Jonathan Freedland argues, arc the imagined subject of phrases like ‘the People’s priorities’. the Lottery as the ‘People’s money’, the ‘People’s Princess’. The People are definitely not the ‘working classes’ or the ‘under-classes’, or the ‘chatting classes’ or manual workers or lone parents or black families or trade unionists or public sector workers, or Labour Party rank-and-file members, come to that. Their desires must be flattered: ‘wooed’ rather than represented. They are spoken to rather than speaking. When not watching GMTV or Sky Sport, they are to be found in focus groups. The People, Nick Sparrow remarks, are those who matter once every five years. Their voice is The Sun.

Then there are The Businessmen. The longer New Labour governs, the more it cosies up to Business, reinventing itself in full-dress corporate disguise. Mr Blair is constantly to be seen in their company. Visually, he is exclusively associated with Success, a dedicated follower of celebrity, which is the modern form of the success story. He looks decidedly uncomfortable in the company of the poor. No doubt a Labour government needs support from the business community. But New Labour’s relentless wooing of the new business nouvelle riches is nothing short of abject. Businessmen can do no wrong. Their logo adorns every Labour Party conference delegate’s name-tag (‘Serving the community nationwide’ - courtesy of Somerset supermarket). Their ads will soon be beamcd into every classroom that is wired up to the National Grid for Learning. Their expertise is required on every public, regulatory or academic body. They are the ‘wealth creators’, whose salaries are beyond control, dictated by some extraterrestrially defined ‘rate for the job’: the big spenders, the off-shore investing ‘patriots’, the Mercedes-Benz and Don Giovanni crowd, with a finger in every share-option deal and a luxury pad in every global city. The fact that, comparatively speaking, they are set fair to also being the most poorly educated, philistine, anti-intellectual, short-termist and venal ‘business class’ in the western world does not seem to matter.

In an ill-advised attempt to appropriate the spirit of the new British cultural revival, there was, briefly, ‘Cool Britannia’. But it was short-lived. The energy levels here proved too high, the swing too wild and unmanageable, the rhythms too loud, the fashionable too see-through, the culture too ‘multi-cultural’, too full of clever creative folk, too subsersive, too ‘Black British’ or ‘Asian cross-over’ or ‘British hybrid’ for New Labour’s more sober, corporate-man- agerialist English style. This was definitive- ly not the ‘modernity’ towards which Britain required to be ‘modernised’. Finally, in recent weeks, an ‘enemy’ has surfaced on New Labour’s social stage. The ‘those who matter once every five years’, or Mr Blair’s friends, who charmingly characterised them, the ‘chat- tering classes’. Recently, he declared him- self to have been ‘never a partaker of the chattering classes’. Critics and whingers to the backbone, this lot ‘pocket everything that they do like and then moan about the 10 things they don’t like’. He clearly found it difficult to keep the tone of exasperation out of his voice. The ‘sneer squad’, as he dubbed them, occupy the forbidden zone of Radio 4, The Guardian, The Observer, Newsnight, Channel 4 News. They are out- side the circle of influence, ‘below the radar’. There is little doubt that the readers of ‘The People’ have been unfairly selective. What about all those who matter once every five years? Their voice is The Sun.

It will inevitably be said that this account has been unfairly selective. What about all the good things New Labour has set in train - the peace deal in Northern Ireland, incorporating Human Rights into British legislation, the minimum wage, family tax credit, expanding nursery places, the school hospital building programme, bringing the tide of Euro-scepticism, the move towards devolution, constitutional reform? Of course, these initiatives are welcome. They add up to a substantial claim on our support. There are many others which point in the right direction, which we should support, though their implementa- tion may be controversial. These include some of the proposals for urban renewal, the efforts to reach through to some of the deep, underlying causes of social exclusion in communities, and the general commit- ment to improve standards in education - though whether letting Chris Woodhead, the ?athering classes’, or manual workers or lone parents or black families or trade unionists or public sector workers, or Labour Party rank-and-file members, come to that. Their desires must be flattered: ‘wooed’ rather than represented. They are spoken to rather than speaking. When not watching GMTV or Sky Sport, they are to be found in focus groups. The People, Nick Sparrow remarks, are those who matter once every five years. Their voice is The Sun.

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The momentous landslide victory of May 1997 was indeed an his- toric opportunity, inviting New Labour to the difficult task of facing up to the complexities of historical change and, at the same time, offering an alternative political strategy different from and breaking decisively with the neo-liberal project which was, internationally, the first - but cannot be The Only - political response to the crisis of ‘New Times’. Historic opportunities, however, don’t last forever. And they don’t keep coming back, offering you a second chance.

However, the difficult truth seems to be that the Blair project, in its overall analysis and key assumptions, is still essentially framed by - and moving on terrain defined by - Thatcherism. Mrs Thatcher had a project. Blair’s historic project is adjusting Us to It. That touches half- the modernising part - of the task, as Marxism Today argued it.

But the other, more difficult, half- of the Left reinventing a genuinely modern response to the crisis of our times - has been largely abandoned. At the global and domestic levels, the broad parameters of the ‘turn’ which Thatcherism made have not been radically modified or reversed. The project of renewal thus remains rough- ly where it did when Marxism Today pub- lished its final issue. Mr Blair seems to have learned some of the words. But, sadly, he has forgotten the music.

What we knew after Thatch­ er was that the New Right could respond to the new historical conditions, though the results of its attempt to do so were an unmitigated disaster. But could the Left? The Left was certainly in a good shape when New Labour took office. However, the fact is that Mr Blair does not seem to have any deep political roots in its hopes and traditions. He is in some ways a modern man, at ease with some of the changes which now characterise our world. But, politically, he is essentially a post-Thatcherite figure, in the sense that the experience of Thatcherism was, it seems, his shaping and formative political experience.

So, try as he may to find an alternative ground on which to stand, he finds the imperatives of a soft Christian humanism more compelling: its cadences come to him more naturally than those of the centre-left. He is an able and clever politician and has become a clever, even to some a charismat- ic, leader. Just now he is basking in the power a landslide majority has conferred on him. And, far from betraying his princi- ples, he seems totally and honestly per- suaded that what he is doing is right. He has and will continue to make many impor- tant adjustments to the legacy he inherited. There is also a genuine humanity which one would have been wise to put any money on in Mrs Thatcher. They are simi- lar figures, but they are not the same.

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