

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

What is the political character of the Blair regime? Is New Labour a radically new response to the core political issues of our time? Is its 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?

Thatcherism, from which Mr Blair has learned so much, certainly did have a project. Its aim was to transform the political landscape, irrevocably: to make us think in and speak its language as if there were no other. It had a strategy - an idea of where it wanted to get to and how to get there. Mrs Thatcher had no fondness for intellectuals: the word 'ideas' did not trip lightly off her tongue. Nevertheless, everything she did was animated by a social 'philosophy'. From a reductive reading of Adam Smith, she learned to see individuals as exclusively economic agents. From Hayek, she learned that the social good is impossible to define and that to try to harness markets to social objectives led down a one-way slippery slope to the nanny state, misguided social engineering, welfare dependence and moral degeneration - 'There is No Such Thing As Societv'. From the Monetarists she learned market fundamentalism: markets are 'good' and work mysteriously to the benefit of all; they are self-instituting and self-regulating entities; market rationality is the only valid mode of social calculation, 'market forces must prevail!'

What is more, she armed herself with a decisive analysis of the points of historical change which had created the opening to Thatcherism. But she did not, like some versions of the 'Third Way', simply project

the sociological trends on to the political screen. She never supposed Thatcherite subjects were already out there, fully formed, requiring only to be focus-grouped into position. Instead, she set out to produce new political subjects - Entrepreneurial Man - out of the mix of altruism and competitiveness of which ordinary mortals are composed. Above all she knew that, to achieve radical change, politics must be conducted like a war of position between adversaries. She clearly identified her enemies, remorselessly dividing the political field: Wets v Drys. Us v Them, those who are 'with us' v 'the enemy within'.

When *Marxism Today* first began to discuss Thatcherism as a 'project', smart-arsed journalists and Labour analysts joined forces to pour scorn on the idea - a thought altogether too concerted and 'continental' for the empiricist temper of British political culture. Geoff Mulgan - Director of Demos, former *MT* contributor and now in the Number 10 Policy Unit - advances a similar view elsewhere in this issue. 'Meta-political' questions, he says, are irrelevant - a sign that the left intellectuals who ask them are hopelessly isolated from the 'real' business of government. They would be better employed, like Demos, thinking up concrete proposals which New Labour could put into effect.

Guilty British academics on the left are particularly vulnerable to this kind of gross anti-intellectualism. However, Mulgan's position seems disingenuous. Of course, policy innovation is essential to any political strategy - that is why Martin Jacques dreamed up the idea of Demos in the first place. There is lots of room for lateral thinking. But - Mr Blair's *Rendezvous With Destiny* notwithstanding - May 1997 was not the start of 'Year Zero'. All questions of perspective and strategy have not been 'solved'. As Decca Aitkenhead put it recently, the Blairites sometimes behave as if 'Number 10 is sorted for nuts and bolts; it's just not sure what sort of machine they add up to'. In fact, it's impossible to know how radical and innovative a concrete proposal is until you know which strategy it is attempting to put in place and the criteria against which its 'radicalism' is being

assessed. Without a strategic framework, the 'concrete proposals' could be brilliant; or they could just be off-the-wall - completely batty. In recent months, Demos has offered us plenty of both kinds.

In fact, seen in the context of New Labour's sustained hype and vaunting ambition over the past 18 months, Mulgan's idea that nothing requires serious attention apart from pragmatic effectiveness is not only wrong but curiously 'off-message' and wholly out of synch with His Master's Voice. It was clear from the outset that Mr Blair saw himself in the Thatcherite mould and he has worked hard to model himself on her style of leadership. And with some success! Recent polls suggest the electorate is impressed with 'what they regard as the strong Thatcherite style', though they also seem unsure whether this is more than 'better gloss, more PR and spin' and, more worryingly, they doubt that New Labour 'will make a real difference and force a clean policy break with the Tory years' (*The Guardian*, September 28 1998).

Mr Blair has also modelled his ambitions to make everything in Britain 'New' on Thatcherism's project of national self-renewal. Consequently, these days, no New Labour spokesperson opens his/her mouth, nor journalist reports the event, without reference to 'the Blair project'. It is New Labour, not the intellectuals, who put this 'meta-political' question on the agenda. It is Blair who talks of New Labour in apocalyptic terms - 'one of the great, radical, reforming governments of our history', 'to be nothing less than the model twenty-first century nation, a beacon to the world', 'becoming the natural party of government'. ('Natural parties of government' are those whose ideas lead on all fronts, carrying authority in every domain of life; whose philosophy of change has become the common sense of the age. In the old days we used to call them 'hegemonic'.) Mr Blair is definitely into 'the vision thing'.

New Labour's latest bid to give 'this vision thing' historic credibility and so to capture and define 'the big picture' is the 'Third Way'. This comes in several shapes and sizes. There is the intellectual's version of the 'Third Way' offered by Anthony Giddens. Mr Blair's most influential intellectual, which sketches out a number of significantly novel sociological shifts which seem to have major political consequences. Many of these one would be happy to agree with or to debate further. After all, economic globalisation is a reality and has transformed the space of operations and the 'reach' of nation states and national economies. There is a new individualism abroad, due to the growing social complexity and diversity of modern life, which has undermined much of the old collectivism and the political programmes it underpinned. Many problems do present new challenges or assume new forms not well covered by the old political ideologies. We do need to broker a new relationship between markets and the public good, the individual and the community. These sociological shifts are part of the great



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 course on every question between all the existing extremes. However, the closer one examines this via media, the more it looks, not like a way through the problems, but a soft-headed way around them. It speaks with forked, or at the very least garbled, tongue. It is advanced as a New International Model to which centre-left governments around the world arc even now rallying. However, when it is not rapturously received, it suddenly becomes, not 'a Model', just a 'work in progress'. Can it be both heroic and tentative? It cannot make up its mind whether its aim is to capture 'the radical centre' or to modernise 'the centre-left' (and should not therefore be surprised to find young voters placing its repositioning as clearly 'centre-right!'). It claims to draw from the repertoires of both the New Right and Social Democracy-but

'The Third Way speaks as if there are no longer any conflicting interests which cannot be reconciled'



also to have transcended them - to be 'beyond Right and Left'. These shifting formulations are not quite what one would call a project with a clear political profile.

In so far as one can make out what it is claiming, does it offer a correct strategic perspective? The fact - of which the 'Third Way' makes a great deal - that many of the traditional solutions of the left seem historically exhausted, that its programme needed to be radically overhauled and that there are new problems which outrun its analytic framework, does not mean that its principles have nothing to offer to the task of political renewal on the left. Welfare reform is only one of many areas where there is a continuing debate between two clearly competing models, drawing on if not identical with, the two great traditions that have governed political life: the left-of-centre version, looking for new forms in which to promote social solidarity, interdependence and collective social provision against market inequality and instability; and the neo-liberal, promoting low taxes, a competitive view of human nature, market provision and individualism. Can the 'tough decisions' on welfare which New Labour have been 'taking' for 18 months really be 'beyond Left and Right'? Or is that a smoke-screen thrown up to evade the really hard questions of political principle which remain deeply unresolved.

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' 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 their 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 this by political action'. The 'Third Way's discourse, however, is disconcertingly devoid of any sustained reference to power.

Mr Blair is constantly directing us, instead, to 'values'. But when one asks, 'which values?' a rousing but platitudinous vagueness descends. He can be very eloquent about community, an inclusive society, with the strong supporting the weak, and the value of facing challenges together. The problem arises when this communitarian side of the Blair philosophy meets head-on the equally-authentic, rock-like, modernising, targeting, moralising streak in 'Blairism'. In practice it is difficult fervently to believe in 'the politics of community' and at the same time to hold unshakably to the view that the task of government is 'to help individuals to help themselves', especially when the ways of implementing each so often point in diametrically opposed directions. Besides, as a timely *Guardian* editorial observed: 'What distinguishes governments of the centre-left is not their values ... but their perennial dissatisfaction with what markets - necessary as they are - produce.'

It therefore seems most unlikely that the shifting indecisions and 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.

Blair: 'The reason we have been out of power for fifteen years is simple - that society changed

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.

This accounts for the passivity of the Blair government, despite its pivotal role in Europe and leading position in the G7 etc, in the face of the current crisis in Asia, Russia and elsewhere. It continued until very late to reiterate the false reassurances that the Asian crisis would have little noticeable effect on Britain. It has shown a surprising lack of flexibility in the face of mounting evidence to the contrary. It seems content to reiterate the mantra: 'The goal of economic stability and stable inflation will never be abandoned or modified. New Labour is not for turning,' which sounds increasingly like a desperate struggle to win. not the present, but the last war.

It has signally failed to seize the advantage of the rapidly changing terms of macro-economic debate to offer early, effective or radical leadership to the international community, as one country after another deserts the neo-liberal ship and moves towards thinking the unthinkable - that the unregulated movement of currency and capital, aided and abetted by derestricted corporate power and new technology, will, if left to the 'hidden hand' of macro-economic forces alone, bring the whole edifice crashing to the ground. His belated proposals for the reform of the IMF are far from radical. Paradoxically, it

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 seems as bewildered as every neo-liberal hot-gospeller that Japanese bankers just don't actually behave like Wall Street bankers, and that if you dump 'the market' into a state-socialist society like Russia without transforming its political institutions or its culture - a much slower and more complex operation - it is likely to produce, not Adam Smith's natural barterers and truckers, but a capitalist mafia. As Andrew Marr shrewdly observed, 'It's the politics, stupid!'

Since globalisation is a fact of life to which There Is No Alternative, and national governments cannot hope to regulate or impose any order on its processes or effects. 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 came to be called, The Enterprising 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

'New Labour deals with globalisation as if it is a self-regulating, implacable Force of Nature, like the weather'



Response: 'We are not spending our time saying this is a terrible government. It is a much better government than the one before. It is a government that has done a fairly substantial amount of things and we shall all go on voting for it supposing there is an election tomorrow. What we are trying to find out is what it is trying to do in line with the old traditions of the Left.'

First, I don't think this government is a single bloc. There are different languages coming out. If you listen to Blair or Brown or Mandelson or Field, you hear different views.

Second I think it is simply not so that New Labour carries on with the traditional centre-left. Geoff Mulgan is quite wrong about the great wave of centre-left governments being the same sort of thing and happening in the same sort of way. There is a basic difference. The Blair idea, and I am talking about Blair not other people, is of a centre-left which is between the Democratic Party in the US and New Labour. He believes that is the model for the centre-left. But the alternative is New Labour or the traditional European centre-left, marxist, social-democratic and social-christian. And there is a great difference between the two. The American tradition is fundamentally not that of the European social state. It may be that as between Republicans and Democrats, the Democrats are, in terms of class composition and topographical position, the Left. But they are not the same as the European tradition. If you look at the reaction, for instance, from Blair and others to the election of the Left in France, and Clinton in the US, it is very different. Whatever it is, New Labour is not a centre-left government in any traditional sense in which we in Europe perceive it and that includes not only socialists but demo-christians, the whole of the social state which is the central tradition of the 19th and 20th centuries on the continent'

Eric Hobsbawm, Marxism Today Seminar, 4-6 September 1998

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

this or not, its effect is automatically to prioritise meeting inflation targets over everything else. The irony is that it is precisely the whole structure of neo-liberal, scientific juggerv-pokery which is rapidly falling apart. Economies are not machines. Changes in one sector have knock-on consequences elsewhere. The hedge-funds equations which have kept the inflated bubble of futures, options and derivatives markets afloat are liquefying. The infamous monetarist so-called 'natural rate of unemployment', which enabled banks and governments to calculate the necessary unemployment "costs" for a given level of inflation, has fallen into disrepute. The Bank of England itself says that 'it cannot be directly measured and changes over time'. The Federal Reserve long ago sacrificed it on the altar of jobs and growth.

On the domestic front, the policy repertoire seems at first sight more diverse, but has tended to follow the same tendential groove. The main emphasis has been thrown on to the supply side of the equation. There have been many commendable social-democratic interventions. But its key watchwords - 'Education and Training, Training and Education' - are driven, in the last analysis, less by the commitment to opportunities for all in a more egalitarian society, and more in terms of supplying flexibility to the labour market and re-educating people to 'get on their bikes' when their jobs disappear as a result of some unpredictable glitch in the global market. New Labour does not and cannot have much of an industrial economic policy. But 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 remoralisation of the work ethic, and the restoration of that discredited and obscene 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 childrens' misdemeanours while Welfare-to-Work insists that anyone who can move and wants to draw a benefit must leave their children, get up off their sick beds, overcome their disability, come back out of retirement and work. Not since the workhouse has labour been so fervently and single-mindedly valorised.

Social inequality, broadly defined, is one of the critical defining issues of national politics and a crucial test of the distinction between the Blair project and market

fundamentalism. According to Giddens, in his book *The Third Way*: 'The gap between the highest paid and the lowest paid workers is greater than it has been for the last 50 years' and while 'the majority of workers are better off in real terms than 20 years ago, the poorest 10 per cent have seen their real incomes decline.' This is no aberration. It follows a period of the most intense 'marketisation'. It is what markets do - the kind of Will Hutton, 40/30/30 society which markets 'naturally' produce when left to themselves. What's more, the nature of poverty has changed, becoming more diverse, while its causes have multiplied. The term 'social exclusion' draws attention to these differences, and underlines the fact that income and economic factors are by no means the only reason different groups find themselves excluded from the mainstream of society. There is, however, considerable evasiveness, both in Giddens's argument and in New Labour's appropriation of it, around the question of how important the income/economic factor in 'social exclusion' is and what to do about it. Giddens' bald statement that 'exclusion is not about gradations of inequality' looks like a sentence in search of a 'not only' that went missing.

These issues are at the heart of New Labour's profound ambiguity and duplicity around welfare reform. After months of a Great Debate, and a disastrous and aborted effort to begin to put 'it' into effect, we are still really none the wiser about what Mr Blair really thinks or proposes to do about welfare. We do not know whether he proposes to transform the welfare state to meet its broader social purposes more effectively, or intends to go down in history as the politician with the 'courage' to wind up the welfare state as the basis of the social settlement between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' which has kept twentieth century capitalist societies relatively stable and free of social violence. 'Reform' is the weasel-word, the floating signifier, which masks this gaping absence.

He says welfare is not reaching those who are most in need. True: but it does not follow that 'targeting', as such, is the correct overall strategy. He says Britain, in a global economic context, cannot financially sustain it. But he does not make anything of the fact that the UK is about fifteenth in the world league table of social security spending. He treats the present level of wealth distribution as a Natural Law rather than a political outcome. He believes welfare is bad for us, corrupting our morals and inducing us to commit crime. But the actual level of fraud is one of the most contested social statistics, and the Fraud Office systematically fails to produce the missing millions. There is as much evidence that the really poor, of whatever kind, can't live decently on the level of benefits they are offered and that many are thereby driven to crime as there is for the proposition that millions of people are making a 'lifestyle choice' to live homeless on benefit in perpetuity. He promises the poor not social

justice (that is a bridge too far) but 'social fairness'. But his actual image of the citizen is of the lonely individual, 'set free' of the state to face the hazards of the global weather alone, armed against incalculable risk, privately insured up to the hilt against every eventuality - birth, unemployment, disability, illness, retirement and death - like those lean urban 'survivors' on their mountain bikes who haunt our streets, their chocky bar, Evian water-bottle and change-of-trainers in their knapsacks. Man as 'poor, bare, fork'd animal', isolated and at bay before the elements.

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 collective provision by buying themselves out. Why should they go on paying for a service they had ceased to use? This potential 'revolt of the elites' is, of course, the critical political issue in welfare reform. The establishment of a two-tiered system, with the richer sectors buying themselves into private provision, is what helps to fix in stone the political threshold against redistribution. It destroys the public interest in favour of private solutions dictated by wealth inequalities and must drive what is then left in the residual 'public' sector to the bottom, perpetually in crisis and starved of investment, and propel those who are left out to the margins.

This 'law' is already manifest in education - though New Labour systematically refuses to confront 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, Thatcherite, possessive individual. 'Targeting', 'selectivity', and '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 Demon Fraud and the Feckless Work-shy. But he understood that the principles of contributory social insurance and 'universalism' had to be preserved, howev-

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Blair: 'The centre-left may have lost the battle of ideas in the 1980s, but we are winning now. Ai



Labour project. The attempt to govern by spin (through the management of appearances alone), where you 'gloss' because you cannot make your meaning clear. New Labour's systematic preference for media reality over sterner political realities, indeed, the constant hype about 'hard choices' coupled with the consistent refusal to make them, are all part of the same phenomenon. This is not a superficial 'style' we don't much like, but something that goes to the heart of the Blair project.

Despite all the promising talk about decentralisation and participation, the commitment to devolution and constitutional reform - which are significant - one gets the queasy feeling that New Labour increasingly finds the rituals of democratic practice tiresome, and in practice if not formally, would be happy to move in the direction of a more 'direct', plebiscitary, referendum style of governance. The project is consistently more 'populist' than 'popular'. This is not the populism of Mrs Thatcher's neo-liberal Right but it is a variant species of 'authoritarian populism' none the less - corporate and managerialist in its 'downward' leadership style and its moralising attitude to those to whom good is being done. It's also deeply manipulative in the way it represents the authority it imposes as somehow 'empowering us' - another triumph for 'customer services'.

The same can be said of New Labour's sense of agency - of who exactly are the political subjects in whose image the Blair Revolution is made. Many of us responded to his election as leader of the Labour Party with the same optimism we greeted the nomination of Bill Clinton. Not because we agreed with everything he believed, or properly knew what it was he did believe, but because he was of the generation who had lived through the Thatcher-Reagan era, through the 1960s and the social and cultural revolutions of our time. We hoped he would respond - however much we might disagree in detail - with sensibilities informed by these late-modern experiences. How wrong we were. The Blair social project is 'modernising' but modern only to a very limited extent.

His key social constituency in the run up to the election was 'Middle England' - a profoundly traditionalist and backward-looking cultural investment. His discourse on the family, social values and diversity remains deeply conventional. Middle England commands some votes. But as a characterisation of New Labour's political subject, it is the repository of English traditionalism, irredeemably small 'c' conservative. As Jonathan Freedland recently reminded us. Middle England is a place of the mind, an imagined community', always located somewhere south or in the centre of the country, never north - though Mr Mandelson has recently put in a claim for Hartlepool Man. Middle England is peopled by skilled, clerical or supervisory grade home-owners, never manual workers or public sector professionals. It is commit-

er modified their forms; that a network of voluntary agencies could only be introduced if regulated, underpinned and enforced by the state. He believed that benefits must provide, not a residual but a decent standard of life for those who qualify for them; and that the costs of transition from one form of delivering these principles to another had to be borne. These were the 'unthinkable' thoughts for which he was dismissed. The debate about how much, in what form, with what effects, therefore, remains to be had. Tiered universalism. combinations of public/private contributory solutions etc, remain to be debated. There is work for Demos to do! But only after the principles of reform have been openly and thoroughly debated.

It is deeply characteristic of the whole style of the Blair project that Great Debates are announced which do not actually take place. Instead of a clear and open laying-out of the alternatives, we have a massive public relations and spinning exercise, and policy forums to speak over the heads of the much-abused 'experts and critics', direct to selectively chosen members of the Great British Public. There may be an open invitation to participate, to join the consultation. But this openness is effectively closed by Mr Blair's own already-settled conviction that he is Right - what Hugo Young called 'his unfreighted innocence, wide-eyed rationality and untroubled self-belief. When in difficulties, the party faithful - about whom he is a less than devoted admirer - are summoned to hear the message, not to state their views. The Labour Party, as an organisation within which these profound matters of strategy may

'Despite the talk about participation one gets the queasy feeling New Labour finds the rituals of democratic practice tiresome'



gain, through debate, some broader resonance in terms of the everyday lives and experiences of ordinary folks, and genuinely be modified or win consent, has been ruthlessly emasculated. A terrifying and obsequious uniformity of view has settled over the political scene, compounded by a powerful centralisation of political authority, with twenty-something Young Turks beaming out ill-will from ministerial back-rooms, the whole caboodle under surveillance from Millbank and cemented in place by a low-flying authoritarianism.

The Labour benches have, with a few honourable exceptions, been the most bedazzled by the hope of preferment, the most obsequious of all. Critics, welcomed at the front door, are systematically discredited through innuendo and spin-doctored at the back door as being trapped in a time warp, if not actually barking mad. Anyone who does not pass the loyalty test is labelled with the ritual hate-word, 'intellectual', gathered into one indiscriminate heap - those who called for the reinvention of the Left while Mr Blair was still, metaphorically, in his political cradle lumped in with Trotskyist wreckers - and the whole shooting-match branded as 'Old Labour'. 'Bring me the head of Roy Hattersley!'

Against a majority of people on the left, *Marxism Today* argued that bringing the Labour Party into the late twentieth century and transforming many of its traditional habits and programmes were necessary, if traumatic, events. But the reduction of the party to a sound-box is quite another thing. It reveals, to borrow a phrase of Martin Kettle's, how far the demotic has triumphed over the democratic in the New

we won a bigger battle today: the battle of values.' (Blackpool, 29.9.1998)

'Historic opportunities don't last forever. And they don't keep coming back, offering you a second chance'



ledly suburban, anti-city, family-centred, devoted to self-reliance and respectability. Its cultural icons, he argues, are 'Neighbourhood Watch, Gordon's Gin, Enid Blyton. Ford Mondeo, Hyacinth Bucket, *The Antiques Roadshow*. Nescafe Gold Blend. Acacia Avenue, Scouts and Brownies, Nigel Kennedy and the Salvation Army.' Its voice is the *Daily Mail*.

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', *homines el filles moyen sensuelles*. 'The People', Jonathan Freedland argues, are 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 'chattering 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 coxies 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 nouveaux 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 Somerfield supermarket). Their ads will soon be beamed into every classroom that is wired up to the National Grid for Learning. Their expertise is required on every public, regulatory or advisory 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 fashion too see-through, the culture too 'multi-cultural', too full of clever creative

folk, too subversive, too 'Black British' or 'Asian cross-over' or 'British hybrid' for New Labour's more sober, corporate-managerialist English style. This was definitively not the 'modernity' towards which Britain required to be 'modernised'.

Finally, in recent weeks, an 'enemy' has surfaced on New Labour's social stage. These are 'the intellectuals' or, as Mr Blair charmingly characterised them, the 'chattering classes'. Recently, he declared himself 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 outside the circle of influence, 'below the radar'. There is little doubt that the readers of *Marxism Today* belong firmly to the lower circles of this encampment.

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 and hospital building programme, breaking 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 implementation 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 commitment to improve standards in education - though whether letting Chris Woodhead, Thatcherism's chief Enforcer, loose to brow-beat schools and abuse teachers is the best approach to the latter objective one begs leave to doubt.

The momentous landslide victory of May 1997 was indeed an historic 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. So in answering the big questions about the Blair project, one has had to be ruthlessly selective and go for the strategic choices, trying to identify the persistent tendencies: what seems to be the underlying framework of assumptions, the shaping 'philosophy'.

The picture is ambiguous. There are still counter-arguments to hear. New Labour remains in some ways an enigma, and Mr Blair, either despite of or because of his

ceaseless efforts to talk a project into place, paradoxically appears both 'bold' and 'vacillating'. But having held one's breath and crossed one's fingers, it is necessary to speak it as it looks. New Labour, faced with a near-impossible historic task, has not fully confronted its challenge. Instead, it has been looking for easy - 'Third' - ways out, craftily triangulating all the troubling questions, trying to finesse the difficulties. It may therefore turn out to be a half-way decent Labour government, one which one would have been grateful to have in 'normal' circumstances. The times - and the task - however, are exceptional. And the higher the spin doctors pump up the balloon, the more firmly one becomes aware how much of it is hot air.

What we knew after Thatcher 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 not in 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 charismatic, leader. Just now he is basking in the power a landslide majority has conferred on him. And, far from betraying his principles, he seems totally and honestly persuaded that what he is doing is right. He has and will continue to make many important adjustments to the legacy he inherited. There is also a genuine humanity which one would have been unwise to put any money on in Mrs Thatcher. They are similar figures, but they are not the same.

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 - that 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 roughly where it did when *Marxism Today* published its final issue. Mr Blair seems to have learned some of the words. But, sadly, he has forgotten the music. •