

The New Labour project

Soundings began only a year or so before Labour took office, and this political transition unavoidably sets a significant part of our agenda. Even though we have always argued that Whitehall and Westminster are not all there is to politics, there is no doubting the importance of what the new government does and plans to do.

What is the New Labour project? We think it is important to represent this truthfully, in terms with which its own exponents might not quarrel unduly. It is a common failing of New Labour to define itself largely by antithesis with an under-specified set of beliefs conveniently labelled Old Labour. There is no point in our repeating this practice in reverse. The Blair project is, we believe, based on a coherent view of the contemporary world and of the possibilities for a reforming politics within it. Unless this project is understood, in both its strengths and weaknesses, it is impossible to develop any critical engagement with it.

The fundamental assumption of the Blair project is that unless Britain can reach the standard of performance of its global competitors, in virtually every aspect of life, there is no hope of achieving lasting improvements in well-being. 'Getting competitive' is the name of its game. This frame of thinking is shaping most fields of government policy. It is why New Labour seems so to admire successful businesspeople, has brought them into government, and has been appointing them to sort out struggling public institutions. Much more radically (since all governments seek good relations with business) is the way that this 'get competitive' idea is shaping the government's relationship with all its citizens.

Soundings

The reason for the government's rejection of traditional programmes of redistribution, of increased benefits to the poor, is the view that improvements in living standards achieved by such means are bound to be trivial and shortlived. Only if individuals are helped to help themselves, in particular into the labour market and into higher-skilled work, can any difference be made. This is the logic of welfare-to-work, of pushing single parents into the labour market, and no doubt soon of a social security reform which in one way or another will encourage greater self-reliance and self-provision. The aim is to remoralise the labour force, and to lower expectations of what can be expected as social entitlements. There seems to be an intolerance of all dependency.

This competition agenda also dominates the government's education policy. Competitive norms are setting the goals, (what Japanese children can achieve in mathematics, British children should be able to do), and also the means for achieving those goals (league tables, sanctions for underperforming schools and teachers). There is to be little shelter from the competitive winds, except for those who can indisputably demonstrate that they are incapable, and new thinking about disability benefit shows that this is going to be made harder to do. And those who are not merely dependent, but also delinquent, or whose children are delinquent, will be subject to stricter compulsion and where necessary punishment - for example, the parents of truanting children.

Even the constitutional reforms espoused by the new government probably form part of the 'competitiveness' agenda, though they are widely understood in other terms. The common radical view is that this is the one area where *real* changes are being promoted, in ways which are apparently in contradiction with the rest of the minimal programme. But whilst one welcomes the prospect of new political spaces being opened up, by devolution for example, it is worth asking how the Blairites themselves regard these reforms, and how they reconcile them with what are plainly their dominant goals.

It is possible that the purpose of creating a measure of devolution is to establish sub-national and regional governments which will become more, and not less, responsive to the imperatives of competitiveness. A Labour-dominated devolved government in Scotland can, after all, be expected to have more legitimacy than the Conservatives ever had there, to preach the doctrines of economic, and welfare, realism. Scotland and Wales may well have to pay in

their share of UK public expenditure for the privilege of self-rule. 'Mayors in every large city', which Tony Blair is reported to favour, will be expected to be more effective agents of 'partnership' with business enterprise than majority groups on Labour councils have habitually been. It seems likely that New Labour regards its constitutional reforms more as part of its contribution to its own version of enterprise culture, than as its antithesis or corrective.

The Millennium Dome is being constructed as a symbol of this governing philosophy. It is presently the centrepiece of the strategy, recommended by Demos, of 'rebranding Britain', but is likely to display all the contradictions that might be expected from the assertion of British national identity at a moment of its general crisis, both internal and external.

This is all, in sum, a programme to re-shape the national psyche, in the people's own self-interest. This is a process of 'individualisation' viewed not merely as the outcome of larger social trends - increased mobility, communication, the informational revolution - but as a positive strategy of competitive survival. It is a Foucauldian dream of governing the soul, broadcast from Downing Street. The continuities with Thatcherism, with its earlier attacks on the 'dependency culture', on collectivism, and on values which seemed hostile to the market, are undeniable. Peter Mandelson and Roger Liddell, in their valuable outline of the New Labour agenda, did say after all that there were many things which Thatcher got right.

The exponents of this strategy appear to be in good faith in their belief that this programme is the only one which can advance the interests of *all* the people, including the weakest. It is not, in its conscious purpose at least, merely meant as a means to reward the successful. The Blairites pride themselves on their realism, on the idea that one can do nothing without confronting the world as it is. It was such a view that made them into such formidable election-winners, and makes them see the political process (as we explored in *Soundings* 4) as an instrumental one meant almost exclusively for the capture and effective use of power.

But is 'getting competitive', on a New Labour basis, the only possible form of realism? There are considerable reasons for thinking not.

One problem in establishing any kind of constructive dialogue with New Labour is the reluctance of its exponents to engage in much thinking aloud. The imperatives of short-term advantage - the macho virtues of decisiveness,

Soundings

absolute certainty, and dynamism - have been winning hands-down over any possible benefits of a more open debate about larger strategic assumptions and objectives. (Sarah Benton, in *Soundings 5* and *Special*, has described the dominance of mythical registers over rational ones in New Labour's discourse.) Sound-bites substitute for thought. It seems likely that, as with Thatcherism, mainly tactical advantages are being sought by this method of approach. It was Thatchensm's opponents, after all, who were left with the task of analysing the logic of the larger strategy, whilst the Thatcherites appeared to proceed in a merely incremental way, new ideas (e.g. privatisation) arriving unannounced as they went along. It may indeed be a logic of unintended but inevitable consequences which propels such transformations, not a pre-conceived plan. 'Good faith' (in the values of social justice, opportunities, social cohesion, social justice) may only be preserved by not thinking too far ahead, and 'good faith', as Tony Blair's every public appearance reminds us, is his project's most crucial political resource.

One major theoretical argument underlies New Labour's approach, which is made more and not less influential by the fact that it remains largely implicit. This is a particular version of globalisation theory, seen as a process which now exposes the entire world to market pressures which can only be successfully responded to in terms of enhanced competitiveness. The main role assigned to government in this scenario is as agent of this process. Globalisation is another term for market forces operating on an international plane. Their effect is felt in the constraints upon governments to accept the prevailing 'rules of the game' as financial markets dictate them, in the necessity to adapt to the investment priorities of business corporations, whatever these are; and in the irrelevance and indeed retrograde harmfulness of all conceptions of value or motive which might lead anyone to neglect or defy this reality.

Adaptation to this 'real world' is primarily viewed as a matter for individuals. This has always been the prevalent Anglo-Saxon attitude, and the current crisis of the 'Asian Tigers' - induced in part by the neo-liberal IMF - and the sluggishness of the continental European economies as they mortify themselves to enter a European Monetary Union built on the same principles - is undermining the challenge to it from a more 'social' model. Impersonal flows of money on the one hand, individuals mobilised by a new enterprise culture on the other - this seems to be the social geography imagined

by New Labour. It adopts the negative half of the argument developed by Manuel Castells in his major trilogy, *The Information Age* - about the power of global capital in the informational revolution - and ignores both his critique of its hugely divisive effects, and his positive argument that new social identities and values can and will create themselves in order to wrest human control from this impersonal engine of transformation.

It is a notable and defining fact about 'New Labour' that for the first time the power of capital and the markets which empower it is regarded as merely a fact of life, a reality to be accommodated to, and not a problem, a force to be questioned and resisted. The abstractions of 'globalisation', 'individualisation', even 'informationalism', can be used to reify the real agents and interests which dominate the contemporary world. New Labour has uncritically adopted a partial version of a complex argument. Analyses of 'globalisation' which we have already published (by Paul Hirst and Grahame Thompson in *Soundings* 4, by David Goldblatt, David Held and colleagues in *No 7*, and in Doreen Massey's editorial in the same issue) question these assumptions, and seek to reinterpret 'globalisation' as a process potentially subject to democratic intervention.

There are two critical questions which can be asked about New Labour's assumptions. One, will 'competitiveness' be achieved by the programme being adopted? Is 'competitiveness' not as often the outcome of institutional, cultural and collective resources, as of individual drives? We think government should be identifying as the main agents of development a variety of institutions and social agencies, and should be seeking ways of mobilising their capabilities. (Ash Amin explored this model in our *Special Issue*.) This would be the 'stakeholder agenda', taken seriously, since it requires enhancing obligations (e.g. of the owners of capital to those they employ, supply, and work among, to the environment and future generations), and establishing in public institutions more active means of social accountability. Models of welfare institutions which operate in more participatory ways have been explored in both our *Public Good* and this *Active Welfare* issue. A climate of punitive audit, public shaming, and scapegoating, such as current policy is evoking in order to coerce providers such as teachers, will not have good general outcomes, since damage done to morale, confidence and cooperative work will outweigh any local benefits. The improvements of some, in such an atmosphere, are won at the expense of the demoralisation of the many.

Soundings

The second critical question to ask is at what cost is 'competitiveness' made into the overriding goal? Does nothing else matter, than Gross National Product and aggregate levels of consumption? One example is the new policy towards single parents. Granted, access to the labour market can be a positive benefit in many ways. But how is it that no discrimination is even being made between the needs of infants and pre-school children, for whom care at home may reasonably be chosen by parents as a preferred option, and the needs of children over four or five, who are in full-time school? Why should the needs of the labour market rule over all other considerations? (In this case, probably because of an American-inspired vicious myth of 'welfare mothers', conceiving children in order to scrounge off the state, which however no-one quite dares to admit to believing.)

The problem is that a nation which is on the face of it highly 'competitive' in economic terms can be at the same time a most unjust and oppressive social order. The United States, the implicit model for much though *not* all of New Labour's agenda (they did after all ban handguns soon after the election), is the paradigm instance of the non-correlation of wealth and well-being. A more competitive society, in aggregate terms, may turn out to be a more unequal one, and a less unequal one less competitive, in certain respects. Some in the New Labour leadership seem to see this as an unavoidable trade-off, and it may be this belief that competitiveness has to be achieved even at the expense of greater inequality which underpins the commitment not to increase income taxes on the rich.

Richard Wilkinson's article in our *Next Ten Years* issue advanced a different view. Well-being, he argued, extrapolating from data on the incidence of health and illness, is affected adversely by inequality. In more unequal societies, there is more illness and lower life-expectancy, on average and not just for the worse-off. What causes this seems to be the 'hidden injuries' of relative failure and the anxiety which this brings. It is competitiveness, where basic guarantees and respect are not provided for all, which does the damage. The ambiguity of the idea of 'competitiveness' - does it mean a nation which competes more, or individual citizens who are forced to compete more with each other? - emerges as a central issue. For New Labour, it seems clear that competitiveness has become an objective in both these senses.

For *Soundings*, markets, globalisation, and individualisation, are outcomes

of social choices, and of unequal divisions of power. If the democratic state, both nationally, and on a larger scale, has any useful function, it is to influence these decisions, and at the least provide some counterbalance to irresponsible powers such as those which are mediated through global markets.

It is vital that arguments *of this sort* be heard *within* the New Labour system, if the government is to become more than merely an instrument of adaptation to global market forces. We hope that there are some who want the government to be more than the executive arm of 'Britain plc', and that they will contribute to debate about a more complex conception of a 'modernised Britain'.

In all this, public dialogue *is* fundamental. If democratic publics are to have effective access to decision-making - this is what citizenship should mean - the assumptions and beliefs underlying decisions must be made clear. New Labour would make a major contribution to its own development, as a project, and to its proclaimed development of a 'new Britain', if it found the confidence to tell the *rest of us what its* long-term perspectives are, so that these can be explored in a rational spirit.

MJR