

Editorial

Social life and market failure

Recently *Soundings* has been seeking to understand the success of the Tories in their call for the mending of society (see *Is the Future Conservative?*, www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/ebooks.html). One thing that has emerged clearly in the debate is the thinness of the Conservative conception of the complexities of social life (a failing which they share with New Labour). In particular, they continue to regard the economy as a separate sphere - for example they argue that Margaret Thatcher fixed the economy but they are now moving on to address the serious problems of society (see the interview with Oliver Letwin in this issue). Though the financial crisis has shifted the news agenda, and made it more difficult to sustain a market fundamentalist position on the economy itself, there is still little recognition that economy and society cannot be kept separate, and that the relentless process of marketisation is itself destructive of social cohesion.

Social life is seen as something to be managed, and commercial management practices are still seen as best. The dynamics of the market, and its effects on society, remain outside the picture. Hence the government's continuing commitment to the market agenda in public services - a commitment that is shared by the New Conservatives. In spite of the apocalyptic failures of the market system in banking, the main political parties remain hopeful that private companies will deliver in other areas. The first three articles in this issue point to some of the ways in which this faith is articulated.

Consumer choice and user involvement are key terms here. As Peter Beresford argues in his article on personalisation in social care, the liberatory impulse of social movements - in this case the disability movement - have become transformed into a language of individual choice and consumerism. In this way a collective impulse for the empowerment of a social group is reduced to the bathos of an individual care budget. And along the way democratic involvement is displaced, so that services become commodities that can be best supplied through a market process.

Sally Baker and her colleagues report from the front line in mental health, where,

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as they argue, patients have been compulsorily relabelled as 'service users'. They too show how a potentially liberating process - the move away from institutions and into the community - has become a nightmare for many, which has often resulted in no support at all. They also show how the rhetoric of consulting 'service-users', which in practice is a highly managed and largely undemocratic process, has allowed unpopular decisions - for example to close down services - to be paraded as the results of widespread consultation.

Stewart Player documents the government's championing of 'choice' in the health service, which he regards as largely a cover for privatisation. Here too, apparently, the results of consultation are often known in advance. For example in London land was already being earmarked for polyclinics before the consultation process had ended. The rhetoric of decentralisation is another term frequently invoked (and thereby abused) to justify changes. The reality is that health authorities and primary care trusts are under immense government pressure to buy in commercial services, and are penalised if they fail to do so. A further ploy is to describe general practitioners as having a 'monopoly' in primary care, which needs to be broken through creating a market of competing providers. Here again the market is presented as providing bountifully for consumers - though, as Stewart argues, it is hard to see why the US healthcare companies that the government is inviting into the NHS should be seen as providing evidence for such a view.

The market failure on the global scene is addressed by Colin Hines and Ann Pettifor. They argue the need for major government and collective effort to intervene in the financial crisis, on the scale of the Roosevelt new deal. This of course means much more than bailing out financial institutions. They also argue that the scale of the problems we face means that economic policy must be addressed alongside climate change - both issues that require intervention way beyond what the market can deliver. It remains to be seen whether western governments will move beyond shoring up organisations not fit for purpose, to concede that the market is not the answer to every question.

The Sakhalin 2 story, told here by Michael Bradshaw, shows what can happen when the future of a major energy project - with massive environmental implications - is decided by private companies and their repeated attempts to resist accountability. This cautionary tale warns against leaving climate and energy policy in the hands of financial institutions and private oil companies - though here there is an additional

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twist in the way that the Russian government has exploited the conflict between commercial institutions and the environmental movement for its own purposes. Reading this story produces feelings of despair at the way the planet's future is being decided, but also a strong reaffirmation of the need for collective solutions.

Jon Bloomfield argues that the European Union is a key arena in which the kind of political action that is needed can be articulated and supported. Though the EU has been subjected to a neoliberal onslaught - led from within by Britain - it remains the best hope for an international bloc capable of undermining the Anglo-American consensus and beginning to seek social and political solutions to control the destructive forces currently shaping the world's economy and ecology. As he also argues, this will only happen if the institutions of the EU become more accountable, and this is a political arena in which the British left must become more involved.

Of course this battle is being played out across the world, not just in Europe. Richard Archer and Jo-anne Schofield report on the state of play in Australia, where the Labor government's short honeymoon period is now over, but where there are still opportunities for challenging Labor's lingering attachments to at least some of the components of the Washington consensus.

Robert Reiner argues that law and order issues are also dominated by liberal orthodoxy - in which crime is seen as a largely a problem of individual pathology, and control of criminals as the main solution. Similarly, Bridget Anderson and Rutvica Andrijasevic show how public debate about migration has been displaced onto a fixation with traffickers and their victims, who are portrayed as individual wrongdoers and sufferers: trafficking has now moved to the centre of debate on migration, and this has facilitated the slippage between migration policy and a wider law and order discourse. Punishing and controlling criminals and traffickers then becomes the main focus of activity; and the ineffectiveness of policies that disregard social factors is something that politicians feel able to live with - especially when weighed against the political capital to be gained from articulating people's insecurities to an authoritarian agenda.

Finally, Sarah Franklin discusses the changes that have taken place over the last thirty years, from the birth of the first test-tube baby to the current legislation on human fertilisation and embryology. In a fascinating look at the way that cultural attitudes have changed, she argues that IVF has played a major role in making us think differently about how we define life. It is precisely because IVF is so

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ubiquitous - and almost mundane - that it has revolutionised the way we think.

The future is now an open question. The financial crisis has irrevocably altered the politics of this country. In the issues ahead *Soundings* will be developing its analysis of these extraordinary times for contemporary capitalism - from macroeconomics to personal life, and from the state of our society to the political strategies for a new left. We will also be continuing to publish debates on our website - www.soundings.org.uk - we look forward to your contributions

Our latest online debate is 'Who owns the progressive future?'. It includes articles by Jon Cruddas, Jesse Norman, Philip Blond, Suzanne Moore and Beatrix Campbell.

And we also now have a facebook site. If you are a member of facebook please join the Soundings group.

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MEETING

Who owns the progressive future?

Presented by Soundings and Comment is Free

7pm Monday 1 December

Kings Place, York Way, London N1 (nearest tube Kings Cross)

With Aditya Chakraborty, Beatrix Campbell, Caroline Lucas, Ken Livingstone. Chair John Harris

Ticket price £11.50, £2

Cheaper if booked online at www.kingsplace.co.uk

Guardian readers can obtain tickets to this event at the special rate of £5.25 by phoning Kings Place box office on 0844 264 0321 and asking for the 'Guardian readers' offer'.