

Beyond the Soundbites

The general election in Britain

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The 1997 general election result has rightly been celebrated as a huge relief, the lifting of a choking fog. For a while New Labour has the benefit of almost everyone's doubt. There *is*, after all, an alternative, and people are willing to wait and see what it looks like. And the size of the majority means that things can be done: over the next four or five years, what the alternative means will become pretty clear. But this should not prevent us from recognising that a chapter in the history of socialism has been closed. For almost a century the Labour Party was committed to 'parliamentary socialism'; in this election, for the first time, that commitment was unambiguously abandoned. We need to reckon with this: to look back over the past three decades and consider what 'parliamentary socialism' was, and why it failed; and to reflect on what its termination in the Labour Party implies for the construction of a new socialist project.

What was 'parliamentary socialism'? As practised by Labour, it combined three things: an ideological commitment (however vague) to a non-market-driven social order; an extra-parliamentary mass organization; and a particular conception of democracy. This conception, evolved over time from Burke to Schumpeter, saw democracy simply as a contest between competing teams of parliamentary elites. It treated the extra-parliamentary party as, in the final analysis, a servant of the parliamentary team; and it conceived of citizens primarily as mere voters, not as active participants in self-government.

One of the main contributions of the British New Left in the 1960s was its critique of this supposed route to socialism. But although the leading New Left intellectuals thought the Labour Party would never transcend it, they themselves did not generate any organizational alternative. When, however, the postwar settlement – the high-water mark of parliamentary socialism's achievements – finally unravelled under the Wilson government in the late 1960s, a significant current emerged within the Labour Party which broadly accepted the New Left's appreciation of the limits of parliamentary socialism, but which did not think it impossible that Labour might yet be transformed into a democratic socialist party of a different kind.

New Left, New Right

This new Labour left emerged at roughly the same time as the New Right within the Conservative Party: it was a critical political turning point. Tony Benn articulated the new left activists' understanding of this, and their sense of urgency, when he called for fundamental democratic reform of both the party and the state in order to prevent the ascendancy of what he described as 'a new philosophy of government, now emerging everywhere on the right', dedicated to deregulating business and controlling citizens in

the name of market freedoms. Yet, whereas the New Right quickly gained ascendancy within the Conservative Party, allowing them to reach outwards as a coherent political force and start reorganizing the country, the new left in the Labour Party was bitterly resisted by the party's deeply entrenched parliamentary elite, who, besides being committed to 'social-democratic centralism', failed to grasp the magnitude of the crisis of the postwar order. They shared the judgement of Crosland, who declared at the beginning of the 1970s that there were no signs of a new crisis in Western economies, and that therefore 'no fundamental rethinking' of party strategy was needed. They rejected the new Labour left's alternatives to the postwar settlement, in the shape of the Alternative Economic Strategy, and the municipal socialism that culminated in the Greater London Council under Ken Livingstone; and they were determined to defend the status quo inside the party. The ensuing decade-long struggle to change the Labour Party exhausted the new left – and what they had to offer the wider society was sub-merged in the intra-party conflict.

The 1983 election disaster was a product of these divisions – exacerbated by those social democrats who pushed matters to a split, while those who stayed energetically enlisted the media to denigrate their opponents as the 'loony left', whatever the cost to the party's overall standing in the country. The way back to power after 1983 was then defined in terms of systematically isolating and marginalizing the new Labour left and its ideas, but this meant that the party turned its back on the one segment of its membership that had seriously confronted the issue of how to sustain a socialist project in the new era. With their defeat, the die was cast for the modernizers' project: accepting the legacy of Thatcherism as a kind of 'settlement' akin to the Conservatives' accommodation to the legacy of the Attlee governments in the 1950s. The new Labour left had wanted to replace parliamentary socialism with democratic socialism. 'New Labour' replaced it, in effect, with a new kind of parliamentary capitalism, the so-called 'radicalism of the centre'.

Of course, New Labour's election triumph was partly due to the Conservatives' weaknesses. Already by 1995 the Conservatives had impaled themselves on a double contradiction. First, politics are national; and yet capital, of which the Conservatives are nothing if not the guardians, is increasingly transnational. In playing the nationalist card so recklessly, the 'Euro-sceptics' forgot how much capital is already integrated into and dependent on the EU economy. When the leadership looked like surrendering to them, the party no longer appeared to be a completely 'safe pair of hands' – either to big business, or to many voters. Second, the Conservatives' neo-liberalism, and the growing inequality and social marginalization it generates, was in increasing contradiction with the electorate's residual sense of social solidarity. The tide was beginning to flow the other way; the Tories failed to see it. In the end, people preferred anything to a fifth Conservative victory.

The many and the few

The difference made by Blair and the modernizers has nevertheless been enormous. First, they have gone as far as they could in detaching the Labour Party from the old bases of 'parliamentary socialism' – the trade unions, and Labour's inner-city heartlands – and have instead concentrated on promoting whatever political 'product' seemed most consistent with the wishes of voters in the 'target seats' of 'middle England'. Second, they accepted that globalized financial markets pre-empt macroeconomic management by national governments, and that growth depends on creating conditions attractive to investors; and they went to great lengths (the adoption of monetarist economic policy, more independence for the Bank of England, etc.) to persuade capital of their sincerity, seeking by all available means (including the scrapping of the old 'Clause IV') to replace the image of 'tax and spend' with that of 'a party of business'. Third, with

the exceptions of work projects for unemployed young people, and reduced primary class sizes, they have tried their best to reduce socio-economic expectations to a bare minimum, engaging instead in a good deal of ‘symbolic politics’ (‘parenting’, ‘moral values’, ‘tough on crime’, etc). Finally, so as to do all this, they have rewritten the party constitution, formally disempowering the grassroots activists, effectively disempowering the trade-union leadership, and potentially disempowering stropky left-wing Labour backbenchers (through changes in the Parliamentary Party’s standing orders).

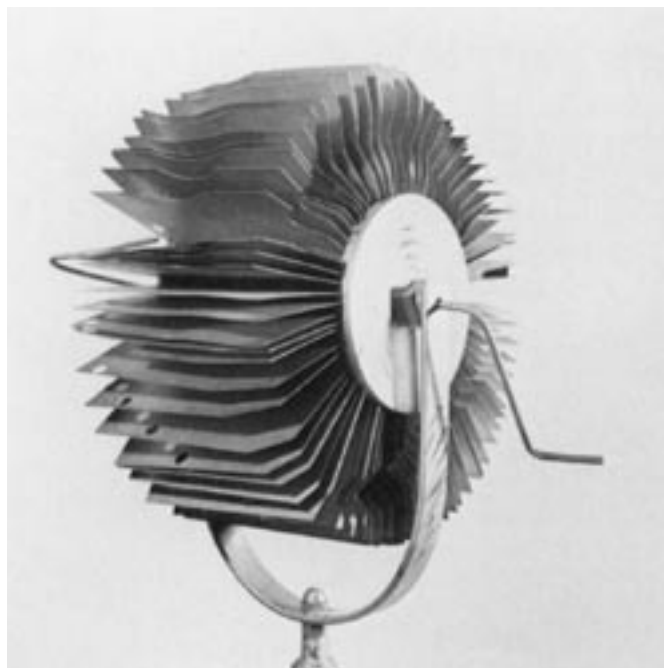
These changes have been crucial to the scale of New Labour’s victory, and we have no wish to belittle their achievement in definitively terminating the Thatcherite era. The Conservative Party may well take more than one parliament to overcome its unrepresentativeness and its Europhobia, and to seem trustworthy again to both ‘middle England’ (not to mention middle Scotland and Wales) and big business.

But the hard fact remains that the disparity between Blair’s oft-repeated goal of ‘national renewal’ and the means proposed (from a more representative council for the Bank of England, to compulsory school homework) is painfully large. The weaknesses of the British economy will not go away of their own accord, yet New Labour has ruled out the kind of ‘radical bourgeois’ reforms that progressive economists like Will Hutton and John Wells have persuasively argued are necessary, fearing the opposition from vested interests that they would inevitably provoke. Even New Labour’s modest economic proposals, from tax reforms to the end of the assisted-places scheme, will be rancorously misrepresented and attacked when the Tory tabloids have restocked on spleen, as will Scottish devolution and other constitutional reforms, not to mention the inevitable compromises in store on Europe, Northern Ireland, and other controversial issues.

Nor is it clear that giving absolute priority to low inflation, and making a big point of not ‘playing politics’ with public finances, will be rewarded in the long run, either by lasting business support for Labour, or by higher rates of investment, growth and employment. On the other hand, Gordon Brown’s born-again fiscal rectitude leaves so little scope for redistributive spending, or the real improvements in education, health, pensions and social services that Labour’s least advantaged supporters are hoping for (in spite of all the modernizers’ efforts to lower their expectations), that considerable disenchantment seems unavoidable.

And as opposition rebuilds – and as accidents happen and mistakes are inevitably made – the cost of the disempowerment of the party’s activists and the labour movement will have to be reckoned. It may have facilitated the near-military discipline of the election campaign, but it also means that the party no longer has a nationwide cadre of committed grassroots activists capable of mobilizing opinion behind any reforms which are seriously opposed by powerful interests. Over the next parliament, in other words, the narrowness of the terrain of democratic action that New Labour defines as practicable will gradually become painfully clear.

The optimism generated by New Labour’s stunning victory should be tempered, then, by the recognition that its programme is set so frankly within the boundaries set by capital. Do people really suppose that capitalism’s contradictions have disappeared? Is its indispensable need for growth ecologically



sustainable? Do we really expect full employment to return? Or – alternatively – can we foresee a new consensus on transferring a steadily growing share of the surplus to the support of the poor and the unemployed, so that the increasingly alienated ‘relative surplus population’ is reintegrated into ‘the community’? Has the secret been discovered that will prevent worsening worldwide inequalities from leading to more and more crime, violence and wars, as they always have in the past?

Thinking long term

It is not entirely far-fetched to see a parallel between our situation and that of 1850. Then, national economic conditions did not yet make it possible for the workers to take power, as the socialist revolutionaries of 1848 had imagined. Today, the conditions do not exist for socialism to be achieved in face of the power of global capitalism. Now, as then, there is an urgent need to study the current phase of capitalism and understand the new forms taken by its contradictions.

Analysing the contradictions of globalized capitalism and their political effects is not the same as constructing a renewed socialist project, even though the two tasks are intimately interconnected. We need to think through some fundamental issues in any conception of an alternative future to the one the neo-liberals are creating for us, including how far we accept the ideas of continued growth and consumerism. We also need to address ourselves to developing a new set of conditions governing capital flows that would once again allow governments to have a decisive say in their countries’ economic and social development. This will require new transnational alliances among progressive parties, which must be capable of generating a powerful groundswell of popular support for such control over capital, instead of focusing on assuring business of their support for the market.

The defeat of the new Labour left’s attempt to transcend parliamentary socialism suggests that the way forward does not lie in transforming the Labour Party. This does not mean that progressive elements in it should not be supported. However, supporting them should not be confused with the main task. New organizational forms must be developed, and a new conception of parliamentarism and its relation to extra-parliamentary politics needs to be worked out. It is not a question of parliamentarism versus extra-parliamentary struggle, but of what kind of parliamentary practice, complemented by what kinds of non-parliamentary practices, is capable of moving us forward. Vital to this will be debate and collective thinking on how to involve ordinary citizens in a radical democratic transformation of the institutions of the state – a line of thought that has been virtually extinguished in the Labour Party since the defeat of the new left project.

The prospect for the emergence of new types of socialist organization depends on renewed popular mobilization on a scale that cannot be expected to emerge quickly. For behind New Labour’s electoral success lies the reality of the defeat inflicted on socialism, and major defeats take time to recover from. We need to be ready to think long term again. Not the least benefit of New Labour’s electoral success, predicated on a resolute acceptance of the short term as the horizon of the possible, may be to have reopened some space for socialists to work out how to act in the present in a way that does not undermine our capacity to build a different future.