

Editorial

Crises and opportunities

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We may have to wait for the memoirs, or even the expiration of the thirty-year rule, to establish exactly what has gone so badly wrong for Labour over the past twelve months. But the general outlines seem clear enough.

There was already a growing awareness, and not only on the left of the party, that the socio-economic model that for a few years had seemed to serve New Labour's limited social democratic ends was beginning to reach its limits (in addition to Lent, Turner, and Houghton in this issue, see especially Elliott and Atkinson, 2007) – though few can claim to have foreseen that external shocks would blow it apart quite so suddenly and spectacularly. And it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this has combined with a dismaying lack of political will – or tragic loss of political nerve – at just the moment when Labour needed to clarify its purpose and priorities, not only in the 'values' that it communicated, but also by the decisions that it took.

But we should not allow the distorting prism of the Westminster game to deflect attention from the extent to which this was a collective failure, a generalised loss of ideological confidence and strategic determination that seems to have afflicted the entire government and to a significant extent the wider Labour Party and labour movement.

Those of us who hoped that Gordon Brown's accession offered an opportunity to shift British politics onto a fresh path can only hope that the government can regain some sense of direction and authority. As this journal goes to press there is talk of a new 'fairness' agenda that might demonstrate some resolution to respond to the economic crisis in a way that puts those in greatest need first. But unless Labour is willing to take on the new pinnacles of privilege and power that have grown up unchallenged over the past decade (see Peston, 2008), this is likely to be little more than a pale shadow of the populist economic agenda that is underpinning the US Democrats' momentum today (see Jackson in this issue, and Obama 2008), or even the egalitarian commitments of Christian Democrats on the continent (see Wilson in this issue, and Thornhill et al, 2008), let alone the New Deal of the 1930s.

The point here is not to compare Labour's prescriptions with more ambitious programmes born of different times and places, but to measure them against the scale of the challenges that face our own society today. If we really do think that inequality matters, or believe in a more democratic society, then it is clear that reversing current trends will take far more radical measures than have so far been contemplated. If we are serious about meeting the health and care needs of an ageing population, or truly unlocking the

potential of every child, then small measures will not be enough. If we accept the need to reduce carbon emissions then the changes to the way we live and work, produce and consume, will be enormous.

At its best, New Labour shifted the terms of British political debate towards a new consensus around the importance of social inclusion, equal opportunities, a restored public realm, and a sustainable economy, building legitimacy by taking small symbolic steps towards these goals. But it often risked giving the impression that it thought it was doing enough; and now it stands accused of failing to deliver. Now may be the time for a more honest engagement with the public about what it will really take to make more progress towards these goals – a new honesty that, moreover, might have the additional benefit of exposing the Tories' adoption of a new social rhetoric to a bit more critical scrutiny.

The fear is that over the past year the government has lost much of its claim to be able to lead such a debate. But the truth is that it could never have done so alone. And it may be that much of the left has become too focused upon cultivating or criticising political leaders whose ability to retain power and set the public agenda we began to grow accustomed to, and not devoted enough energy to shifting the ideological and social context within which any competitive party has to operate.

So this special double issue of the journal looks not only at various aspects of the present crisis – economic, political, environmental, social, ideological – but also forward, to the heightened struggle over Britain's future that is the inescapable consequence of its new political instability. Fighting back for progressive politics in these new turbulent times will not be easy, but it could be energising. And if it forces us to pay less attention to the nuances of New Labour doctrine, and think more creatively about an agenda that speaks directly to the needs and hopes of the majority in this country, it could be refreshing.

Different moves in this direction can already be detected – in the work Compass has begun on a popular narrative and policy process (see Cruddas in this edition); in the emergence of new alliances around a green economic agenda (Lent, Simms); in the reinvigoration of a broad campaign for a more democratic polity (visit www.unlockdemocracy.org.uk); in the community organising techniques which have fuelled the Obama campaign, and are gaining purchase here in the UK (Littman, Nabulsi).

Such interventions are not aimed exclusively at redefining Labour, but at re-engaging a wider citizenry. But by shifting the terrain upon which national party politics is prosecuted, they could help to limit the damage of the current melt-down, constrain the Tories' ability to capitalise upon it, and maybe – just maybe – sow the seeds of Labour's renewal.

References

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