

Editorial

The problem of Britain

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Before it was blown off course last autumn, the Brown government seemed to want to start a new public conversation about the British state and its role in obstructing, or supporting, the aspirations and collective goals of a diverse, dynamic, but still too divided society (1).

The social-democratic rationale for such a conversation is clear – as Cameron and Clegg converge on an anti-statist ‘pro-social’ agenda, the government knows it needs to make a different kind of argument for a different kind of active, democratic, enabling state that can empower individuals, grow social capital, and promote a common good (see also Rogers and Muir, 2007). The evidence is on its side (see Paul Skidmore in these pages on the findings of the *Everyday Democracy Index*, or Theda Skocpol’s historical argument for the productive interaction of national representative politics with grassroots civic activism in the USA (2000)). But the perceptions and emotions of the British voters (and, increasingly, abstainers) are not. The state is felt as alien, imposing, procedurally opaque, unable to deliver.

Perhaps the most creditable aspect of the original New Labour project was its (accidental?) marriage of a modest rehabilitation of social regulation, redistribution and investment with a partial, but not insignificant, package of constitutional reforms. But if Labour itself rarely made the link, relating each plank to distinct constituencies of supporters, it isn’t surprising that the public didn’t. And the inadequacy of these measures to the scale and recalcitrance of the pathologies they claimed to address – the stubborn centralism and elitism of our governing machinery and political culture, the social strains of an increasingly unequal and imbalanced economy – combined with the over-selling of the spin-doctors to further feed cynicism and disaffection. The past few months have raised even more concerns about the state’s integrity and competence, the economic conditions for further advancing social justice, and the populist lures of the right and far right.

For the left, additional problems arise from the fact that ‘the state’ can for most intents and purposes only be a *nation*-state (or attempted approximation) within an international states-system, with its logic of, internally, elision and suppression of difference, and externally, exclusion, competition, and *realpolitik*. And the *British* state has proved a particularly poor vessel for the progressive aspirations of those it governs. As Gerry Hassan stresses, this has been all too evident in the still unanswered questions about Britain’s relation to the US, the EU, newly industrialising powers and the global South; and in Labour’s disturbing forays into a rhetoric and politics of securitisation, ‘identity management’, border control, and outright flag-waving and xenophobia. Hence Arun Kundnani’s charge that ‘the state has so far chosen to bind itself to the people through fear rather than hope; through national security rather than social security; through the politics of a phoney Britishness rather than a genuine universalism’ (Kundnani, 2007, 7)(2).

Dismayed by the British scene many now look across the Atlantic for distraction and cheer to, according to political taste, the Bolivarian experiment in Venezuela (discussed in these pages by Louise Jefferies), or the popular momentum apparently building behind Barack Obama (of which more in our next issue). But no one can deny that both these projects have, in their own ways, sought to mobilise new inclusive movements of civil society behind an emotionally charged redefinition of national identity and purpose.

It's not easy to imagine Labour's current leader pulling off the same trick – but perhaps it is a blessing that we may have to bypass, or substitute for, what Jefferies calls 'the charismatic moment'. (It's hard to resist the thought that such a performance would in any case be somehow 'un-British'). The task this sets us is that identified, in different ways, by Jon Bright and Stella Creasy. Labour knows it needs to find a vocabulary and a narrative that can connect and resonate with people's everyday experiences and struggles. But rather than set out its own story about the condition of Britain and the solutions that government can offer, we need to find a way of letting the people of Britain – in the most inclusive sense, perhaps taking in all whose lives the British state impacts upon – tell their own stories, discover for themselves the ways in which these intertwine (3), and identify and demand, indeed enact, their own solutions.

This would entail both governmental reforms and methods of political mobilisation that could stimulate an open-ended collective determination of shared ends and priorities. Vitaly, it would have to include proactive procedural and social interventions to ensure that the voices of all were heard (see Weir and O'Brien in this issue), and the courage to 'let go' and allow the discussion to set new agendas for our state and society. Labour's hesitant return to questions of British identity, constitutional change and community participation this Spring provide some opportunities for this. The coming general election campaign – now viewed with increasing foreboding as an epochal, perhaps apocalyptic, contest – could be another.

References

- Davison, S. and Rutherford, J. (eds) (2008) *Soundings on Race, Identity and Belonging*, London, Lawrence & Wishart.
- Kundnani, A. (2007) *The End of Tolerance*, London, Pluto Press.
- Nairn, T. (2007) 'Not on your life', at www.opendemocracy.net.
- Rogers, B. and Muir, R. (2007) *The Power of Belonging: Identity, citizenship and social cohesion*, London, ippr.
- Skocpol, T, Ganz, M, and Munson, Z, 'A Nation of Organisers: The Institutional Origins of Civic Voluntarism in the United States', *American Political Science Review* 94 (3): 527–546.

Notes

1. The conversation has continued, irrespective of ministers' waxing and waning interest, at <http://ourkingdom.opendemocracy.net>.
2. On the interrelation of neo-liberalism and contemporary racism see also essays collected in Davison and Rutherford 2008. It is striking that the most inspiring contemporary initiatives of civil society have emerged precisely to counter this drift – see the Citizen Organisation Foundation's Strangers Into Citizens campaign (www.strangersintocitizens.org.uk) and the trade union-backed Hope Not Hate tour (www.hopenothate.org.uk).
3. For the argument that any process of democratisation must not be limited by a prior insistence on preserving the Union, see Nairn (2007).