

Editorial

The lessons of power

Martin Mclvor

Why has Labour's leadership contest proved so unsatisfying? The case for the extended timetable that is reaching its final stage as this issue of *Renewal* goes to press was that it would allow a thorough, maybe cathartic, but most importantly self-educative reflection on the causes of May's election defeat. Like the Tories in 2005, the Labour Party would be forced to stop and think hard about its predicament and its purpose, instead of digging itself deeper into the hole that its existing policies and positioning had left it in.

Sure enough, candidates have all, in one way or another, hurried to proclaim an end to 'the New Labour era'. More significantly, the defining dogmas and taboos of the past fifteen years have been earnestly thrown to the bonfire. Old heresies are the new orthodoxy. It seems now to be accepted on all sides that New Labour was too technocratic and managerial, and insufficiently visionary or ideological; New Labour was too impressed by wealth and corporate power, and too embarrassed by its party activists and union affiliates; New Labour placed too much trust in markets, and too little faith in democracy; New Labour was too complacent about inequality and the rise of the new super-rich, who should be made to pay more tax; New Labour should have done more to rein in the financial services sector and regenerate our manufacturing industries; New Labour should not have invaded Iraq. For the most part the tendency has been refreshingly progressive, social democratic, even radical (1). (The major exception to this was the dubious dog-whistling about immigration indulged by a number of the candidates in the early stages of the race. But since this was effectively challenged by Diane Abbott, they have all been sheepishly assuring us they only meant that New Labour should have built more council houses, and defied the CBI and EU over labour market regulation).

Those of us who have been raising such points for years should be pleased. And certainly much of this is encouraging, in many ways exciting. And yet it is hard to shake the feeling that there is something too easy about all of this. The worry concerns not the sincerity of the recantations, but the risk that party is being denied the difficult and challenging discussion it needs to have about the realities of power and the barriers to progressive reform. The question begged by the pitches of the four candidates who have been close to the heart of Britain's governance for the past decade or more – why could you not do more of this while you were in office? – need not be rhetorical and accusatory. It would be ridiculous to suggest that individuals who worked in the Blair/Brown governments are thereby disqualified from moving the party forward into new territory; the interactions of personal and collective responsibility are complex, and we should in any

case expect people to learn from experience and develop new insights. But the lessons of power need to be shared and debated collectively. For this reason they do owe us an explanation – so that the party as a whole can better understand the limitations of the New Labour project and, rather than simply wish them away, start a conversation about what it would take to overcome them if there is a next time (2).

For the fact is that Labour did not misplace its principles in a fit of absent-mindedness, or find itself closer to the City and the Pentagon than its traditional constituencies by accident. New Labour's compromises and calibrations were the result of hard-headed calculations by people convinced that the realities of psephology and sociology, monopoly media ownership, international capital mobility and global power politics left them no other line of advance. And the cognitive biases that over-interpreted evidence for Weapons of Mass Destruction while underestimating the risks of Credit Default Swaps were not personal quirks, but systematic and structurally determined. The fact that a few key players embraced the resulting course with apparent conviction should not be an alibi for the fact that many more were persuaded that no other option was available. New Labour was shaped by powerful ideological, institutional, and economic forces far greater than a few renegade individuals (3).

What kind of party – what kind of movement – what kind of governing project would be rooted and resilient enough to withstand these pressures in future, and deliver the more ambitious and transformative agenda that the leadership candidates are now promising? So far the debate has produced only gestures towards an answer, with the current enthusiasm for social media and community organising serving as a kind of proxy or symbol for the kind of cultural presence and hegemonic force the Labour movement might become. Suggestions for empowering party activists, local councillors, and affiliated trade unionists have been rather more sketchy, and serious discussion of the new international alliances that might be formed – in Europe or beyond – almost entirely absent. Beneath these practical issues lie deeper and more profound questions of philosophy and identity, born of the unresolved tensions between globalisation and 'modernisation' and the contemporary possibilities for experiences of security, dignity, belonging, and solidarity (in this issue see Stefan Baskerville and Marc Stears, Jonathan Rutherford, and Gerry Hassan). After a period in which they were wilfully ignored it is to be welcomed that such contradictions are now becoming pivotal to Labour Party thinking, stimulated by the influence of thinkers such as Richard Sennett, Wilkinson and Pickett, and (at further remove) Karl Polanyi. But the surface of the problem has barely been scratched, and its resolution, if there is one, will only be found through sustained social experimentation and practice.

It was probably unrealistic, then, to expect a party to come to terms with the roller-coaster ride of the past fifteen years and plot a new course through the uncharted waters Britain has now entered inside the few months of a leadership election. Even if circumstances offer Labour an early route back to power in Westminster – and while such an opportunity cannot be ruled out, it should certainly not be counted upon – the answers to these questions will take longer to work out, intellectually and practically. Combating the Coalition while keeping the door open to future cooperation with the Liberal Democrats will be hard enough. But alongside this Labour has set itself some demanding new tasks: designing a more sustainable and genuinely productive economy that distributes rewards more evenly; tackling the vested interests of high finance and the influence of the super-rich; reconnecting with low-paid workers and disadvantaged communities as well as the

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'squeezed' middle class; recovering and redefining its internationalist ideals; focusing less on triangulation and more on organisation, and grounding a recalibration of its policy in a renewal of its culture. This is the right place to start. But it is only a start.

References

- Diamond, P. (2010) 'Labour's failed renewal campaign', *Financial Times* 1.09.2010.
Richards, S. (2010) 'Blair's journey is Labour's problem', *The Independent* 26.08.2010.

Notes

1. These themes have been taken up more or less sharply and explicitly by the different candidates, but anyone who doubts that this has been a general trend should consult the alarmed *Times* editorial of 4 August: 'Mr Miliband recommends "fighting inequality" and "checking corporate excess" ... On the defining issue of the day – tackling the deficit – Mr Miliband advocates higher taxes ... He also ... advocates rebuilding the economy through an "active industrial policy" ... taken together, and stated as his priorities, they prompt concern about the direction of his campaign'. They were not talking about Ed.
2. It has taken former Downing Street advisor Patrick Diamond to momentarily break the spell, pointing out that 'the contest has suffered from lack of sustained reflection about why the theories of social democracy – a stakeholder economy, democratic reform and an ethical foreign policy – provided so difficult to achieve in practice, despite three huge majorities'. Whether or not one agrees with his answers, this question – which concerns politics and power as much as policy – is surely the right one (Diamond, 2010).
3. As Steve Richards has mischievously but acutely suggested, when Tony Blair chose to ally with 'the most powerful country in the world, with the intense support of the most influential media owner in the world', he was well within his 'comfort zone'. His genius was to present his pragmatic accommodations as bold iconoclasm (Richards, 2010).