

Dare more democracy

From steam-age politics
to democratic self-governance

Neal Lawson

“Democracy is the bridge between diversity, liberty and equality. The tensions between difference and equality create a political paradox – but democracy is the mechanism by which we continually try to square the circle... Democracy is both means and ends. It is a weapon in the struggle for socialism and it is the form in which socialism will be realised”

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Preface and acknowledgments

The issue of democracy has become more important to me. From a key political concern it has shifted to become perhaps the central concern. It is both the problem for left advance and the solution. It is the means by which a social democracy will be created and it is the form that a social democratic society will take. If there is a crisis of democracy the answer is not to be found in less democracy but more.

The idea for the pamphlet took root one night at an abortive meeting of a North London Constituency Labour Party. As Chair of Compass I was due to address the meeting but it snowed in North London that day and the transport system collapsed. Two or three people turned up and we agreed to postpone the meeting. But on the way out of the Labour Club a stream of bird fanciers were carrying cages of exotic birds into a packed and noisy downstairs hall. The bird fanciers, it would seem, had a greater sense of purpose and drive than the socialists. Changing the world held less interest and commitment than fancying budgies. Disaffection is not specific to this seat – it is replicated across the country. How did this happen? Why have politics and democracy become so meaningless to the people it should matter most to?

This focus on our democratic future chimes with the central thrust of thinking behind Compass. When it was founded a little over a year ago the original Compass statement covered a range of left issues: equality, liberty, public services, the economy, globalisation and the environment. But the thread running through the statement, the answer to the problems and challenges faced by the left, all revolved around the issue of democracy. Compass is the pressure group of the ‘democratic left’.

In writing this pamphlet two books by Richard Swift and Colin Crouch have greatly helped my understanding of the importance of democracy to the

left. More widely the work of Zygmunt Bauman, David Marquand, Thomas Frank, Colin Leys, Christopher Pierson, Hilary Wainwright, Tom Bentley, Stuart Hall and Alan Finlayson have all had a big effect on what I think about democracy, governance, markets, the public realm, citizenship and New Labour. The list of recommendations for possible democratic advance at the end of the pamphlet owe a great deal to *The Future of Democracy in Europe*, a Green Paper for the Council of Europe co-ordinated by Philippe Schmitter.

I would like to thank Deborah Mattinson and her colleagues at Opinion Leader Research for their professional work on the focus groups, the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust for their support for Compass, Gavin Hayes, the National Organiser of Compass, for all his unstinting work building the organisation, and all the groups listed at the end of the pamphlet who have supported Compass and the members who have joined it. Finally, I would like to thank Daniel Leighton for his ideas, support and comments on an early draft.

Thinking about democracy and markets has had a profound effect on me. For the last ten years I have worked as a ‘Labour lobbyist’. When I started such work, around the formative years of New Labour, there was (and still is with some) a sense that we can have it all – markets and democracy, economic efficiency and social justice. My view now is that you can’t. The march of the market denies the space for democracy. This is not an argument about absolutes but points of balance. The danger is not a mixed economy but the development of a market oriented mono-culture. There is nothing wrong with markets per se – indeed they can be beneficial. But what they can’t be is left to their own devices. Then their impact on society becomes destructive.

In 1969 the phrase *dare more democracy* was used by the then German Chancellor Willy Brandt to

increase all citizens' participation in political events. For Brandt this pivotal phrase was not merely a description of the form of organisation the state should take but was the principle which must influence and permeate our entire social existence.

Neal Lawson, Chair, Compass

While ideas, thoughts, inspiration and facts have been plundered from many sources the final words and recommendations contained in the pamphlet are entirely those of the author not of Compass.

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Introduction

There is of course an irony in the use of focus groups to build a constructive critique of New Labour's attitude to democracy – given that it was the Holy Grail of focus group findings from which so much of the 'project' sprang in the early 1990s. What is gratifying is that New Labour's focus groups must now be telling them the same things as the findings that formed the basis for this publication – that key swing voters are angry and feel betrayed and disheartened about politics.

Something profound is taking place in the relationship between citizens and the state. There was never a golden age of democracy or political participation but what did exist was a general buy-in to the process of governance. That buy-in by the people for their government and system of politics is now fast eroding. We face nothing less than a crisis of legitimacy in the manner in which we govern our society. This is a global problem but we can only face it from a particular British standpoint. It is now widely predicted by pollsters that turnout at the next election will dip below 50%, with Labour winning a large majority on the basis of around 38% of the popular vote – that is an unassailable majority based on the active support of less than one in five of the voting population.

The crisis is not just one of quantity but the quality of our democracy. It is based on a second irony – that as our old industrial form of politics rusts and ossifies before our eyes people are yearning, as never before, to take more control over their own lives. At home, work, often in their communities and during their own leisure time, people no longer want to be dictated to but want a voice and say in how their lives are ordered and structured – but this growing desire for autonomy has little if any connection to formal party politics. We are witnessing the welcome end of an era

based on deference but are trying to paper over the cracks of a revolution in what we think and how we operate with a political system based precisely on the old culture of deference. The contrast couldn't be more evident in the fact that the last few years have seen turnout shrink in general elections alongside the biggest demonstrations our streets have ever seen.

We retain a system of steam-age politics when the world has moved on and demands not just a reformed sense of representative politics both at Westminster and locally but also a deeper sense of participatory democracy. The roots of the impending crisis are deep and lay both in the substance and style of our politics. To save our democracy we have to address both.

There is another level at which the crisis of politics and democracy reveals itself – it is the issue of Britishness. The evidence of the focus groups overwhelmingly exposed a crisis of identity that is sweeping the country. The sense of betrayal laid at New Labour's door is not just rooted in the perceived failures to transform education or health, to stop sleaze or bring about a new politics. The cynicism and sense of despair is magnified by a strong sense that this is a government that is giving up on what it means to be British, or more precisely with these particular focus groups, what it means to be English. The nation state is still the key organising principle for politics and so there must be some sense of loyalty and commitment to the nation. Something profound is happening in terms of people's sense of belonging and place in the world, which brings into question Labour's ability to govern effectively.

Paved with good intentions

The pamphlet will argue that the central cause of the democratic and identity crisis is being fuelled by New Labour's over-enthusiastic accommodation

with neo-liberalism and its continuing adherence to the culture and practice of Labourism. At its core New Labour's goal is enlightened neo-liberalism and the means by which it seeks to achieve it is rooted in the old politics of command and control – in which people are too often the recipients of centralised decisions – not the creators of their own society. New Labour's strategy inverts the historic purpose of social democracy – to make people the masters of markets – not the servants. In the process the unique role of the public sector and the public realm in promoting the values of equality, solidarity and liberty is contaminated by the competitive and individualistic values of the market.

There can be no new politics within the context of unconstrained capitalism for the simple reason that capitalism and democracy do not mix and instead have a zero sum relationship – more market inevitably means less democracy. This is not to argue a simplistic case of 'business bad' and 'democracy good'. Social democrats have always recognised the important role of wealth creation and indeed the place for consumerism. But markets cannot address imbalances in power relationships – they simply allow effective individual choice within the context of given wealth distribution – however unfair that distribution may be.

We end up with a *strong market weak democracy* model for our society. But the dynamics of this are not static. The brilliance of the market is its relentless and ruthless search for new sites of profitability. Only if collective and democratic barriers to the march of the market are erected can commercialisation be contained. Without such barriers – which existed from 1945 in Britain to the 1970s – more and more aspects of the public realm and our individual lives are transformed into opportunities to make profit. Democracy is in retreat and will remain so until there is the collective will to regulate markets in the public good. So even a limited view of representative democracy is under threat as the march of the market continues apace.

It is within this prism of analysis – the inversion of social democracy to make people fit the needs of markets – that the issue of diversity and what it

means to be British can best be understood by the left. This debate has been billed as a dilemma between diversity and solidarity (Goodhart, 2004). Put simply, the argument is that people will refuse to share their income with asylum seekers or immigrants who don't sufficiently share their cultural norms. The welfare state as we know it cannot therefore be sustained alongside such levels of diversity – something has to give – either diversity or a solidaristic welfare state. But this is a simplistic reading of surface fears – all be it strongly held fears. The underlying issue is one of insecurity brought about by a political surrender to market forces which causes a double bind of insecurity. Not only are working lives and communities now routinely destabilised by putting the needs of markets first but the global restructuring of capitalism also leads to the flow of workers to Western economies like Britain. It is the causes of these fears that the left needs to address, not just the symptoms.

These are troubled times for democracy. Having ceded too much power to the market politicians limit their offer and voters switch off because their promises are so timid. If they are not committed to great deeds then the electorate presume politicians must be in it for themselves. The spiral of democratic decline and bitter cynicism ratchets up. Colin Crouch describes the moment as one of *post democracy*. He says that "it is difficult to dignify it as democracy itself, because so many citizens have been reduced to the role of manipulated, passive, rare participants" (Crouch, 2004, p21). In this post-democracy the formal components of democracy stay the same but the life is sucked from them. They are stripped of their former meaning and power.

Crouch rightly argues that "Democracy thrives when there are major opportunities for the mass of ordinary people actively to participate, through discussion and autonomous organisations, in shaping the agenda of public life" (Crouch, 2002, p2). This is an ambitious, even idealised, view of democracy – but importantly it frames the debate and gives us an insight into what is possible. It certainly stands in stark contrast to the predominant and limited form of liberal democracy – based on periodic elections

for representatives and the maximum freedom for business interest. According to Crouch:

“while elections certainly exist and can change government, public electoral debate is a tightly controlled spectacle, managed by rival teams of professional experts in the techniques of persuasion ... behind this spectacle of the electoral game, politics is really shaped in private by the interaction between elected governments and elites” (p4)

The issue of democracy is crucial to the future of the left. We call ourselves social democrats or democratic socialists. But the emphasis has always been on the social/socialist side of the equation – not the democracy side. From an historic perspective this is understandable. Labour was formed to fight for equality or at least achieve less inequality. What mattered was feeding the hungry, clothing and housing the cold, treating the sick and caring for the elderly. Democracy didn't just play second fiddle: it was pretty much forgotten. The democracy claim was just a bit of early branding to distinguish ourselves from the (very) undemocratic communists of the Soviet Union.

But the purpose of revolutionaries and reformists was the same: the capture of state power to wield and drive people in the direction an elite wanted them to go in. Under this formula democracy became merely a means to an end – something of only instrumental value – to deliver power to those at the top of the Party; taking our turn at absolutist rule. The notion that democracy was of intrinsic worth always by-passed the mainstream of the Labour Party.

New Labour threatened to change all this. On the back of the failures of 'Old Labour' and the sleaze of the Tories New Labour promised, above all else in the minds of the electorate, a new politics. On that brilliantly sunny late spring morning of 1st May 1997 we proclaimed a 'new dawn' for British politics. That sense of hope and excitement has been dashed. This is not just my view. Through Opinion Leader Research, Compass conducted focus group studies in London and Birmingham of people who swung to Labour in 1997. It is overwhelmingly their view too.

This pamphlet is an attempt to take the views of swing voters on New Labour and democracy and

root them in an analysis of the substance and style of left politics. It does not attempt to cover every issue relevant to the problems our democracy faces. But it does strive to answer the essential political paradox of our time presented to us by Zygmunt Bauman – that many feel increasingly confident and powerful as consumers to make individual choices that shape their lives in terms of what they consume – but at the same time have never felt as powerless to act as citizens to shape the world in which they live. It is this paradox between empowered consumers and disempowered citizens that is at the heart of our democratic malaise. By definition a paradox cannot be solved but can be better managed if democracy becomes the means and ends of the left.

The pamphlet starts with an overview of the focus group results. It then examines the reasons for the crisis of British democracy before suggesting ideas about how democracy can be renewed.

The crisis of British democracy: the view from Labour's swing voters

So what do key swing voters think about New Labour's record and its commitment to 'new politics'? What did people remember of that magical night of 1st May 1997 when Labour was swept to power? How could the left recapture the spirit of 1997? To test views Compass commissioned four focus groups – two each in North London and Birmingham – split between men and women. Two groups were 30-45 year olds and two were 50 plus. They were all C1/C2 switchers – roofers, drivers, receptionists and sales assistants. They are exactly the type of people who were enthusiastic for change in 1997 and could and should have been won over permanently to a more radical New Labour agenda. The groups were recruited and run by Opinion Leader Research one of the country's leading political marketing companies. What follows is an edited version of grim views and bad news – not just for New Labour but for our democracy and political system. Everything that is cited in 'quotation' marks is a direct quote from the groups.

Then: the spirit of '97

The spirit of May 1997 wasn't revolutionary but it was passionately born of the frustration with the Tory years and the yearning for something new and better. The sense of it being time for change was palpable. Neo-liberalism in the guise of Thatcherism and its more diluted form of Majorism was a busted flush. People were yearning for a government they could trust, which was on their side, which would invest in and transform public services. New Labour was the embodiment of that hope. On election night and for some days after Britain felt like a better place – people actually smiled at strangers.

In a suburban front room in North London the faces of a group of middle aged women lit up with

the glow of that memory and the hope that sprung from it. Jackie remembered the song 'Things Can Only Get Better'. It would be 'the end of sleaze'. She trusted Blair and the 'electricity of new blood'. Jane recalled a 'bright new future', Jean 'the start of something good'. For Jeanne it would be 'a complete change' from 'the old Labour style and for a better NHS'. Tony Blair for Pat 'was a man of the people'. Monica was simply 'relieved'. It would be a government 'for everybody'. In Tony Blair they saw a politician rooted in truthfulness: 'what you saw was what you got'. The 'lies would stop'. This was a government 'that understood our lives and our problems'. Blair in particular was a 'family man'. He looked 'sincere' and had real 'charisma'. He said it would be 'education, education, education' and these women genuinely believed him.

The men in London were slightly more sanguine than the women. Yes, they had high hopes but not as high. Paul thought it would be 'a new start for the working class'. Nick was 'happy and hopeful', Steve had 'optimism and hope', Mike 'knew it would be a big win'. Where the Tories were for 'privitisation', Labour was 'for everyone'. An end to sleaze and 'an open and honest approach'. They wanted to see the Tories 'punished' and Labour 'undoing the Tory record on the NHS in particular – more cash and better run'. The echoes could be heard from Birmingham. They spoke of a 'new broom'. They were 'overjoyed' and 'felt very positive about the future'. New Labour for them was 'exciting, credible, young and dynamic'.

When they cast their minds back the men in Birmingham still 'feared the Tories getting back in' who were seen as 'tired and stale'. New Labour would be 'a change for the better'. There were some worries that 'taxes would rise' and about the new

government's 'lack of experience' but they still switched and they still hoped. These hopes were for 'better schools and hospitals'. As one Birmingham man put it, 'their kids went to the same school as ours' so they had a vested interest in getting it right.

That was then – this is now

These were the memories of loss and betrayal. The women in particular seemed to feel the most let down. They had pinned their hopes on Tony Blair in particular. He was like the son who would do good or the partner who could be trusted to deliver on his word. A world where Tony Blair was Prime Minister would be 'safe, secure and trustworthy'.

Their reaction now? While the euphoria of 1st May 1997 was never going to be fully realised the extent of the bitterness and the sense of betrayal amongst the group members was shocking. Attitudes were as cynical as could be imagined from a randomly selected group of north London women. 'The spin doctors must have been wonderful men' said Pauline. Sitting next to her Maureen felt 'so conned'. The bitterness was horribly acute – one woman said 'I'm glad he's (Tony Blair) got a family – so they can suffer the legacy'.

There was not a good word to say about any of the government's 'achievements' – on the NHS, education, pensions and in particular amongst the London women on asylum. It was for one person 'a false dawn'.

The sense that this was a government on their side had evaporated. Blair, one London woman said, 'makes up his mind that he is right and never listens'. 'At least the Tories resigned over sleaze' someone chipped in amongst the group of Birmingham men. The New Labour government after seven years in office was 'too detached and didn't understand real people's lives'.

The Birmingham women were 'disheartened'; they saw New Labour as 'all a waste of time' and didn't believe that 'they stand by what they promise'. One said that she would 'be devastated if Labour gets back in'.

The Birmingham men were also unstinting in their condemnation of government delivery. They had 'failed on law and order' and had 'promised

NHS dentists but all we get is £100 charges'. Every one of them knows about stealth taxes. There was an awareness of the government's targeting strategy – 'families with young people are being looked after' but 'it's the old who are losing out and those without children'. Generally there was a feeling that they were 'no better off' but 'paying more while services were getting no better'. They don't believe any national figures that things are getting better. They believe what they see and what family and friends tell them – anecdote is the most powerful source of information.

The issue of accountability came up again and again. 'They pass the buck and no one takes responsibility' said one Birmingham woman. The quotes kept coming; 'people get away with failure in the public sector', 'no one gets the blame' and 'no one is accountable, look at the Soham police checks'. And 'if they were business people they would be fired'. 'None of them ever resign, they never do anything wrong' said a Birmingham man.

The relationship between citizen and politician is viewed as very personal, very close – as one Birmingham woman put it 'we got sucked into voting for them and then they let us down' and went on by saying 'they proved us wrong'. Their perception of New Labour's failure has, it would seem, been taken to heart. Not that any of the other parties fared much better – this was a plague on everyone's house – only the Tories slightly more so than Labour.

But there were touches of realism in this sea of despair. One Birmingham man offered up an excuse by saying that 'they have so much to do' and 'it's inevitable they lose touch'. This found echoes in all the groups – 'the longer you are there the more disconnected you must get', 'it's not an easy job' and 'I don't envy them' were some of the few but more generous offerings. Political expertise was also acknowledged – 'they know things that we don't'. But there were rare glimpses of mitigation.

The issue they were not asked about – but volunteered again and again – was their anger and fears over immigration, asylum of the threat to their sense of Englishness. With no sense of shame they were incredibly keen to go back to the 'unjustified'

claims of ‘foreigners’ on the health, welfare and education resources that ‘should be going to the people who paid into the system’. The group of women in London were the most vociferous, but this theme animated everyone. Although it was not mentioned as an issue in their minds at the time they said they believed that in 1997 Tony Blair was ‘for England and for us’. But New Labour had let this become an issue. Now they said ‘Blair is anti-English’, he ‘supports any country and religion except the English’ and that he is ‘ruining our country – England’. The threat to their identity is made worse by the perception that he has ‘given Scotland away’, while ‘The Iraq war shows where his focus is and loyalty is’. The conclusion was that ‘only UKIP are fighting for England’. The issue of patriotism, nationality and the threat from outside animated the groups more than any other and crystallised anxieties that Blair and New Labour were a cosmopolitan elite – focused on other places and other people – not the tough domestic concerns of the ‘real English’.

Their views on democracy

While it didn’t feature as policy issue the shadow of the war in Iraq hung like a black cloud over the perceptions of the groups. Of course there was the rather matter-of-fact statements that they are all a ‘bunch of liars’ and ‘deceitful’. But the impact on trust is not confined to the decision to go to war but seems to have confirmed a wider suspicion, namely that ‘our involvement in politics won’t make any difference – the war showed that’ and ‘they just go for it – they asked what we thought and did it anyway’. The precursor to the war which they still mentioned was the Dome. They knew this was a folly and is still viewed as the first example of a government that was out of touch. This view in turn seemed to fit a wider pattern. All the talk of referendums on Europe in particular had clearly stirred interest but ‘they don’t involve people in referendums – they decide when it suits them’. Referendums were viewed as powerful voices for the people but they are in the gift of the politicians who ‘refuse to give us referendums’ according to one of the London men.

Against this cynical and betrayed backdrop, wider and more ambitious promises of involvement had become hard to imagine. Political involvement was seen as futile in the current system in part because ‘there is no difference between the parties’ but also because there was no belief that anyone wanted them to be involved – ‘they don’t want us to get involved’ – a belief backed up by what they saw as hard evidence: ‘what’s the point of going on marches – no one listens’.

And then from the feeling of being let down and disappointment they return to a savvy, almost streetwise, mood: ‘you get wise to it’. It is the depth of this cynicism that was most shocking. One London man was clear in his own mind. ‘It’s a gravy train,’ and then from a Birmingham woman, ‘they want to line their own purse’. Another London man matter of factly asserted that ‘they pay themselves what they want and get flats on the cheap’.

Ultimately it is the sense, as one Birmingham man put it, that ‘we have got two Tory parties’. ‘New Labour means conservative to me’ said one. New Labour has become ‘exactly like the Tories – dictatorial’. Pat from London summed it up ‘They have made us a lot of angry people’. Every head in the room nodded.

There was, though, a very strong view of what politics and democracy were for. Government should be run ‘for the people – for the majority’. Interestingly they did not offer up much of a version of ‘government by the people’. What it seemed they wanted was better ‘leaders’ with ‘greater professional and expert advice’. Their ideal politician was someone who ‘listens, who cares, who is down to earth and does things’. The almost desperate longing plea was that politicians should simply ‘practice what they preach’. Rebuilding trust would be possible if ‘they showed us they are going to do something’, ‘admit to mistakes’ and would ‘listen and act on what they heard’. For Tony Blair trust was, to say the least, problematic. There was a strong desire to ‘get rid of Blair’ and ‘build on a new person’.

There was deep scepticism about developing local politics as a site for democratic renewal. These wise voters know that local authorities ‘don’t have real powers’ and ‘have to ask Blair as the money comes

from Blair'. The dismal failure to get a Yes vote for a regional assembly in the North East because it lacked real teeth is rooted in this rational decision-making about where power actually lies. The No campaign's image of a white elephant was an accurate reflection of these well-founded fears.

Despite this cynicism, when prompted, all four groups liked the idea of citizens juries (despite no one having heard of them before the groups met), that is small groups of randomly selected citizens given the time and resource to deliberate on national or local policy issues. Perhaps it was the familiarity of legal juries that endeared them to this tentative democratic 'solution'? One woman from Birmingham said 'I think it's the time – it would give the opportunity to really get to the bottom of things and make a better decision yourself'. And for one London woman citizens juries would mean politicians could 'hear people's voices' and that she would 'enjoy it – it would be interesting, I would feel part of it'.

Likewise there was interest in the notion of local boards to provide community and user input into public services. One London man said they 'could work well and provide a fresh mind'. But people were also conscious of the time commitment and wanted to know whether they would get paid time off from work to participate.

Referendums were viewed enthusiastically – but also, as we have seen, cynically, as they were seen to be deployed only when they suited the interests of the politicians. There was a strong desire to have 'referendums like the Swiss'. One of the Birmingham women saw a Euro referendum positively as it would 'give people a chance to learn and hear the debate'.

Although it wasn't pursued as a question it was interesting that one London man voiced a concern that 'Cabinet views should be taken into account'. This fear about the growth of Executive power is now widely spread – ironically at the same time Downing Street feels it has never been more powerless to influence delivery. The answer to this conundrum lies in greater old-style centralised power at a time when real power is more diffuse in society and the economy. It represents the weakness of centralised steam-age power in a less deferential

and more decentred era. In terms of their relation to their own MP there was a call to 'get on to your local MP and get them to represent you in parliament' but then a sanguine recognition that 'MPs have to toe the line and they are all scared of Blair'.

They had some of their own ideas to renew democracy, such as 'weekly open question times at the civic centre' to make politicians more accountable and to improve delivery to 'get public service workers better involved'. To rebuild trust it would require some basic but fundamental relationship changes between people and politicians – but none of the group's demands seemed extreme. As the London men put it, 'politicians should treat people as they would treat themselves', 'admit faults' and 'treat us like adults'. If they didn't believe what politicians said about improvement in education and health, they did tend to believe what friends, family and frontline professionals said. What New Labour needs is real life advocates of the historic investment in health and education – no one else is believed.

Electoral reform appeared to be a difficult issue to grasp, as indeed it is, and entails conceptualising a different form of power than the winner takes it all. Like good pluralists they saw more than one side for the case, so 'proportional representation sounds fair' and then quite a sophisticated view that it might mean 'the BNP might get in but at least you know (the level of support they had)'. There was the same mixed view of devolution (remember these groups were held far from Scotland and Wales). Members of the groups said they were a 'waste of money' but others more generously remarked that 'they should have it (devolved power) if they want it'. Regional assemblies naturally aroused more interest in Birmingham because 'everything is London-centred'. While elected mayors were also better perceived in Birmingham as a means of 'rooting for your area'. There was recognition of the need for trade unions – but 'not more power for them'.

Some thoughts on what they said

Listening back over the tapes what is striking is the remarkable consistency – forty people recruited at random on the suburban streets of London and

Birmingham, but across the generational, gender and geographical divide a shared sense of hopes dashed, of disappointment and frustration, of tough and resigned reactions to this but also of interest and intrigue in democratic possibilities and a demand to be heard and to have their say. And at the end of the sessions an almost universal expression of enjoyment in the experience and wish to do it again. The threat of a dying belief in politics is palpable – but so too is an inextinguishable human desire to take control over our lives. They wanted to talk, they were almost relieved that someone would listen to them, they were animated. For an hour at least the focus group session acted as a form of political/democratic therapy.

For these groups this was disappointment on the bounce. Let down by the Tories, they had now been let down by Labour. This is where the cynicism and desperation comes. After Tory sleaze New Labour offered fresh hope. And these people believed it would be different and markedly better– they had suspended their usual disbelief in Labour in particular and politics in general – only to have their hopes dashed. The new destructive dimension is the threat to their sense of English identity and the insecurity created by immigrants and asylum seekers.

The almost tragic nature of their lack of expectations (they just wanted politicians who treated them decently), their fears and their disappointment in those who they desperately wanted to trust was touching. There was at the very least a latent sense of fair play in terms of their relationship to others in society; what they wanted was to be treated as grown ups, to be asked and to have a voice. They want politicians to listen, they know that politicians will decide – they just want to be heard first. Their's is a cry of democratic anguish.

But their cynical analysis is entirely rational. If our politicians 'don't stand for anything' because 'they are all the same' then they must be 'in it for themselves'. One male participant in London had concluded that the war in Iraq and Tony Blair's close ties to Bush were in part due to him having one eye on the lucrative USA lecture market after his retirement. He may be wrong but you can't fault the logic.

If limited representative democracy is letting them down then what hope is there of getting them to buy into, as they must if it is to work, a deeper form of participatory democracy? This is viewed sceptically precisely because politicians don't listen now and won't give power away. Why should they expect anything more? So a deepening of democracy to more direct participation is predicated first on a renewal in the belief and efficacy of representative democracy.

At the end of the sessions they were asked how they were going to vote at the next election. Remember that these are qualitative research groups and not scientifically representative samples. But their response is interesting. The women were more adamant, especially in London, that they would not vote Labour again. The men were more open to persuasion and would, it seems, leave the door open for Labour.

In terms of the outcome of the next election what saves Labour amongst these people is that Tories are regarded as being even worse, even less in touch and less competent. There is a plague on everyone's house – only Labour is plagued just a bit less than the Tories. That is why, it would seem from this evidence, Labour will win the next election.

The reasons for the crisis of our democracy: the problems for the left of substance and style

Like the recovering alcoholic, the left – in particular its dominant Labourist tradition – must admit to the problem it has with democracy before a cure can be found. This requires a thorough examination of the substance and style of left politics and its treatment of democracy – both what we are trying to achieve and how we are trying to achieve it. Rising disaffection is rooted in a lack of differentiation amongst the electorate between the two main parties. That is not to say the two parties are the same or that New Labour is simply a continuation of Thatcherism. It is not. But the differences are not apparent enough. In 1954, 53% thought the parties were really different and 39% saw them as much the same. By 2004 only 16% saw a real difference, with 81% perceiving them as much the same (*Observer*, 21 November 2004). In the British Social Attitudes Survey 2003 Catherine Bromley and John Curtice reported how “never before have the electorate felt that there was so little to choose between the two main parties” (p102). A BBC poll carried out on Election Day 2001 found that 77% said voting wouldn’t change anything.

Trust is the issue and its decline seems to be getting worse. Eurobarometer measured trust in the UK in 1996 at -25 compared to -8 as a whole for the EU. By late autumn 2003 it was -44 for the UK compared to -29 for the rest of the EU. It’s getting worse everywhere but Britain leads the way. Only 24% of the population trust ministers to tell the truth (*Independent* 9th September 2004). The Electoral Commission reported on field work undertaken at the end of 2003 which indicated that voting could become a minority interest at the next election.

There is certainly a political time bomb of youth involvement. In every previous generation, the young are the least likely to vote, least likely to be

active – that has always changed over time as they mature. As people have got a job and home their propensity to vote has increased. That trend appears to have stopped. In 2001 only 39% of 18-24 years voted and there appears to be little reason at the moment to believe they will become more active as voting citizens. Indeed Clarke et al have argued that there has been a distinct decline in turnout across political generations starting with the Thatcher era and continuing unabated during the Blair era. They suggest that the Thatcher period, with its insistent advocacy of market rather than government solutions and emphasis on individual rather than collective goods had important negative effects on public attitudes towards electoral participation as a collective good. Of those that came to the age of electoral majority from 1997 onwards, 41% believe that it is a ‘serious neglect of duty not to vote’; in contrast 86% of the oldest voters surveyed thought it was a serious dereliction of duty. Clarke et al conclude that ‘people who have entered the electorate during the Thatcher and Blair eras constitute distinct political generations whose relatively low levels of civic mindedness help to explain their greater reluctance to go to the polls’ (Clarke et al p273). This suggests that neo-liberal policies and rhetoric that were introduced by Thatcher and adopted by New Labour have had inherently depoliticising or even anti-political effects on recent generations.

The members of the focus groups consulted for this pamphlet made the rational conclusion that politicians who don’t seem to believe in anything distinctive must therefore be in it for themselves. The less politicians feel they are trusted the less ambitious they become, the more they focus on limited pledges and the politics of ‘what works’.

Only things don't tend to work if there is little sense of vision and too little application of values. Certainly when times are bad the public sector in particular needs not just support for the instrumental value it provides in terms of better services but the moral backing that there is an intrinsic value derived from democratic and collective service provision. If politics becomes just an instrumental and contractual relationship between the state and the citizen then it's no wonder the citizen behaves more like a consumer who is likely to 'exit the deal' if it fails to deliver for them at the first time of asking. Politicians often complain about the restless, thankless, febrile nature of the electorate, people who are never satisfied or happy with their lot – but politicians get the people they deserve. This is not to say that sensitive and respectful delivery is unimportant – we all want to be treated well and on time. But there needs to be more. Without a moral and ethical commitment to the delivery of public services 'success' becomes very unlikely. This downward spiral of timidity feeding disaffection has got to be reversed.

The disenchantment of Labour voters is reflected in the Labour Party itself. Membership is at the lowest level since the 1930s. Officially the figures have fallen from a high point of 440,000 around the 1997 election to around half that figure at best. The number who are actually active is a fraction of the 200,000 left. The disenchantment is partly a product of policies and actions the membership don't support – like Iraq but is also a product of their own powerlessness within the Party. They feel literally helpless to stop the drift. No one listens and no one cares. There is no mechanism through which they can apply pressure because the sight of a critical Labour Party, albeit one incapable of oppositionalism only constructive debate, is deemed to be a vote-loser. There may have been a Big Conversation (following in the wake of the commercial hits the *Big Breakfast* and *Big Brother*) which got a huge response (so big that of the 30,000 odd responses few were read and even fewer responded to) but one-off, top-down initiatives controlled by the centre, however well meant, are insufficient – dialogue and accountability have to become culturally and organisationally systemic.

Ultimately, leaders must be held to account. Political party membership – especially for the left – is driven by the belief in a different society – one that is more equal and more democratic. If neither of these core values are preached or practiced strongly enough then membership is bound to wither on the vine.

Since the mad oppositionalism of the 1980s Labour has struggled with a strange psychosis. While it is true that divided parties help lose elections, the reality of fighting off Trotskyite entryists in the 1980s is very different from honest debates about substance and style today. Instead of raising their voices too many just walk away in silence. The danger now is not too much debate within Labour but too little. Discussion is an impulse the Party is losing. When senior Labour politicians argue that division will simply let the Tories in – the reality on the ground is that many too don't care. Like the electorate they see too little difference and are anyway voting for Greens or Liberal Democrats – anyone they deem to be vaguely progressive except New Labour. A healthy political party, especially one of the left, demands real internal debate and the issues and structures that make that possible. The Tories are out of office not because they are divided but because they can't fashion a place for themselves while Tony Blair and New Labour eats up all their political territory. This is the Catch 22 of Blairism – it wins Labour elections but on terms that denies the Party the ability to fulfil its purpose. It is too much power over too little principle. New Labour has become a party of the living dead – a movement broken by the compromises of being in power on terms dictated by our enemies.

Democracy in decline?

This is a difficult moment for democracy and it would be stupid to try to lay all the blame at New Labour's door. But given the moment, is New Labour making things better or worse? To answer this, first we have to understand something about the democratic moment before examining the problems of New Labour's substance and style.

Colin Crouch and others suggest that mass democracy has reached and passed its high point. They may well have a point. First the conditions for

mass democracy created by industrialisation are unwinding. Martin Jacques correctly links the rise of democratic society with the rise of the labour movements which “provided societies with real choices: instead of the logic of the market, it offered a different philosophy and a different kind of society” (*Guardian*, 22nd June 2004). Mass production and mass consumption, alongside organised labour and social democratic parties delivering new welfare states, meant that belief in the democratic system was high. This is unravelling but instead of being replaced by a new vision of the good society – one intrinsically linked to a new politics and new forms of collectivism the only alternative on offer is that of the individual consumer within an increasingly marketised and commercialised society. Again Jacques spells it out: “The decline of traditional social-democratic parties, as illustrated by New Labour, has meant the erosion of choice The result is that voting has often become less meaningful. Politics has moved on to singular ground: that of the market” (*Guardian* 22nd June 2004).

Second, the end of the cold war which signalled not just the collapse of ‘socialism’ in the East but the retreat of social democracy in the West means that liberal democracy, that is a very limited conception of democracy and accountability, is now judged on its own terms and is being found wanting. Before the fall of the Wall in 1989, neo-liberalism was defined by what it stood against and was galvanised by such opposition. Without this fear factor democracy in this limited form loses its grip. This has led some to talk about the new politics of fear (such as Adam Curtice in his recent BBC2 series *The Power of Nightmares*) where global terror has taken the place of communism as the political glue which permits a limited democracy, pro-market form of politics to dominate. So liberal democracy is in crisis because it has won nationally and internationally – but victory is not the utopia many had believed it would be. Indeed, when the Wall came down it didn’t just destroy the barriers between East and West but between the state, civil society and the market across the world. Now there are no barriers protecting the public realm from the market – and we are paying the price.

This is not how it was supposed to be. The concept of social citizenship was meant to embed the institutions, cultures and practices of social democracy. Zygmunt Bauman writes that it was hoped:

“once personal security from oppression was achieved, people would come together to settle their common affairs by political action, and the result of the ever wider, in the end universal, participation in politics would be collectively guaranteed survival – security from poverty, from the bane of unemployment, from the inability to eke out daily existence ... once free, people would become politically concerned and active, and those people in turn would actively promote equality, justice, mutual care, brotherhood” (Bauman, 2004, p42)

The substance of democracy

Democracy, to have any meaning, has to be about competing visions of the good life and the good society – otherwise elections become merely the replacement of one set of managers, technocrats and administrators with another. If voting fails to change anything of significance then what is the point? The focus groups and polling figures show that this fact is not lost on people.

At every level of society it is increasingly the demands of the market that hold sway over the interests of the people – or rather the interests of the market have become synonymous with the interests of the people. Thomas Frank in *One Market Under God* traces the rise of market populism in the USA – with the market now viewed as the ultimate tool of democracy – with each individual ‘casting their vote’ all day everyday for the goods and services that matter to them. How could a formal representative democracy that is bureaucratic and statist, run by liberal elites, ever compete with the dynamism and complexity of the market? Government and the state is attacked as being too slow, cumbersome, inefficient and lacking in ‘responsiveness’. But the market doesn’t just eat up the space for democracy, it delegitimises it. The superiority of the market is then acclaimed by government and the public sector is opened up to the ‘remarkable efficiency’ of market forces and contestability. Either state functions are privatised

or gradually commercialised through contracting out, the formation of quasi-markets, the injection of private capital (both corporately through PPP and PFI or individual through initiatives like city academies). Where markets cannot be introduced the mechanisms of the market are reproduced through targets.

Overlaying all this politicians talk up the ethos of the market – citizens become consumers and choice becomes the meta-value for our society – despite the fact that choice in public services is at best an extremely problematic concept. Everywhere collective voice, which was already weak and undernourished – is replaced by atomised and competitive individualised choices.

At the global level markets dominate not just in the form of multi-national corporations but bodies such as the WTO and IMF whose *raison d'être* is the enforcement of market rules on both the global economy and national governments' public services which are opened up to competition and privatisation. Within this context the pressure is on to deregulate, to lower corporation tax, do nothing about unjustified rewards for failure in public companies or the growing gap between the rich and poor. At every stage the rules of the market are strengthened at the expense of democracy. National governments stand helplessly by as multi-national companies hold a gun to their head – 'support the free market or we invest and relocate elsewhere'. Re-location, re-location, re-location is the *sotto voce* battle cry of the globalisers. It is said that one British based global bank regularly announces they have no plans to move their global headquarters from the UK – that is enough of a reminder.

New Labour is visibly constrained by the dominant culture and practice of the market. Alan Finlayson and Stuart Hall have described it best. New Labour has inverted the historic goal of making people the masters of the market – now the goal is to make them the servants. This is done with good intentions although the consequences are debilitating for the left. New Labour does not believe the market nationally or globally can be confronted – only accommodated. So the meta-context of neo-liberalism is taken as given. But

unlike Thatcherism which saw only an authoritarian policing role for the state (the rest being rolled back to allow the market in) – New Labour recognised that to be competitive in a global economy, it required active supply side intervention in terms of education, training, transport and housing infrastructure. New Labour's goal is to equip everyone to succeed in a global economy. So it's not a continuation of Thatcherism, which didn't care who failed – but nor is it social democracy because it fails to confront the supremacy of the market. This is tricky ground to be in. Hall argues in his influential *Soundings* article that the role of spin is to permit a priority project – namely competing in a global economy – to run alongside the secondary project of keeping the Labour Party and trade union movement onside through limited social democratic concessions.

In part this 'double shuffle' is achieved by the magical mantra of 'economic efficiency and social justice'. The politics of the heart (on which Labour has always stood and often lost) is thus matched by the politics of the head (on which it is felt the Tories stood in the past and most often won). But the trick is just that – a trick. New Labour's sleight of hand wishes away the contradictions between capital and labour, the rich and the poor through the argument that social justice is delivered by economic efficiency, i.e. through jobs not welfare provision. Thus the role of the state is not to deliver welfare but employability because employability is the only route to economic success and therefore, it is argued, social justice. But the place of politics and therefore democracy are massively diminished if government becomes merely the hand-maiden for the global economy. Once the supremacy of the market is accepted, then its imperatives always ride roughshod over the public realm and democracy.

The one area where New Labour promised a substantial shift was the politics of 'community'. The notion of community was once a continuous thread through speeches and articles by Tony Blair. It was a point of differentiation with the Tories and a link to Labour's social democratic past. But the politics of community have not been put into practice in any consistent or coherent fashion. Community has not

become the guiding light of this government. Again, there have been good initiatives like Sure Start and the New Deal for Communities. But the effect is patchy and the politics of flexible labour markets dominate.

Christopher Pierson explains clearly the New Labour strategy based on a more assertive globalised capitalism. He writes:

“this is just a restatement of the structural dependency thesis: that social democratic governments committed to legal constitutional methods and economic growth must attend to the interests of mobile capital, even when these clash with what appear to be the immediate needs of social democracy’s principle electoral constituency. But there is also a lingering political concern that a labour movement which can frighten but not deliver is liable to find its gains eroded by populist politicians of the right” (Pierson, 2001, p58).

Tellingly for New Labour Pierson goes on:

“In the end this shades over in to the argument that it is better for social democratic forces to give capital what it wants than to have the same goods delivered by a party of the right. The problem with this logic is that it appears to give licence to ‘social democratic’ politicians to pursue almost any political agenda, however damaging to the interests of its supporters, on the grounds that the alternative (right-wing policies delivered by right-wing parties) would be worse” (Pierson, 2001, p58).

If market-based efficiency becomes the only measure of ‘success’ then governments can’t help themselves but apply the rules of the market to the public sphere. But the efficacy of the market is based on closing down the space between producers and consumers so that signals between the two are easily, quickly and cheaply communicated in terms of supply and demand. The lesson is simple – that mediating organisations are prone to inefficiency because they ‘distort’ and ‘confuse’ the message from the individual to the producer. Democracy and the organs of democracy, trade unions, local government, mutuals, co-operatives, voluntary associations even political parties are messy, awkward, time-consuming, difficult and ridden by compromise, consensus and conflict – they should therefore be stripped out in the name of global

competitive efficiency and therefore bizarrely in the name of social justice. If the ‘agora’ was the ancient Greek term for the space where citizens came together to debate, discuss and decide the shape of their society democratically then New Labour exhibits what Zygmunt Bauman calls a strange agoraphobia – a fear of public discourse and deliberation.

Without democratic or representative mediating organisations between it and the public at large, without a rich civil society, New Labour starves itself of any sense of agency, of groups and forces that will be the advance guard for a different type of society. Ironically Thatcherism had an institutional sense of politics. It created advocates through home owners and share owners and undermined the advocates of the left – most importantly the unions and local government. Tony Blair once spoke of taking on the ‘forces of conservatism’ but if time has shown anything it is that his only target was in fact the ‘conservative Left’. New Labour’s sole source of agency is technocratic public sector managerialism that attempts to ape as far as possible the ethos of the market.

The attempt to link economic efficiency and social justice places our democracy under siege. Like most social constructs if it is not going forward and expanding our democracy is contracting. This is because its nemesis, capitalism, is an incredibly dynamic force. Its job, its reason for existence is to make a profit. Like the killer shark it does this ruthlessly and with a single-minded purpose for the very good reason it can do nothing else. Capitalism doesn’t have a conscience it just brilliantly creates and recreates itself to become more profitable. It is both destructive and creative in this purpose. As Karl Marx said ‘all that is solid melts into air’. Without barriers, without constraint, the market will always search for new spaces to make money. This is the process of commodification: turning goods and services that weren’t tradable into goods and services that are. Not only does capitalism create new wants though design innovation, marketing and advertising, it is also compelled to commodify the non-market – the public sector and public realm. In doing this it denies the space for collective and

democratic decision making – because as goods and services become commoditised people make decisions as individuals. What is more, the ‘logic of the market’ dictates that unless a producer cuts costs and instils more productive machines first, they will go out of business because someone else certainly will. It is competition that makes markets dynamic – but it is competition that creates losers, recognises no other values than ‘winning’ and creates a race to the bottom in terms of employment conditions.

Again, this is not to argue against markets per se. Market mechanisms do empower people by lowering costs and providing choice and diversity. In many ways markets can and do make our lives better and more rewarding. And in a global economy we do need to be economically efficient. The great breakthrough of New Labour was the recognition that in a global economy left governments had to take an interest in successful wealth creation in a way that Labour hadn’t before. But its conversion to the sensible and bounded role of the market went too far. In its eagerness to drop the baggage of ‘old Labour’ it embraced too fully the virtues of the market – adopting a private sector good, public sector bad mentality. The danger now is the development of a mono-culture where only the values, culture, processes and institutions of the market dominate over society.

The mantra of economic efficiency and social justice pretends there is a win-win formula for the left – that it can be pro-business and pro-equality at no cost. As Nick Cohen writes, “market democracies are eating themselves. You can have modern capitalism or you can have modern democracy but it is becoming ever more difficult to have both” (*Observer*, 18th July, 2004). Tom Bentley of Demos makes a similar point: “today’s politicians are engaged in an attempt to humanise the systems which neo-liberalism left behind. They are trying to do this without questioning the basic structures of market-based competition and economic rationalism” (Bentley, 2001).

The irony is that as government withdraws from regulation of the economy it has to intervene to try and put right the omissions and consequences of this withdrawal. By freeing the market still further and

allowing its boundaries to seep into the public sector then government has to pick up the bills of market failure, of externalities the market refuses to recognise and act as a safety net for the inevitable losers of market forces. When economic efficiency becomes the driver of social justice then government feels able and willing to intervene in peoples lives – in part to ensure improved employability. Smoking, eating, drinking, social behaviour and parenting all become, in part at least, economic issues. This is not to say that intervention is necessarily wrong – it is to argue that we need an honest discussion about the balance between social needs and markets needs. Instead of a clear distinction between government and non-government action, between regulated markets and a public welfare state, the boundaries are being blurred. Nothing is Political but everything is political. The role of the state can therefore extend even if there is no ideological purpose – no grand ambition other than economic efficiency. No wonder people in the focus groups and more widely are confused and wonder what their increased taxes are being spent on.

If publicly provided goods and services are only offered on the basis of a utilitarian instrumentalism (the direct and personal benefit they bring) then the whole ethical case for a public realm is undermined. If we only ask to be judged on instrumental and not intrinsic grounds then what happens when we fail the test? As there is nothing else to fall back on it is likely that people then give up on the whole notion of collectivism and therefore any sense of a democratic society and fall back on the market as the arbiter of provision. In his book *Market Driven Politics* Colin Leys says “New Labour hope only for customer loyalty, i.e. conditional loyalty based on performance, not the more enduring kind of political loyalty that comes from shared beliefs and solidarity” (Leys, 2001).

If New Labour allows this to happen then it will simply be repeating the mistakes of the past as captured in books like David Marquand’s *Unprincipled Society*. Here the case was made with great clarity and force for the moral, ethic and intrinsic value of collective social provision. The benefit the citizen gets from being served in the NHS as opposed to private care is that as soon as

the patient walks through a hospital or GP's door they know they are being treated primarily on the basis of their need – not on the basis of profit maximisation. They benefit too from knowing that the service is only based on collective provision – that social care in many instances provides better standards than individual insurance. Using collective provision makes us feel good about ourselves, our society and our fellow human beings.

The danger of a market mono-culture is not just one posed to the public domain and therefore democracy. It goes much deeper and is the reason why social democrats need to act. The domination of market forces and values over social forces and values means that the left is surrendering the very notion of what constitutes the good life and the good society to the right. Today in Britain there is very little sense of what a social, economic or cultural alternative to the market could look like. Such is the dominance of consumerism that increasingly it is through consumption that we form our identities. Increasingly we are what we buy and the value of goods and services is not necessarily found in their instrumental worth (is another new shirt really needed?) but in their intrinsic worth – as a signal or communicator of what we want to say about ourselves. Freedom in today's consumer society is defined by choice in the market place in an endless but ultimately unsatisfying search for fulfilment. The market has us on a treadmill of unsatisfied desires but we keep on purchasing in the hope of self-fulfilment because the hope of collective self-fulfilment is denied to us. We know this is an empty promise but there is no other way to express our identity or sense of self. The bigger and more meaningful job of developing a sense of self by creating and recreating our social world given the miserable state of our politics and our democracy just doesn't feel possible. The threat then is not just the zero-sum relationship between dominant markets and an ever weakening democracy but the extinguished hope that there is any type of alternative to turbo-consumerism.

How to explain New Labour's strategy?

Given the mood amongst the group of swing voters interviewed for these focus groups the question has

to be asked: why has New Labour been so cautious? There was clearly a mood for change in 1997 and a collective sense of relief that it had happened. Why then wasn't this political capital spent more ambitiously? In the run-up to the 1997 election New Labour, at one level at least, was incredibly careful in terms of creating limited expectations. The key promises were restricted to the five pledges – promises that were deemed doable and crucially did not require huge resources to make them happen – resources that had effectively been ruled out through the commitment not to raise tax and adherence to tight Tory spending plans. But on another level the Party appealed to the mood for change – it promised not just New Labour but a 'New Britain'. It was 'a new dawn' in the words of Tony Blair. But the New Labour project was always based on the assumption that Britain is a 'conservative country'. However, the public mood was not for adjustment to the Thatcherite agenda but a much more decisive shift away from it. People wanted to see a transformation of the NHS and education. Opinion polls have shown that despite Labour's promise not to increase tax, there was a presumption that they would. People voted New Labour thinking they would break their promise on tax. The extent of the landslide was unexpected – but it was a landslide. Instead of taking strength from the result New Labour governed as if its majority was on a knife edge. Like a pack of dominoes, if one seat fell then – the rationale seemed to suggest – they all would. The landslide became a constraint, not a source of liberation.

The Party leadership had the option to recognise that the centre of gravity of British politics had shifted and that the people had given them in one night two terms to make a real difference. Instead the response was the classic mantra 'we won as New Labour we will govern as New Labour'. The governing culture then and since has been akin to gatecrashers at a party – never feeling like they belonged, usurpers to power, always feeling like they will be found out and kicked out unless they behaved like the normal establishment party hosts. A landslide at elections in 1945 and 1979 led to a political transformation in the country. This was not to be the case for New Labour after 1997. The

first casualty was the promise on new politics in the form of a deal with Paddy Ashdown and the Liberal Democrats about jobs in the Cabinet and a referendum on electoral reform. But there were to be many more casualties. The crucial question is why did the most politically astute leaders in Labour's history misinterpret this earthquake? Was it accidental or was it wilful on the basis that they believed a more radical departure was not just unpopular (the actual result and these focus groups suggests otherwise) but politically undesirable. For New Labour is the context of neo-liberal domination of our political and economic value base, not just given, but desirable?

Taken at face value the political strategy of New Labour is now unquestionably to occupy the terrain of the Conservatives. By pushing them further to the right and with no electoral competition to Labour's left because of our first past the post voting system then Labour is virtually guaranteed electoral success. It is a simple but devastating electoral trick. No wonder that in a recent *Guardian* interview Michael Howard expressed his frustration with Blair continually parking his tanks on the Tory's lawn. The strategy was exemplified in the last Queen's Speech in which plans for crime and security – the one area on which the Tories had a poll lead – dominated Labour's pre-election agenda. Andrew Rawnsley, the well informed *Observer* columnist, put it succinctly: "Tony Blair takes the view that the best way to stop a Tory government reversing his legacy is to make it as unlikely as possible that there will be a Tory government" (*Observer*, 28th November 2004). The fundamental problem with the strategy is that political differences are eroded and therefore democracy becomes increasingly meaningless as all the parties fight on the same terrain – who can make the public sector most like the private sector and who can address a questionable climate of fear over terrorism and crime?

In an article for *Progress* magazine John Curtice the psephologist sums up the dilemma facing a democracy worthy of the name "All that divides the parties is their relative ability to manage capitalism". And Curtice goes on:

"the key to the future of turnout in Britain depends not so much on whether voters change but rather whether

parties do. At present at least, there seems no reason why 70 percent plus turnouts should not be registered once more at general elections. But whether they are or not depends on whether the Conservative Party (or else an alternative opposition party) becomes electorally competitive once more and whether a bigger ideological gap opens up between the parties than has been the case in the recent past...But as well as perhaps being unwelcome to many inside the Labour Party, neither development can be guaranteed. For many commentators, New Labour's move to the centre is a reflection of the reality that in a post-communist, globalised world there are no big choices left to make any more about what kind of society and economy we want to have. All that divides the parties is their relative ability to manage capitalism. Meanwhile, there is certainly no law of politics that says that the Conservatives must recover. Britain may perhaps for all practical purposes have become a one-party state. But if it has, then we should not expect many voters to think that voting is worth the effort, no matter how easy the internet might make it to do so in future."

Noam Chomsky has said "If you act like there is no possibility of change, you guarantee that there will be no change" (quoted in Richard Swift, 2002, p117).

The style of our democracy: Labour, New Labour and Labourism

If the substance of our democracy is failing many crucial tests – then what of the style? Here the problem of New Labour is not that it has modernised too much – but not enough. The history of the Labour Party is the history of 'Labourism'. This is the creed that controls from the top-down and the centre out, that arrogantly decrees that 'socialism is what Labour governments do'. In its New Labour form this has become the politics of 'what works'. It is statist, elitist, tribalist and paternalistic. Its essential view is that the 'ordinary' person cannot be trusted to do what is best for them – only a Labour government knows what's best. Labourism sees only one Party, one history and one future. Democracy for this dominant Labourist tradition became simply a means to an end and was never regarded as an end in itself.

New Labour has updated Labourism but has failed to break free from its confines. Alongside spin

this *New Labourism* is founded on the increased centralisation of power – in particular around the office of the Prime Minister as the likes of Lord Butler have testified. New Labourism has overseen the effective death of Cabinet government and the Parliamentary Labour Party as competing centres of power. Along with them Labour’s ‘ruling’ National Executive Committee and ‘sovereign’ Annual Conference have been marginalised. The powers of the Executive are now seriously out of balance. Greater formal powers are mixed with an informal operational culture. The trade unions are largely excluded and the business community is increasingly included. Through management consultants, PFI, PPP and the creation of public interest companies Government takes on the form it most admires – that of the modern business corporation. Task forces, targets, czars and zones bubble up and out. But as Trevor Smith has argued: “They remain outside any constitutional control” (Smith, T, 2003). Despite devolution, New Labour has taken the strong state model of Labourism and indeed Thatcherism and wielded it for its own ends. In its adherence to corporatism *Old Labourism* at least recognised the tri-partite legitimacy of the unions and business in national decision making. New Labour has dropped the unions and deals with business interests informally.

The British left were not always wedded to Labourism. The foundation of the labour movement and indeed the Party was first rooted in the self-help traditions of mutualism, co-operatives, friendly societies and of course trade unions. These self-organising structures were informed by the democratic ethos derived from the likes of the Chartists. This was the age when progressives of the social and liberal tradition were united – before the advent of statism.

But the times were against a liberal socialism. The driving culture of the day was towards centralism as mass production in the shape of Fordism became the dominant economic model. If the economic base drives the super-structure, as Marx suggested, then it is no surprise that centralism also became the dominant political trend. The Labour Party was fashioned in the era of Leninism and Fabianism. The

former was revolutionary, the later gradualist – but both political creeds shared a mistrust of the ordinary citizen and therefore took a vanguardist approach to leadership. Indeed, Labour’s approach to governance has rightly been called ‘parliamentary Leninism’. The abiding social ethos of this age was deference – the belief that some people did know better and were born to rule. In a deferential society people ‘knew their place’ and would take orders from above. All of this lent itself strongly to a command and control view of politics.

Politics went on a century-long detour in centralism and Labour has largely continued in that vein. Even where New Labour has decentralised to Scotland, Wales and London it has tried (and failed) to exert political control from the centre. This command and control model of politics is made worse by New Labour’s paranoia that no one else could possibly understand the ‘project’ outside a small band of true believers – so no one else could be trusted. Control was therefore even more centralised around 10 Downing Street. This over-mighty central state has also been a driver of the commercialisation of the state – as greater power in the centre has facilitated the increased involvement of the private sector. So centralism denies the space locally for democratic input and facilitates the crowding out of the public sector by private interest at the heart of Whitehall.

But the economic base that spawned Labourism is now breaking down as production becomes decentred, more complex and flexible. The new era is defined by the end of deference and an urge towards self-actualisation. People rightly want to become the masters of their own lives. The issue is how? So far new times have not led to new politics. We live with the political culture, practice and organisation of the industrial age – we are still doing steam-age politics in a digital, decentred and less deferential world. If politics denies the opportunity to become a full and active citizen then consumerism becomes the only stage on which a sense of self identity and self-creation can be practiced. The problem of substance has therefore been exacerbated by the problems of style.

Labourism is underpinned by Britain’s adversarial culture of electoral politics and the

voting system in turn bolsters the corrosion of our democracy. Adversarialism in a winners takes all first past the post (FPTP) voting system plays against pluralism and the building of a progressive consensus based on a deeper democratic relationship between citizen and state. New Labour has won huge majorities on just above 40% of the vote and does so by targeting a few swing voters in a handful of swing seats (in 2001 New Labour won 64% of seats based on 42% votes (source: Mori). Britain's electoral system is subject to the whim of no more than 100,000 'middle England' voters in a few swing seats who will switch to whichever party offers them the best deal. For everyone else their vote simply doesn't count and neither therefore do their views. Not only does this mean pandering to a limited group's vested interests (and therefore limiting Party radicalism) but encourages the further centralisation of the campaigning apparatus of the Party and therefore little need for troublesome opinionated troops on the ground.

New Labour likes FPTP because it stops electoral competition from the left as there is no space for new parties to develop. Ideology-free politics under FPTP leads to a fight in the gutter between the two big parties. Differences between the parties are increasingly based on personality and therefore on the destruction of opponents – the triumph of fear over hope. The result being that more and more voters are turned off by the whole show.

The very notion of what constitutes 'strong government' must now be questioned. Despite two huge majorities New Labour has been buffeted not by its own troops but the outside world. Big business, the corporate media and pressure groups like the hunting lobby have called many of the shots. Even a big parliamentary vanguard, seem to find it impossible to impose their will. That is because the assumptions of Labourism – of command and control based on centralism and deference – no longer hold. In new times strong government has to be based on 'soft' power – of honouring pluralism, winning debate, building consensus and making compromises. Those compromises have to be negotiated in the open. A democratic left must now

contest what it means to 'win an election' on 40% of the vote when turnout is only 59%.

New Labour is in many regards simply a warmed-up version of Old Labour – but a version stripped of any ideological clarity. A thin veneer of democratic modernisation has been glued to the surface but underneath the same creed of Labourism drives the project. Yes there are debates about a new localism and some new structures such as foundation hospitals have been put in place. But the motivation for the latter was the introduction of competitive market forces in the health system – not a new model of democracy. We are left with the worst of all worlds – marketisation dressed up by a botched attempt at new politics. The New Labour debate on governance and democracy is neither coherent nor consistent. The essential model remains the same – command and control. Nothing much has changed since Beatrice Webb wrote in the sexist vernacular of her day that "We have little faith in the average sensual man. We do not believe that he can do much more than describe his grievances, we do not think he can prescribe his remedies"

An instrumental view of democracy which dominates the practice of Labourism, and which inhabits the DNA of New Labour leads to the regular debasement of democracy. Over the last seven years this includes:

- The appearance that honours can be bought (some big Labour donors have subsequently received peerages or other honours)
- Corruption in postal voting (widespread allegations of fraud have been reported by the Electoral Commission, as a technocratic fix for falling turnout has been pushed too fast)
- By-election victories based on the character destruction of opponents rather than the merits of New Labour's candidate or campaign (Hartlepool was a recent example where an interesting attempt by the Liberal Democrat candidate to use a web blog was savagely used against her – the result being more safety first and negative campaigns that act as a turn off)
- The eviction of Ken Livingstone from Labour by undemocratic means but then his readmittance by equally undemocratic means

- The establishment of the Welsh Assembly and then the attempt to fix from London who the First Minister should be
- Ignoring Labour Party Conference votes (what is the point of this sham if no notice is taken of votes won, like that on housing this year?)
- Policies like tuition fees or foundation hospitals that are never debated or discussed but are imposed on MPs and the Labour Party
- The Whipping of MPs and increased Prime Ministerial patronage that maximise the ‘payroll’ vote and reduces the space for real debate and discussion
- Democratic experiments like elected majors and regional assemblies that are never given any real teeth and botched reforms like the House of Lords
- Promises made on referendums for electoral reform and a single currency that have been broken
- The fact that Tony Blair went out of his way to persuade the country to back the war in Iraq before troops were committed then lost the debate but went ahead anyway
- The sight of millions marching against the invasion of Iraq only to be totally ignored

In all these cases there may have been a strong pragmatic argument for the actions taken – to win a vote, to get the right person elected etc. But every time democracy is treated as a means to an end – rather than an end in itself – then bit by bit democracy dies. New Labour came to rescue the modern state but it chose the wrong mechanisms of governance. It made a pact with the devil over centralisation to try and provide quick-win public sector delivery successes. It’s not that people are apathetic rather centralised steam-age politics gives them no voice and little hope. New Labour has played too fast and too loose with democracy. There are no shortcuts to building a progressive consensus and every time democracy is cheated, then the prospects for progress decline with it.

If New Labour has such a disparaging view of democracy then what explains new democratic institutions like the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament? The truth is that it’s hard to say. Rumours have long circulated that some in New Labour’s

leadership would have liked to ditch the commitment to devolution but there wasn’t time in the run up to the election in 1997. What is clear is the point made by David Marquand, that if Blair’s ambition is to turn New Labour into a dominant party on the lines of the interwar Conservatives then aren’t his constitutional changes of devolution and therefore pluralism paradoxical (Marquand, 2000)? Why set up new competing centres of power when your every action suggests you don not believe in their legitimacy? At best New Labour has a contradictory attitude towards democracy – its record is ambiguous. The danger is that ambiguity is turning into clarity: from democracy as the solution to commercialisation as the solution.

Coping with diversity and Britishness

The debate on diversity versus solidarity has raged amongst progressives and has taken root in the politics of fear that has now become pervasive across the mainstream of British politics. But the reaction from New Labour has largely been to address the symptoms of these fears rather than the causes. The argument promulgated by David Goodhart is essentially dismal – a belief that only homogeneity can lead to citizenship and that only sameness will encourage us to share. For Goodhart coping with diversity is beyond politics. There are two responses to this argument.

First, what these fears reflect is a wider and deeper-rooted sense of insecurity brought about by the demands of unfettered market capitalism. Not only is insecurity exacerbated by labour market flexibility but the institutions on which social solidarity and our sense of Britishness are based are also undermined. There is no such thing as a job for life, there is no commitment to us and therefore none from us. In the competitive cost-cutting economic efficiency of the market it is not just jobs that go through outsourcing and downsizing but any notion of retirement security. Economic symbols of Britishness like Rolls Royce and the Mini are sold off to the highest overseas bidder. Meanwhile institutions like the BBC and the Royal Mail stumble into terminal decline as they desperately try to ape the efficiency of the market to appease their political masters. And the state – the biggest symbol

of national sovereignty – retreats and offers less and less to cope with the threats and challenges of the global economy. What is the point of the state and therefore politics and democracy if it offers no protection from the ‘outside’? There is nothing and no one to cling onto. No certainty, nothing that is secure that we can rely on – only our ability to stand on our own two feet to compete in a global economy. No wonder this feels like a foreign land to the people in the focus groups.

Writing in the *Guardian* Gary Younge says of the complex relationship between migrants and domestic Western citizens:

“People come to the West looking for opportunity because opportunism, in the form of western capital, has gone to the developing world looking for them. If we want to manage migration, we should start by looking at fair trade and international aid. Building higher walls and slashing the welfare rights of migrants may offer temporary respite from the chaos we wreak beyond our borders. But it will do little to relieve the source of desperation that forces them to leave” (2004)

Jeremy Seabrook articulates the dereliction of duty of social democrats whose only goal is to make people the servants of the market by writing “We are present at the making of a new politics of globalisation, over which progressives have forfeited control” (2004). It is under these conditions that the BNP become the saviours of only one group of victims of neo-liberalism – the white working class of the industrialised north without jobs or hopes, while savagely exploiting the uprooted migrant victims of the same neo-liberalism abroad.

Second, our society has always faced the challenge of integration. It simply cannot be the case that we have reached the limits of our ability to deal with the tensions between diversity and solidarity or the belief that only white Anglo-Saxons can be social democrats. Rather, new forms of integration have to be established. In part this requires new forms of collectivism – ones that recognise and celebrate diversity over conformity. Of most importance is the role of democracy in enabling us to negotiate difference. The answer to the real tension experienced between diversity and solidarity is both the moral and mechanical reform of the state and the

public realm. The tensions can be effectively managed with better education, greater equality and investment in solidaristic institutions and symbols of Britishness we can all share and take pride in. If the old social democracy cannot cope with such diversity and an accommodation with neo-liberalism is the root cause of the problem, then the solution to the crisis of diversity has to lie in a new social democracy.

New Labour is an attempt to reconcile the tension between global opportunity and insecurity. Its prospects of success are not good if this is to be achieved by prioritising the demands of the market over society. There is an eternal ambiguity about the search for belonging alongside freedom. Bauman best describes the sense of anxiety caused by the liberation and insecurity of having no fixed home – whether that means literally the roof over your head, or a job, a pension or a relationship to other people or other institutions. Because everything now is so transient, so fluid, there are no demands or commitments made because none are given in return. If there is no loyalty to each other then there can be no loyalty to the state, the nation, the democracy or the body politic. Bauman writes:

“Individuals struggling with their life’s challenges and told to seek private remedies for socially produced problems cannot expect much assistance from the state. The reduced powers of the state do not promise much – and guarantee even less. A rational person would no longer trust the state to provide all that is needed in the case of unemployment, illness or old age, to assure decent healthcare or proper education for children. Above all, a rational person would not expect the state to protect its subjects from the blows falling seemingly at random from the uncontrolled and poorly understood play of global forces” (p44, 2004).

While it is always a ‘double shuffle’ the over-riding response of New Labour is to favour the flexibility of the market and advocate policies based on meritocracy. The state is there to help equip people to stand on their own two feet – but ultimately salvation can only come from within – from the individual and not from society. Against the backdrop of the constant change, upheaval, unpredictability, havoc and ruthless savagery of global markets it is little wonder that notions of

security, commitment and trust melt away. Insecurity cannot be solved by the individual.

A spiral of democratic decline and why democracy matters to the left

New times demand a new politics and the renewal of our democracy. New Labour, in riding the wave of public outrage against the Tories, held out the promise of something different and more relevant. But the opportunity has so far been missed. Instead a vicious cycle is at work. As trust in politicians declines so too does the ability and confidence of government to act; the less they act the less difference they make and in turn the less they are trusted. The result is not just that trust diminishes in politicians but the capacity for collective solutions to collective problems declines with it. The market becomes the only solution. The cycle then repeats itself.

Democracy cannot be allowed to die as long as New Labour wins every election on route to the cemetery where democracy is buried. Democracy matters to the left. Democracy and socialism are two sides of the same coin. Capitalism on the other hand, as China is showing, has no need of democracy.

Democracy is the bridge between diversity, liberty and greater equality. The tensions between difference and equality create a political paradox – but democracy is the mechanism by which we continually try to square this circle. Democracy is the glue in our social fabric. Greater equality can no longer be delivered from above through a system of central tax and benefit transfers. The gap between the rich and poor is growing under a New Labour government – a fact which defies the left's reason for existence. Official figures published recently show that the wealth of the super rich has doubled since New Labour came to power such that the top 1% increased their share of national income from 20% to 23% while the poorest 50% saw their share shrink from 7% to 5% (John Carvel, *Guardian*, 8th December 2004). From equality delivered through command and control we must shift to equality through pluralism, dialogue and participation. Pierson says “a social which is not democratic is not socialist” (Pierson, 2001, p24). The continuation of

poverty, in a rich society where wealth is openly flaunted and worshiped simply ‘proves’ to the poor that politicians don't care about them and democracy doesn't work and isn't worth engaging in.

The strong market weak democracy formulation tears away at the social contract and replaces it with commodified relationships. As the USA shows poor people don't participate so the system doesn't work for them while those who can buy their way out of dependency on public provision do so. Because deference is dying people will only pay tax for governments they trust and that are accountable. This is as it should be. But steam-age politics is hopelessly inadequate in this new age. Only a deeper democracy will see a substantial increase in the minimum wage to turn it into a living wage, only real democratic accountability will see an increase in the top rate of tax. Democracy is the only weapon that society can use to control the market.

Colin Crouch warns the left of the consequences of post-democracy:

“The welfare state gradually becomes residualised as something for the deserving poor rather than a range of universal rights of citizenship; trade unions exist on the margins of society; the role of the state as policeman and incarcerator returns to prominence; the wealth gap between rich and poor grows; taxation becomes less redistributive; politicians respond primarily to the concerns of a handful of business leaders whose special interests are allowed to be translated into public policy; the poor gradually cease to take any interest in the process whatsoever and do not even vote, returning voluntarily to the position they were forced to occupy in pre-democracy” (Crouch, 2004, p23)

The only response for the left is to ‘dare more democracy’.

Renewing our democracy: trusting the people

If the failings of our democracy are ones of substance and style they are the two places where the answers must be found. The solutions to the crisis will not be found in tweaks and changes at the margins of the democratic process. A thriving democracy must first be rooted in a politics of difference, of a competing clash of ideologies and visions of the good society. For the left that must entail the politics of transformation to a society where the interests of society take precedent over the interests of the market. But that can only happen if the left accepts the need for a new politics. Because the neat circumstances of progressive advance in a decentred and less deferential world is that the transformation of society can only happen with the willing participation of at least a majority of the people and that the nature of that transformed society is essentially built on democratic society. The goal of the left is not dull uniformity but true liberty – the ability of people to shape and reshape their world as they see fit. This is liberty as autonomy or self-management. This is freedom *to* fulfil our potential not freedom *from* fear or poverty. Greater equality becomes the means to achieve the greatest possible liberty for all. Democracy becomes means and ends and a return to the original ancient Greek meaning of the word demo (people) kratos (rule). Bernstein called socialism ‘organised liberalism’.

The biggest challenge to this liberal left in renewing democracy is not the reinvention of old democratic structures or even the invention of new ones – important as all that is, the challenge is to change the culture of our politics to a different conception of democracy and power. It must be about the final junking of Labourism and the embrace of pluralism – the recognition that there are competing, co-existing but equally valid centres

of power that need to be mediated through dialogue and deliberation. And that because these centres of power are dispersed and embedded in multiple sites it means that democracy must be able to cope with more complex negotiations, checks and balances. It is about rebuilding trust in collective decision-making and the political process by putting trust in the people to do things for themselves. This is the core of progressive politics – the belief that given the time and the resource ‘ordinary’ people can do extra-ordinary things, that they are capable of managing their own lives.

It is this latent sense of democratic potential for self-help that Tom Paine describes in *The Rights of Man* when he writes that

“revolutions create genius and talent; but those events do no more than bring them forward. There is existing in man, a mass of sense lying in a dormant state, and which unless something excites it to action, will descend with him, in that condition, to the grave” (quoted in Wainwright).

A new politics and a renewed democracy is not just about saving representative democracy but deepening democracy to include a richer participatory strand of activism running alongside it. This would be going with the grain of developments in society. The Citizens Audit found that 73% claimed some form of non-electoral political activity. As Hilary Wainwright has argued,

“Representative institutions determine the principles and general direction of an elected government. The process of participatory democracy provide ways in which the people can play a further decisive role in the detailed elaboration of these principles... Participatory institutions generate self-confident expectations which lead to pressure – in the form of lobbying or

campaigning – being applied to the representatives elected bodies”.

Richard Swift argues that

“a policy of maximum self management could enrich and enliven, educate and animate democratic participation. Democracy would no longer feel like something remote monopolised by a few all purpose representatives, but be part of everyday life where citizens had regular interactions with those that were charged with carrying out their wishes” (Swift, 2002, p109).

Sure Start mums are a good beginning – but the commitment has to be coherent, consistent, resourced and focussed.

A deliberative democracy treats people like adults by making them aware of the consequences of their decisions and the trade-offs and compromises that have to be made.

But to embrace this new politics the democratic left has to make the case on the basis of a competing sense of the good society and the good life by challenging existing concepts such as efficiency and how it is measured.

In these new times it is not just the case that democracy is a moral answer to the crisis of progressivism but increasingly the public sector will only work with the active engagement of citizens through their democratic collective voice. So there is an instrumental case for renewing democracy on the basis that it can be more efficient. Or as Jackie Ashley succinctly put it in the *Guardian*, “Focus groups can answer questions, but they can’t run anything”. This is the case for seeing users of public services not as consumers but co-producers, who through the responsibilities they take on help ensure deliverability. So as parents we ensure our children attend school on time and do their homework. We don’t just use the power of exit, like a shopper and leave for the school next door.

If the democratic left don’t support the statist status quo and fear the consequences of commercialisation, then the onus is to define the culture and structures of a new collectivism. This new collectivism will in part be focussed on democratising the state – both nationally and locally. Principally this would demand the use of ‘voice’ over ‘exit’. New structures and cultures would be

created that embody the principles of co-production, subsidiarity, accountability, empowerment and participation based on social citizenship. Given what the focus groups said about only believing public sector ambassadors – then building coalitions of support becomes essential if faith in the political system is to be restored. But the new collectivism would also be built around the non-state. In terms of the public sector this would involve the genuine mutualisation of services (as opposed to the half-hearted Foundation Hospital experience) and outside the public sector community organisation would be encouraged. Taking a lead from initiatives like The East London Citizens Organization (TELCO) which brings together faith, trade union, and community groups to fight for policies such as a living wage, Labour nationally would encourage and facilitate genuine local self-help organisations.

But the issue of deepening democracy cannot just be focussed on the public realm. The democratic left, and the trade unions in particular, must make the case for economic democracy. After our love the most precious thing we can give is our labour. And yet many do so under the most undemocratic terms. Those with economic power dominate the political process, while those without it are subjugated as slaves rather than citizens. In a neo-liberal economy earning a living requires surrender to routinised, controlled, directed, authorised, and scrutinised life at least eight hours a day, five days a week. How can people become full citizens only when the bell rings at the end of the day? What hope is there for a deeper democracy if the majority of our time is taken up being passive cogs in the wheels of production?

The Labour Party itself must be renewed on the basis of democratic accountability. Party members, in all their cantankerous awkwardness must be seen as a source of strength – their energy and enthusiasm focussed not just on internal debate but turned outward locally to make progressive change in their local community, in a complimentary strand to the empowerment of people by central government. The vision of the Labour Party of the future is a cross between a political version of the Citizens Advice Bureau and the very best social

entrepreneurs, active in every community – helping people to sort out their problems, acting as agents for change in their locality – identifying where resources and help are most needed and providing expertise and guidance.

Finally, the revival of democracy will have to be based on what can be called ‘the politics of less’. For politics to matter it has to be about a different vision of the future than the turbo-consumerism that increasingly dominates western society. The left needs a competing sense of the ‘good life’ which paints a compelling picture of a different quality of life – one based more on family and friendship, community and co-operation, internationalism and sustainability. And crucially people need the physical and mental space to practice and seek benefit from the non-market values of equality, solidarity and freedom as autonomy. People need the option to get off the treadmill and find fulfilment through more democratic and collective means. But again the democratic left could be going with the grain of society. Research evidence clearly indicates the breakdown in the link between increased material wellbeing and happiness. We are getting richer but no happier. This provides an opportunity for the left not just to pose an alternative vision of the good life based on different measures to a marketised quality of life, but also to build a political coalition of redistribution between the cash rich but time poor and their alter egos – those with lots of time and little wealth.

The rationale for all these areas of reform is the same as it ever was for the social democratic left – to make people the masters of the market. It is the politics of social citizenship – in which, as Pierson argues, “political power and resources are to be used to countermand the actions of markets to the extent necessary to ensure that all members of a political community are able to operationalise (with equal effect or at least above some acceptable minimum) certain rights and capacities as citizens” (Pierson, 2001, p61-62).

Renewing democracy requires both moral and mechanical reform. At the moral level the democratic left must build a politics that is pluralistic, transparent, accountable, wherever

possible deliberative and based on the principle of subsidiarity i.e., that unless there is a strong counter reason (usually with regard to equality) that democratic institutions should be located as closely as possible to the people they represent. More than anything else democracy must be treated as an end in and of itself – something of its own intrinsic worth – and not simply a means to end.

In terms of mechanical reform, the following presents an extensive and ambitious basis for reform. Some of the proposals are clearly more feasible than others, but if our democracy is to be revived it must be on the basis of an ambitious sense of the possible. This list is neither exhaustive nor fully developed – but gives a strong flavour of the range of possible reforms.

Saving representative democracy

- A written constitution to limit the powers of the Executive and in particular the Prime Minister (the 2004 JRRT State of the Nation poll indicated that 80% of the population supported such a measure)
- Introduce a proportional voting system for the House of Commons (the 2004 JRRT State of the Nation poll indicated that 67% of the population supported such a measure)
- Direct elections to a Second Chamber
- Proportional voting system for local government (the 2004 JRRT State of the Nation poll indicated that 62% of the population supported such a measure) allied to new spending and revenue raising powers
- Increase the resources and independence of Parliamentary Select Committees by making the Chairs subject to parliamentary election
- Use direct democratic mechanisms to give citizens a tangible influence over legislation. Thinking on this should not be constrained to standard government initiated referendums. The use of the Popular Initiative should also be considered – the Initiative allows citizens to propose a legislative measure (statutory initiative) or a constitutional amendment (constitutional initiative) if they are able to submit a petition with the required number of citizen signatures (a significant

numerical hurdle would need to be passed to ensure that initiatives are not exploited by special interest groups). If enough signatures are gathered, a nationally binding ballot is then held.

- Cabinet appointments subjected to public hearings
- Limiting the numbers of whipped votes in each parliamentary session and therefore allowing more free votes
- The introduction of state funding of political parties (the 2004 JRRT State of the Nation poll indicated that 62% of the population supported such a measure) to go along side the continuing funding of Labour by the trade unions. Finance would be linked directly to votes cast.
- Democracy kiosks – a nationwide network of public kiosks to make voting, transactions with government and the receipt of information and advice
- Specialised elected councils – periodically elected bodies at different levels which provide specialist advice and representation for key social groups – the young, elderly, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities etc
- Investment in electronic support for representative democracy through online information on MPs' voting records, feeding voter preferences through to MPs and eventually electronic voting

Developing participatory democracy

Extend and institutionalise the use of deliberative processes to better articulate citizen's voices to decision makers and provide public spaces for citizens to come together to discuss issues of public concern. This has been a rich area of democratic innovation over the past two decades. Some key examples of deliberative techniques include:

Citizens' Juries: Citizens' juries bring together a small group of citizens to deliberate on a particular issue. Typically juries have the following features: 12-24 citizens selected randomly; citizens are paid a small honorarium for participating; over a period of 3 to 4 days citizens hear evidence, cross-examine selected experts and deliberate on the question(s); the event is run by an independent organisation and a facilitator ensures fair proceedings; at the end of the process citizens

produce recommendations in the form of a report; the sponsoring body (e.g. a public authority) is expected to respond to the recommendations.

Deliberative opinion polling: A random sample of around 250-500 citizens is selected; citizens complete an opinion poll at the beginning of the process; over 2 or 3 days citizens hear evidence from specialists and deliberate in small groups; at the end of the event, a second opinion poll is taken – the deliberative poll. This provides a structured space for citizens to come to preferences on the basis of informed deliberation rather than the 'top of the head' responses given to standard opinion polls

Large-scale deliberative meetings on the America Speaks model: Hosted with the agreement of a decision making body (e.g. Planning Authorities, Mayoral offices), 1,000-plus representative delegates spend a day discussing and debating a key issue and decide on a solution. Decision makers commit to either implementing the proposals arrived at and/or publicly explaining why they are choosing not to.

National Issues Forums: National Issues Forums (NIF), initiated by the Kettering Foundation in the USA, is 'a nonpartisan, nationwide network of locally sponsored public forums for the consideration of public policy issues'. Every year the NIF Institute identifies major issues of concern and develops 'issue books'. These issue books identify three or four options or approaches to the issue (never just two polar opposites) which provides a framework for deliberations and the investigation of conflicting options. Discussions are led by a trained moderator.

Other measures to deepen democracy could include:

- Extending and institutionalising the use of participatory budget making in local government
- Supporting bottom-up self-help community organisations – possibly through the use of citizens' vouchers that allow people to make payments to preferred organisations
- Recognising and supporting the legitimacy of extra-parliamentary activity
- Developing mandated-hypothecation as a means of connecting voters to revenue and spending decisions

Developing citizenship

- Universal citizenship – the granting of full democratic rights at birth with the parent exercising the vote until the child reaches the age of maturity
- The introduction of a Citizens Income – an unconditional, non-withdrawable income payable to each individual as a right of citizenship
- A 35-hour week – to ensure people have the time to be active citizens
- Citizenship mentors – volunteers to introduce migrants to the culture of British society and acquaint themselves with the new citizens' culture
- Civic service – a short period of compulsory civic duty for 17-23 year olds to help the development of community and public goods

Extending economic democracy

- Increased workers' control of enterprises through regulatory, tax and other incentives along with increased incentives for mutuals and co-operatives
- Government assistance for trade unions to take a leading role in pension fund democracy
- New laws to underpin a stakeholder approach to economic governance

Conclusions

British democracy faces a looming crisis of legitimisation. The early shockwaves of this crisis already hamstringing the left much more than the right – because the left needs democracy to work. Active state intervention in these new times requires a strong and vibrant democracy. The crisis manifests itself in failing turnout at the time of formal elections and the decline in membership of political parties. But as the report of the focus groups conducted for this pamphlet shows, the relationship between the people and their politicians is deteriorating rapidly – signalling not just a contented blip in democratic decline but an increasingly alarming trend of disaffection that may not be recoverable by conventional political means.

The crisis is exacerbated by two essential failings of the left, first to offer a substantial alternative to the neo-liberal hegemony and second to reject the old steam-age politics of Labourism. The consequence of these failings is that the democratic sphere is losing out to the market sphere as the site where people realise their ambitions and form their identities. As Zygmunt Bauman has argued, the political paradox of our age is that people feel incredibly empowered as consumers but increasingly disempowered as citizens. They can choose, it seems, whatever they want except a different type of society based on different values and different rules. What is more, this dangerous imbalance is not static – it is getting worse as the market eats into and contaminates the public realm in its relentless search for new sectors to make profit. As it does, the capability of democratic forces to ever regain their strength is reduced. As such the revival of democracy cannot be based just on democratic reforms. The left is in urgent need of an alternative political economy which provides the

wherewithal to enable people to strive to be the masters of markets.

The other urgent task, as Gordon Brown has recognised, is the rebuilding of a sense of Britishness and investment in the institutions of national identity. One aspect of this could be the development of a sense of constitutional patriotism – pride in our democracy and forms of governance. But the primary focus must be the recreation of the welfare state – not a welfarism that mimics the insecurity, chance and choice of the market – but a new collectivism of voice and loyalty. It must be universal and therefore universally adequate but responsive, efficient and where possible personalised. Alongside the welfare state institutions like the BBC should be cherished for their contribution to our sense of national identity rather than undermined for short-term political gain. But no social democratic politician worthy of the name should think that our sense of national identity can be protected while power is ceded by society to the free market. Outsourcing, relocation, downsizing and all the other aspects of flexible labour markets simply won't permit it. There can be no papering over the cracks of neo-liberalism. Social democracy will simply not take root in the thin social soil of competitive markets.

New Labour has left us in a dangerous halfway house – some new institutions and practices but no new politics. This could be the worst of all worlds – the perception that new politics has been tried and failed when the reality is that it hasn't been tried at all. What is more, New Labour is actively encouraging the commercialisation of many aspects of the public sector like the creation of a market in higher education through the introduction of top-up fees.

The dismal consumerisation of politics was reflected in the focus groups. The tragic thing about the people who attended the groups, despite their obvious enthusiasm for potential engagement, was the lack of responsibility they wanted to take for themselves. Their relationship with government was like that of a consumer in a shop – everything is about rights – nothing is about responsibility because the culture of our politics is increasingly the culture of shopping. They blame others and threaten only exit from the whole political system as you would a poorly performing retailer.

Colin Crouch argues that there are two paths forward: autonomous organisation on the basis of vested interest and the mobilisation of pressure (what he calls positive citizenship); or there is the negative activism of blame and complaint (the use of consumerised exit). Both are important but the issue for the democratic left is, which one will dominate?

What is more certain is the latent desire within people to be the masters of their own destiny. Such a desire is reflected in the regular democratic outbreaks from below that we witness, whether they are protests against fuel taxes, the war in Iraq, hunting ban protests, Fathers for Justice or more localised campaigns. For good or bad, demonstrations, bloggers and whistleblowers are a feature of our society. This spontaneity is encouraging but the left cannot rely on sporadic outbreaks. Democracy has to be institutionalised and centred and for a party of the left presented as part of a coherent programme of progressive reform – not just a series of even well-intentioned single issues.

Some on the left fear that given their head the population will vote not to be progressive – this is a risk. But it is a risk the left must take. Labour is in desperate need of renewal. With little or no sense of ideological direction that can shape and focus priorities, a likely third term feels more like a prison sentence than a springboard to transform our nation and shift the centre of politics decisively to the left. Left renewal can only be based on daring more democracy.

All politics is based on a gamble. New Labour's was this – that active state intervention to enable Britain to thrive in a global economy is as good as it

gets and this could be achieved through a combination of centralism, commercialism and spin. As the days, months and years go by this gamble feels less and less like paying off. Without an ideological sense of purpose it is impossible to mobilise even your own troops, let alone the wider public to support a progressive consensus that can make lasting change happen. New Labour's gamble is also that the Tories will never get back into power – for if they do there will no collectivist culture of institutions for the left to shield behind. The bleak years in opposition in the 1980s will feel like a picnic.

The democratic left poses its own gamble – that if people are trusted they can be progressive and can become the masters of their own destiny. It is a gamble that believes in the intrinsic value of democracy as an end – not just as a means to power. It is gamble to endlessly try and resolve the inherent tension between diversity and equality, freedom and security and between a politics that is about listening as well as leading. Richard Swift says democracy is always unfinished business but 'it is our business'.

New Labour did hold out the promise of a new politics. In Opposition Tony Blair said that "the democratic impulse needs to be strengthened to enable citizens to share in the decision-making that affects them". In the third term and beyond Labour has to rise to that challenge – otherwise, given the outcome of these focus groups, the left will reap a backlash of political anger that will debilitate its cause for a generation. We are on a democratic journey but it is possible to go backwards even while maintaining a facade of democratic practice.

Some senior politicians appear to be waking up to the threat that we face. Gordon Brown has made a series of speeches on the theme of a progressive consensus. Brown appears to be aware that a fundamental change is happening in the relationship between 'leaders' and 'led'. First, he acknowledges that meaningful change requires a coalition of forces inside and outside parliament – the example he uses is the successful third world debt campaign Jubilee 2000. Second, he argues that the issue of trust could be addressed by politicians being seen to give power away. He cites the example of interest rate decisions

being given to the independent Monetary Policy Committee – which showed that Labour was able to take a long-term decision in the interests of the country by curtailing the power of central government. These measures have built trust in Labour’s management of the economy. Brown suggest that the same lessons could be applied to democracy i.e. give power away and be seen to act in the interests of the country not just the Labour Party. How such thinking might be applied is not yet clear. But one logical conclusion would be to hand back real powers to local government. What is certainly the case is that the people will only trust the politicians when the politicians decide they can and must trust the people. This is the test of Brown’s credentials to build a *progressive consensus*. The new politics must be based on power sharing between ‘leaders’ and ‘led’. That means sharing not just the rights but the responsibilities of democracy – it means sharing the problems and being honest about the limitations of what politicians can do.

Tony Blair is often accused of being too like Mrs Thatcher. In one sense at least they are very different. One of the biggest frustrations with New Labour is that it refuses to commit to any project with a sense of consistency and purpose (except perhaps Iraq). Education, Europe, Africa, The Middle East, the environment, all and more have been the overriding priority. In contrast it is often said that ask a civil servant under Mrs Thatcher what the answer was to any government problem and it was always the same – create a market. For Thatcher the means was the economy but the goal was highly ambitious – to shift the soul. She believed that people were naturally self-serving, possessive and individualistic – and her political aim was to build institutions and pursue policies that would encourage this belief. So the left’s big bet is not between New Labour’s limited view of democracy and a deeper pluralistic democracy but between right and left conceptions of human nature – between the politics of possessive individualism and social collectivism – for which the left response to any challenge must be to extend and deepen democracy.

David Marquand has described social democracy not as outcome, not as an end state but as a process.

To the democratic left process must be everything. As such the means become the ends – the politics of democratic self-governance. A hegemonic social democratic project will only be built by contesting and winning the battle for freedom – by defining real freedom not as freedom from or freedom within the constraints of the market but freedom to build our lives, our communities and our societies as we see fit – by doing it together. Democracy is the key to that dream. Long ago Bernstein argued that “Democracy is both means and ends. It is a weapon in the struggle for socialism, and it is the form in which socialism will be realised” (quoted in Pierson p24)

The truth is that it is not ‘democracy’ per se that is in crisis but democracy in its limited liberal form. Ultimately the answer to the crisis of democracy is not less democracy but a new politics of accountable representation and deeper participation.

There are two litmus tests of a progressive government – do they leave the country more equal and more democratic? The two are intrinsically linked and there is still time to succeed on both fronts. To do that the left must behave as if there is such thing as society and believe in people’s ability and willingness to manage their own lives. In 1973 Mori found that 60% of the population said that they were ‘very or fairly interested in politics’. By 2001 that figured had fallen – but only to 59%. The potential is still there. If we go back to the focus groups which are the inspiration for this pamphlet, the result of the hour and half these randomly selected swing voters spent together was a sense of relief that they could talk about their political concerns in their own terms and in their own way. You could see they enjoyed the process. Many said they would like to do more of it. They valued the experience. For a brief moment means and ends converged. Perhaps the risk of daring more democracy is not such a risk after all.

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Further reading

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The author would also recommend a subscription to *Renewal* – the Labour quarterly journal of politics. For further information on *Renewal* go to www.renewal.org.uk or contact the publishers Lawrence and Wishart at 99a Wallis Rd, London E9 5LN tel: 020 8533 2506

Useful contacts

Compass is an umbrella of organisations and individuals who believe in greater equality and democracy. Listed below are some of the organisations who have been involved with Compass or who think are operating in an interesting and complimentary space.

Active Citizens Transform (ACT)

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About Compass

Compass is the new democratic left pressure group whose goal is to debate, discuss and develop the ideas, vision and action needed to develop a more coherent and radical programme for a centre-left government.

Compass has been formed to offer a new path for democratic left politics. Its aim is to constructively re-politicise debate within the Labour Party and beyond. We seek to set out the terms of the debate with academics, thinkers, party activists, practitioners, policy-makers, elected representatives and those outside the Westminster system, building a wide alliance to achieve radical social change.

We organise regular events and conferences that provide the space to ambitiously discuss policy, we produce thought provoking discussion pamphlets and we encourage debate through online discussions on our website. We also campaign, take positions, and lead the debate on key issues facing the democratic left. By doing this we're developing a coherent and strong voice for those that believe in equality and democracy.

What is distinctive about Compass is that it is:

- An umbrella grouping of the progressive left whose sum is greater than its parts
- A strategic political voice – unlike think-tanks and single issue pressure groups Compass can and must develop a politically coherent position based on the values of democracy and equality
- An organising force – Compass recognises that ideas need to be organised for and will seek to recruit and encourage to be active a membership across the country to work in pursuit of greater equality and democracy

Compass is funded only by organisations and individuals that support its political aims of greater equality and democracy.

The central belief of Compass is that things will only change when people believe that they can and must make a difference themselves. In the words of Gandhi "Be the change you wish to see in the world".

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