

## David Blunkett takes up the issue of Labourism first raised in Bea Campbell's 'How the other half lives'.

### DAVID BLUNKETT: How the other half lives

The one thing which unites Thatcherites, radical Liberals and libertarian socialists, is their aversion to bureaucracy and 'state control'. What separates the democratic socialists from the other two is a rejection of the market place as a substitute for real participative democracy. What separates old fashioned 'Labourism' and democratic centralism from radical socialism is confidence in the people themselves - an understanding that without the mobilisation and commitment of people, the vanguard of politics can become either the frightening tyranny of state control or the paternalistic benevolence of social democracy which so easily leads to alienation and even well-meaning oppression.

Realisation is dawning in a number of quarters that what we are contemplating should not be a return to the past, a defence of what we once had, but a vision of the future, involving the use of socialist values in mapping out the new territory opening up before us with the development of micro technology and the second industrial revolution. This new, and in some ways frightening, prospect demands a re-examination of the absurd separation which so many people on the Left have made between productive

wealth creation and spending on essential services in the public, as opposed to the private arena.' This is not to deny that there are critical choices about our priorities in spending. It is to accept that democracy itself and not market economic forces, allows ordinary people the right to choose.

The rejection of wealth and privilege as a method of deciding the distribution of resources and control over our everyday lives, is the oldest and deepest root of the socialist tree, yet it is so little articulated in language which people can understand. Thatcher offers the prospect of everyone as 'a man of property' and manages an enormous mass appeal to those whose home ownership will give them no access to decision-making in the market place at all! But Thatcher does not simply link, in a twisted and grotesque way, freedom with the free-for-all of the jungle - she actually uses people's experience of community collective provision against those of us who advocate its extension. This is why the defence of local government is not simply about the protection of basic democratic rights or the defence of services and jobs. The battle is, in fact, about socialism in communities, re-examining both the nature and operation of the services provided collectively and also the relationship between democracy in service delivery and the industrial and economic life of the area. Those local authorities most under attack are the ones re-examining the way in which past achievements have stagnated, thereby providing no opportunity for people to genuinely control what is theirs. Authorities looking at how to decentralise services involve tenants in running their own housing, social service users in deciding what is good for them in day centres, homes or community facilities, or workers coming together with the support and resources of the community behind them, to form cooperatives in which democracy can be experienced rather than simply observed.

Mrs Thatcher understands that the inter-dependence of people who relate to each other and meet their needs through the accountable, responsive and sensitive operation of participative democracy, is the exact opposite of the self-interest and free-for-all of the market place. She knows that if a change in the way in which local government operates under democratic socialist control could be reflected in a 'bottom-up' approach for a future socialist government, then real commitment would exist to withstand the enormous external, as well as internal pressures on those turning the 'machinery of the state behind people rather than against them. But she understands all too clearly that

the dismemberment of the trade union movement, the operation of mass unemployment and the destruction of major traditional industries which formed part of the community in which they operated, change dramatically the political, as well as the social and economic outlook of those affected. In other words, the isolated, fragmented population, no longer experiencing relationships in forms of work which drew them together as a unified force to be reckoned with, reverts to individual economic 'factors' in the radically restructured society in which privatisation and private gain help to reverse the collective ethos. So defending what we have is not enough. We need to offer people a sight of the world that we would like to see - to change their experience of what we hold up as being a taste of the better world the pioneers dreamed of.

We need to understand more clearly than many of us have previously done the aspirations of millions of people to live their own lives, untroubled by what they see as the dead hand of bureaucratic interference. We need to create a society where people can enjoy the pleasures of human contact and use that as a strength to go outwards to make our world a caring place, where the community is the extension of more personal relationships. It is therefore not to reject the importance of particular interest groups and the vital need to provide the opportunity for real equality between people and avoid exploitation, but rather to see these struggles as part of the whole and not separate alliances to which we appeal in order to regain the lost electorate for the Left.

The appeal we offer is that of a civilised society with a chance of some control over the technological dream which could so easily become a nightmare; the chance for people to have a say in how their resources are used and to do so as interdependent and caring human beings; the chance of a society where we do not pretend that equality and justice can be separated from the operation of economic and political power in the world around us but which also recognises the part that individual relationships play in shaping the experience of all of us.

A socialist who never laughs, an activist who spends more time watching how others vote than persuading them which way to do so and the comrade who criticises more than he she constructively contributes, give little hope to a world yearning to turn theory into practice.

<sup>1</sup> See Fabian Pamphlet *Building from the Bottom* by David Blunkett and Geoff Green.