

VIEWPOINT

JAMES CURRAN Rationale for the Right

The last issue of *Marxism Today* contained another elegant restatement of the new realism thesis, by Stuart Hall. Yet his portrayal of Thatcherism as a successful ideology that has skilfully orchestrated popular discontents in a mobilising, populist idiom is difficult to reconcile with its record of *relative failure*. Thatcherism has not prevented the rise of the political centre, partly at the Conservative Party's expense. Indeed, the Conservative Party gained only 32% of the vote of the total electorate at the last general election - less even than under Douglas-Home in 1964 when the Right was scarcely at the peak of its populist form.

Hall's contention that Thatcherism has undermined 'the popular case for welfare

socialism' and 'displaced reformist politics' is also contradicted by extensive survey data. A recent survey report (*British Social Attitudes: the 1984 Report* edited by Roger Jowell and Colin Airey) reveals, for example, that the overwhelming majority of people oppose reduced spending on health and education (85%), oppose development of a two-tier health service (64%) and favour a *dirigiste*, reformist economic policy - government job creating, construction projects (89%), import controls (72%), price controls (70%) and a programme whose first priority is combating unemployment rather than inflation (69%). The same survey reveals, among other things, that Thatcherite talk of incentives has not diminished the view of the great majority (72%) that the gap between high and low incomes is too great. Even those who think that benefits are too high and discourage people from looking for work (35%) are outnumbered by those who think that benefits are too low and cause hardship (46%).

This study corresponds with numerous other surveys showing that commitment to the postwar settlement has remained remarkably resilient. Admittedly, this evidence needs to be analysed with care and circumspection as I have argued elsewhere (MT August 1983). But this is not the same as dismissing out of hand what Hall derisively calls 'the idiotic psephology which passes for political analysis these days'. A wealth of empirical data about public attitudes, indicating that Thatcherism has made significant but still only limited inroads, is a more reliable guide than one man's intuitive judgement, however insightful and eloquent.

Thatcherism is vulnerable because it is unsuccessful even in its own terms. The Conservative 1979 election manifesto promise 'to rebuild our economy' has been followed by the biggest industrial slump in over 60 years, with imports exceeding exports for the first time in recorded

history, and a plunging pound. The Chancellor's promised reduction in unemployment, officially scheduled for 1984, has yet to materialise. Yet, as time goes on, the contradictions inherent in Thatcherism, and in its social base, are likely to become more damagingly apparent.

Thatcherism only gives the appearance of populist success because of the weakness of the opposition it faces. Contributing to this weakness is the prevailing gloomy and enervating analysis of the Left's position and prospects. This is not to deny the validity of much of what Hobsbawm has argued on the subject. The contraction in the number of blue collar workers, the growth of consumer individualism and increasing trade union sectionalism have all contributed to the almost continuous decline of Labour's vote during the last thirty years, culminating in the present crisis in which the



anti-Thatcher vote is disastrously split.

But Hobsbawm's analysis is misleading in implying that structural changes within society produce corresponding changes in public consciousness. The Left in Austria (1979), France (1981) and Sweden (1982) won a higher percentage of the vote in the last five years than Labour won even in 1945, despite the fact that all three countries have been undergoing similar structural changes to those highlighted by Hobsbawm in Britain. While Labour's traditional base is declining, a number of countervailing social trends - notably the decline of social deference and patriarchal authority, the growth of the public sector and deepening class inequalities - provide favourable conditions for the Left to regroup and fight back.

But for this to happen, the Labour Party *does* need to change. Stuart Hall and others are wholly persuasive when they argue that the Left must build new social alliances, reconnect socialism to new social currents and experiences and, in the process, be ready to rethink some of our ideas in the light of past failures both here and abroad.

But this prescription is now being reworked in the context of the Labour Party's internal debate in a way that its advocates surely do not intend. A number of leading members of the Labour Party are currently arguing that the Party's public identification with the miners' strike should be limited because it is unpopular and is getting in the way of rebuilding the Labour Party as a popular front around less contentious and more promising issues. Ironically the Hobsbawm-Hall analysis of the balance of political forces has become a much quoted rationale justifying the Labour Party's cautious and not very effective drift to the right. The influential intervention of Eurocommunists in the affairs of the Labour Party thus seems to be having the opposite effect to that sought.