

## A NEW CENTRE OF GRAVITY

Suddenly, after years of its being dormant, touching only those directly affected or those on conference rostrums, leaving most either unconcerned or at best shame-faced, the issue which has lurked in waiting as the Government's key potential nemesis, is finally at the centre of political consciousness: unemployment.

That the issue will be *the* central battleground in the next general election is now clear. That, properly handled, it offers genuine scope for Labour to reassert itself, and that it offers the potential - perhaps already being realised - of throwing monetarism on to the defensive is clearer still. It's hard to see, otherwise, why the formation of the cross-party Employment Institute should have stirred government ministers to such immediate bursts of vitriol - though it's significant to note how quickly the line changed from outright opposition to a more warm response than might have been ex-

pected, as hardline attacks on the Institute drew the justifiably annoyed question: why shouldn't someone else have a view?

To some extent, all sides had become complacent on the issue: the bland concern of Tom King, the Employment Secretary, at each month's jobless figures was increasingly greeted with an equally formulaic response from Labour. In part, this torpor was shared by at least some of the unemployed themselves; easily one of the most puzzling statistics of the last election was that 25% of the unemployed voted for a return of Mrs Thatcher's government.

For too long it had been too easy for the Government; Labour and union leaders made tired-sounding speeches about unemployment as conference delegates shuffled their feet. Partly, even though the proportion unemployed has risen by 8% since the Government came to power, this was because it wasn't an issue, or at least not one that could be faced. Those in work kept their heads down, took pay increases mostly higher than the inflation rate, hoped and thought it wouldn't be them next, blanked off those who were put out of work: thank God I'm alright Jack.

But this was dangerous for both Labour and the Conservatives. For the Government,

because after seizing the intellectual initiative in politics in the mid-70s, the Right now looked as though it was running out of fresh ideas; for organised labour, because nothing practical was being done to offer support for the unemployed, or even to stop the haemorrhage away from its ranks which increasingly diminishes its value as a representative social force. Both sides seemed to have accepted that there really was no alternative.

Norman Willis, the TUC's general secretary, thinks there is some force in the idea that the year-long miners' strike - not about pay, not about conditions, but about jobs, about people-may have been cathartic: even after the violence, even after the lack of a ballot, the titanic fight of the strike forced jobs to the top of the political agenda.

Other factors there may have been too - the Government's populist-rooted sure-footedness starting to slip, on issues so close to home as student grants, for instance- but the strike's smashing through the fatalism that nothing could be done, that the issue couldn't even be raised, may have been vital.

Seizing the time, the formation of the Employment Institute was one response. Couched in formal terms in a charter for jobs, built on the wide-ranging support of 115

sponsors, including three former prime ministers, with three specific proposals as policies for immediate action (more investment in infrastructure, a cut in employers' national insurance contributions, a job guarantee for the long-term unemployed), the heart of it was as radical as the Thatcher government, and *in exactly the same terms*. changing attitudes, changing the way people had started to think about unemployment - and as well, changing government policy on it.

Grand though its ambitions may be, they have to some extent been dragged back by its sponsors, whose complexion allowed the initiative to be dismissed as 1960s time-warped thinking, and to be viewed with suspicion by Labour as an SDP front organisation.

Galvanising its emergence may have been (unfortunately for its own aims, if only in terms of its opposition), but it is far from alone. Across the spectrum of labour thinking, and activity, there is now a new-found confidence, a real belief that the tide has turned, a realistic judgement that despite the obstacles in terms of parliamentary seats to be taken, Labour could win the next election.

How frail this resurgence of optimism might be, or how long term a shift it implies,



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is not yet clear. But what is apparent is how extensive it now is, informing a series of interlocking initiatives at policy level in the labour movement that are coalescing to form a real policy alternative: Labour's successful launch of its impressive Jobs and Industry campaign; tentative steps towards a new compact between the party and the unions; a new, critical, vigour in Labour and TUC policy statements.

What looks like complacency again on the Government's part has helped provide the opportunity. Labour believes that Mr King's widely-attacked white paper on employment (not even consistent in its own terms: a sermon on micro adjustments to the labour market doesn't sit easily with an economic espousal of the governing value of market forces finding their own level) has shifted the political debate on this central issue in Labour's favour.

Intellectual thrusts like Labour's initiatives, or the Employment Institute, however forceful they are, may not look immediately as though they offer much hope to those without work now, without hope of a job soon; but they are signs - however hesitant, however flawed - that change may be in the air, and challenge to accepted thinking on unemployment is no longer beyond the pale.

Philip Bassett

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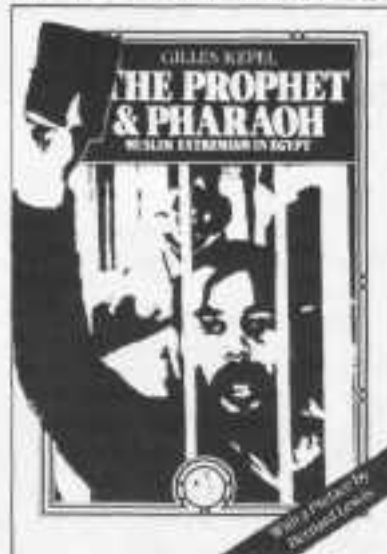
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