

When The Hardline Is Right

The gross excesses of the London Left are leading to a rejection of the new social agenda by the Labour leadership. **David Edgar** (below) argues that the baby should not be thrown out with the bathwater



In its coverage of Labour's great debate, the press paid more attention to the certainties of the hard Left at Chesterfield than it did to the mea culperly organised by the Fabians on London's South Bank (the conference's title - 'Beating the Blues' - could be described as just a mite over-optimistic). But in a sense the latter was more significant, and its lessons more disturbing. For if Chesterfield underlined the need for Labour's *perestroika*, then the South Bank emphasises its dangers and should serve as a warning that, in addition to having much ideological bathwater to dispose of, the Left also has some endangered babies to protect.

The Left's analysis of Labour's poor performance has concentrated on the credibility or otherwise of its economic, industrial and defence policies. But, as 'Beating the Blues' speakers made clear, the leadership's revisionist ambitions are by no means confined to

those matters. Indeed, for some, the prime target is the non-economic domestic agenda: the commitment to social movements like anti-racism, gay rights, green politics and feminism which it has taken so much effort and argument to insert into Labour's programme.

The reason why Labour's leadership has become so suspicious of the party's priorities on these questions (such as they are) was made clear in the conference session on Labour in London. Listening to the passionate *cris de coeur* of Islington leader Margaret Hodge and Greater London chair Glenys Thornton, it was obvious that in the capital the promotion of the social movement agenda has been effectively hijacked by hard-Left impossibilities. As a consequence, the sensible Left appears to have grown highly suspicious of many of the current demands of the social movements. As Margaret Hodge put it, the radical agenda for

women should no longer be about setting up women's committees in town halls, but rather about improving the provision of traditional municipal services in response to women's real social needs.

But while things may be that way in the metropolis, I have to say (and I'm by no means the first person to point out) that it don't look like that up here. In Birmingham, for instance, opposition to the women's and equal opportunities committees is not led by eager if sensible left-wingers, keen to implement a radical but practical egalitarian agenda, beyond the realms of mere rhetoric. There, the successful campaign against a viable equal rights bureaucracy was led not by the bright new Left but the dreary old Right, by white men who employ increasingly spurious electoral arguments to back up their case that Labour's programme should pander to their own prejudices.

In other words, in most of the country, the argument for playing down the social issues comes from the people it's always come from, the advocates of traditional, Tammany Hall, right-wing labourism. Such people are only sustained and abetted by a too-easy conflation of the Left's economic and social agenda, an over-easy lumping together of the supposedly damaging elements in Labour's perceived programme. For although there's no doubt that gay rights and anti-racism and aspects of the feminist programme are just as unpopular as resistance to council house sales and nationalisation, the reason why they are unpopular is not necessarily comparable at all.

For, surely, the problem with the Left's traditional economic agenda is that it has lost its traditional electoral base, that it no longer appears to address the reality of the social and industrial structure as it actually is. Whereas the new social movements have at least the potential to address an increasing proportion of the actual labour force as it develops in the real world. And not only are there more blacks and more women, proportionately, in work; there are also increasing numbers of both (and white men too) who do not live and work where they were born, but who are migrants of one sort or another, and who have thereby both the chance and the need to define themselves in terms of sexual, racial and cultural affinities rather than those of family, geography or even class.

The idea that the much maligned and satirised 'new social forces' might speak more forcefully than more traditional formations is not entirely a matter of conjecture. In fact, in recent times, these movements have had a significantly better track record than campaigns emanating from traditional, industrial organisations. The dramatic period of union militancy in the early 70s was successful but short-lived; whereas the achievements of single-

issue social movements are both considerable and consistent over three decades. From the victories of the civil rights movements of the 60s and the sexual liberation movements of the 70s, to the achievements of women against pit closures, the Greenham peace camp and the GLC (taking in small matters like abolishing hanging, stopping the 70s tour and helping to undermine the Vietnam war on the way), it has been campaigns that have articulated the aspirations of the social movements (or expressed their industrial or political demands in that vocabulary) which have chalked up the most significant achievements and the most lasting victories.

And it is clear, too, *why* those movements have been at the vanguard of the radical project: without exception, they have spoken not just with a political but also a cultural voice. From the CND dufflecoat and hippie kaftan, via Anti-Nazi League punkery (and badger) to Greenham, the socially-based movements have not just been about what people thought and said, but what they wore, and ate, and hummed along with, and did on their nights off. Speaking 'culturally' means to a certain extent speaking 'fashionably'; and while politics is not all about fashion, it's a fair bet that if a political movement expresses itself in song as well as slogan, then that movement probably reflects something in the present tense of the real world, that it is not based on an attempt to conjure a perfected vision of a perhaps mythologised past.

So the Left's social agenda addresses itself to aspects (at least) of how British society actually is, and its success rate would tend to demonstrate that the interests it represents are not always those of minorities. But the social platform differs from the economic in another way. The proof of the pudding in any economic policy must be (ultimately) that it works (certainly a lot of the electorate thought that Labour's wouldn't, and voted accordingly). The importance of a party's *social* programme does not necessarily reside in the efficacy of public measures or the effectiveness of legislation; its strength derives as much from its *moral* content, from its willingness to defend minorities (or majorities, indeed) against prejudice and discrimination, and, if not to lead, then at least not to obstruct their struggles for justice and emancipation.

This is why we should be careful when people write off the 'politics of gesture' as 'posturing' or 'mere rhetoric'. As it happens, Labour voted the right way on Jill Knight's despicable amendment on the promotion of the acceptability of homosexuality; but what people will remember (as they were meant to) is not the vote but John Cunningham's disgraceful statement that 'in my view and in the view of the Labour Party it

has not and never has been the purpose of local authorities and local education authorities to promote homosexuality (and I think that local authorities know that very well)', which weasel words were quickly followed by specific references to ILEA and Haringey, in case anyone had missed the point.

It would of course have been (literally) a matter of mere rhetoric for Dr Cunningham to have stated instead that Mrs Knight's proposal was homophobic in essence, vicious in spirit and punitive in purpose; you could doubtless argue that it would have been hardly more than a gesture for him to demonstrate how this loose and dangerous clause will be used to cut off funds to gay resource organisations, switchboards, theatre groups and the like, and, if the American model is anything to go by, to sabotage the encouragement of safe sex among the gay community in face of Aids. (In October, the Senate voted 94 to two to prohibit federal funding of any Aids education, information or prevention materials that 'promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual activities'). And I suppose he would have considered it just posturing to point out that you cannot defend the civil liberties of a minority group without, to some extent, if not promoting then at least justifying their way of life, due to the regrettable human tendency not to be very bothered about the rights of groups of people they have been trained to view with ribaldry, disgust and contempt.

But it would nonetheless have been a posture of more than rhetorical significance. For, as *The Guardian* pointed out in its excellent leader on the matter, gays are indeed a uniquely unpopular section of the community. In 1984, Audience Research found that while 63% of Londoners supported the GLC's women's policy, and 62% its support for ethnic minorities, only 45% backed its line on gay rights. And today, of course, we live in a society where doctors are being asked to betray confidentiality, actors can't get mortgages, and the principal question raised by the gay hero of the Kings' Cross fire is whether or not Aids-protective clothing should have been issued to possibly equally but hardly more heroic firemen.

And while of course Labour should listen and respond to what substantial numbers of people actually want in the economic and industrial field, it cannot apply such majoritarian considerations in the social field, where (according to the *British Social Attitudes Survey*) seven people out of 10 think that homosexuality is wrong and more than half that gays shouldn't teach (in the same way, of course, that repatriation and hanging have remained consistently popular). At 'Beating the Blues', Bryan Gould wittily defined the hard-Left line as 'no compromise with the electorate'; on these questions, the hard Left is right.

'One might define political moralism as the pursuit of emancipation by intimidation'



But of course, there are reasons why Labour feels it ought to backtrack on the social issues, reasons expressed in heartfelt terms on the South Bank, where the word 'moralism' was a pejorative only a notch or two up from 'Albanian'. For while the *polices* of the London Left on the social issues have been exemplary (as opposed, say, to those of the hard Left in Liverpool), the way they have been *implemented* has displayed all the tact, charm and sensitivity of the Stalinist Left at its worst. Indeed, one might define political moralism as the pursuit of emancipation by intimidation; the distinction between the two being clearly demonstrated by the gap between the impeccably libertarian principles and the appallingly tyrannical practice of the 'Yellow Gate' faction at the Greenham Common peace camp.

No-one on the Left should underestimate what it is like to be on the receiving end of the kind of political tactics that appear to be current in parts of London: the guilt-tripping, the accusations of betrayal, the threats and the intimidation (to which, as Glenys Thornton perceptively pointed out, middle-class socialists are peculiarly vulnerable). And it's sobering to learn that the libertarian and feminist Left are by no means immune from the disease which has afflicted so many socialist organisations in hard times, from the Soviet Communist Party in the 30s to the sects today.

But the fact that the political moralists have a lot to answer for should not blind us to the truth that it was ever thus. All innovatory political movements go through a period of 'going too far', in relation both to the world and to the organisations which surround them and from which they grew; all, as they develop and expand, leave behind them small groups of militant nostalgics for whom any dilution of the movement's experimental zeal is a sell-out; those for whom 'too far' can never be far enough.

The danger is that, for quite understandable reasons, the policies will become tarred with the brush of the politicians; that in spurning the means, the sensible Left will downgrade the ends. But to follow the leadership on this issue would not only call the Left's moral commitment into question; it could also damage its political prospects.

For surely, there will be no chance (as well as no point) in a Labour victory in the early 90s unless by then the party has managed to integrate the priorities of the new emancipatory movements into its central political platform. The effort to bring about the synthesis of the modern social movements and the traditional socialist agenda surely remains the Left's most urgent political task. The road to such a reformation may be a long and hard one, and it will not go via the Yellow Gate. But that's no reason not to start the journey.*