

Rethinking Labour

No Sense Of Mission

The initial salvoes in Operation Rethink concerned Labour's aims and values. The key document came from Neil Kinnock and Roy Hattersley. Eric Hobsbawm is disappointed

The other day, letting herself be interviewed on ITV, Mrs Thatcher took a small linguistic but a large political step to the right: she spoke, not of her government, but of her 'regime'. The word will not surprise readers of *Marxism Today*, which wrote, only a few months ago, that 'the Thatcher regime now has five more years to complete its reshaping of Britain and to make itself irreversible'. What is interesting is that today Mrs Thatcher feels confident enough to use such language herself.

For a 'regime' is no longer just a government. Its language is no longer that of traditional British politics, let alone of parliamentary democracy. (Mrs T makes no secret of the fact that she regards opposition as subversive.) It is the language of a 'New Order' that is being introduced by a revolution of the radical Right, conducted by a platoon of fundamentalists who do not care what anybody thinks of their proposals, because they *know* they are right; and besides, who is to vote them down? It is the language of an authoritarian one-party government which is systematically setting about creating the conditions for staying that way.

For, as the years go by, it is increasingly patent that we were right from the start to see Thatcherism as something quite different from, and immeasurably more dangerous than, just another Tory government. It is an experimental model for post-democratic bourgeois society in the 1980s, as fascism (which was a very different species of political animal) was the model for bourgeois regimes in the 1930s which felt they could no longer afford democracy.

It is probably not easily exportable, if only because so far other conservative governments (eg, the West German

lack the lunatic ideological commitment to the abolition of all activities not performed for private profit, and especially of public welfare. Or else other conservative governments (eg, Reagan's) lack the uncontrollable centralised power which makes the Thatcher regime so dangerous. Nevertheless, Thatcherism has both and we are ruled by it. Consequently there is only one absolutely overriding political task before us in this country, namely to get rid of it. This is a task which will increasingly unite people in this country across the lines of class, gender, age, colour and political parties, including the Conservative Party. There is no higher priority in British political life.

The first, and perhaps the only, question to ask about the present exercise in 'rethinking the Labour Party' is what bearing it has on this task. This exercise has already produced papers and pamphlets by David Blunkett and Bernard Crick (*The Labour Party's Aims and Values: An Unofficial Statement*), by Tony Benn (*An Agenda for Labour and The Aims and Objectives of the Labour Party*) and by Neil Kinnock and Roy Hattersley (*A Statement of Democratic Socialist Aims and Values*).¹

None of these would have been written but for the disasters which have hit the Labour Party and labour movement over the past 10 years. All take it for granted, even though none says so, that a mere call to return to the pre-1979 *status quo* will get us nowhere (quite apart from being impracticable) and that the basic problem is how to recover the lost supporters who still show no sign of returning, or to acquire new ones. To this extent rethinking does reflect the actual situation. As for the generalities of Labour's future policies, there isn't much real disagree-

ment. Nor is there room for one, since it is patent that a future Labour government will preside over a mixed economy, whether it wants to or not. There is actually no significant difference on the page between Kinnock-Hattersley's: 'We are not, and have never been committed to any form of public ownership, but the objectives we seek clearly require a greater sector of the economy to be socially owned' (para 18), Benn's: 'We must reject the old pattern of state corporations, and rethink our attitude to common ownership' (*An Agenda*, p 2) and Blunkett-Crick's slightly longer commentary on Clause 4 (p 10). And, of course, all three documents insist that the Labour Party is a socialist party, though, paradoxically, the word is used less in Benn's papers than in either of the other two.

All this is welcome, insofar as it suggests that there is a basis for consensus within the Labour Party, or at least that people are anxious to avoid the sort of public mayhem which looks better in kung fu movies than in political parties. But it is a weakness in 'operation rethink' that so much of it seems, in the first instance, addressed to an inner-party public rather than to the majority (including the majority of the working class) who are no longer or not yet with the party.

Of the three documents only Kinnock-Hattersley really seem to have the non-Labour voters in Thatcherite Britain in their sights. Who, other than his traditional supporters, Tony Benn has in mind, is difficult to determine, for his documents are exceptionally unspecific (except on some odd matters like 'the upholding and enforcement of existing legislation relating to animal abuse, and efforts to secure the introduction of further legislation making all blood-sports illegal' (*Aims*, p 4)). However, Benn has the merit of being the only one of the authors to deal seriously with international affairs and the question of war and peace, and also recognises the major significance of the issues raised by 'green polities', even though only in passing.

The Blunkett-Crick pamphlet is much the best and most convincing statement on the Labour Party's aims and values (ie, on 'democratic socialism') among these documents, and one which can't help but win friends for Labour, though, alas, few people are prepared to read 20-page pamphlets. However, what it will not do, and is not designed to do, is to convince people who agree that Labour is a good and caring party whose heart and head is in the right place, to entrust Labour with the government of Britain again. It is an admirable statement, but it could have been written at any time since 1945.

As one might expect, the leader and deputy leader of the party, acting jointly, are rather more acutely aware of the political perspectives. However, their statement has the same weakness as Roy Hattersley's own earlier book

Choose Freedom: out of sheer defensiveness it gives the game away to the other side. The statement begins with the proposition that 'the fundamental objective of government' in a socialist society 'is the protection and extension of individual liberty' (para 1) and ends with the proposition that 'Socialism ... is, above all else, committed to the protection and extension of individual freedom (para 26). Now while freedom, in the sense of free choice and a minimum of external restraint, is, or ought to be, a fundamental condition of any society for which socialists stand, it is simply not true that this is what socialism is essentially about, or that anybody really believes that it is, including Kinnock and Hattersley, most of whose document - for obvious reasons - explains why this doesn't mean that we are economic neo-liberals.

Four things are seriously wrong with this approach, quite apart from the fact that its definition of socialism is way off-beam. In the first place it is very unlikely to carry conviction. Competing with Thatcherism in a race to show who best represents individualist freedom is going in for the wrong contest. It is rather like trying to attract tourists from the Greek islands to the Alps on the grounds that you can get a suntan and swim in the mountains too. So you can, but that is not primarily why people who like mountains go there, summer or winter. It is better to sell one's own attractions rather than versions of someone else's.

Second, it suggests that Labour's main problem is how to convert or reconvert Thatcherites. But this is not the case. For every voter Labour lost to Thatcher - and even that doesn't mean exclusively enthusiasts for the 'enterprise culture' - at least another voter was lost to the centre on quite different grounds. Thirdly, it suggests that Labour's leader and deputy leader don't have much confidence in Labour's prospects, which is rather worrying, because if they don't seem to have, then who will? As the jargon has it, this is 'sending the wrong signals' out. And finally, the Kinnock-Hattersley document undoubtedly liquidates some of Labour's *old* thinking, as is indeed necessary, but it unfortunately neither contains nor implies any actual *new* thinking.

The problem here is not simply excessive defensiveness, though this is bad enough. It is a lack of vision: of the dangers of the present situation, of the nature of the British crisis which produced it, and has not been solved; of the tasks of the future and of what non-Thatcherite or post-Thatcherite governments could actually be doing.

Thus there is not in this document - or in the others - any sense whatever that we are faced with a regime which is setting out to demolish what other brands of capitalism still accept, eg,

that the tendency to privatise *some* parts of economies previously belonging to the public sector, which is found all over the world today, is qualitatively *different* from the curious, but dangerous, Thatcherite combination of a right-wing Stalinism (uncontrolled central state power) and the right-wing anarchism of the ideologues who believe (to quote Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*) that 'What you couldn't state in figures and show to be purchasable in the cheapest market and saleable in the dearest, was not, and never should be, world without end, Amen.'

It is the essential Thatcherite argument that Britain's troubles are due to the fact that in the past it was never *really* a capitalist society the way our more successful competitors were and are. To quote Prof Norman Stone: 'It is a start towards that bourgeois revolution which, in my opinion, never really occurred in this country and (if this is so) Margaret Thatcher goes down in history as the natural complement to Oliver Cromwell' (*Sunday Times* March 6, 1988). The argument has no good historical or comparative basis, although, for quite different ideological reasons, similar theses have long been (mistakenly) put forward (minus the plug for Thatcher) by a section of the marxist Left. But to accept the view that Thatcher is doing no more than any other business-minded government - say West Germany or Japan - is in effect to accept the Thatcherite analysis. It is to fall for the hype which is the essence of Thatcherite public relations.

Again, given the systematic undermining of civil liberties, of autonomous local government, freedom of speech and press, and democracy in general, it is quite extraordinary that these statements of 'democratic socialism' should pay so little attention to democracy, and its present dangers. Kinnock-Hattersley use the phrase 'democratic socialist' for Labour occasionally, but, unless I am mistaken, the word 'democracy' or 'democratic' occurs only *twice* in the 15 typed pages of their statement, as distinct from the words 'freedom', 'free' and 'liberty' which occur 48 times. (For the record, words referring to 'equality' occur 19 times, 'fraternity' zero times.) It must, however, be said in fairness that the document specifically notes the threat to our civil and political rights and their erosion during the Thatcher years (paras 11 and 12).

Tony Benn naturally pays more attention to democracy, but with the exception of a single, characteristically vague, phrase ('It is essential that we devote a great deal more work to the question of civil liberties which have been directly attacked in recent years') his observations appear to have no specific relevance to the present situation. 'Democracy' is certainly the red thread that runs through Blunkett-Crick, and to this extent this pamphlet provides the best basis for a campaign

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to rally all defenders of democracy round the Labour Party. (Blunkett-Crick is also the only contribution to the debate which pays any attention to 'fraternity' or 'community', or for that matter which even mentions the famous old slogan 'liberty, equality and fraternity' and recalls that while 'liberty' is good, by *itself* it is not uniquely socialist.) Nevertheless, one would not guess from the text of Blunkett-Crick that British democracy today is under any special pressure.²

As for the nature of the British crisis which brought Thatcherism to power and has kept it there, none of the documents even hint at it. But this is to miss the point of operation rethink, which would not be taking place at all but for this crisis, and must address itself above all to people who are dissatisfied with the Labour Party because of this crisis. It does no harm to offer a guide to healthy living to anyone at any time, but it does not satisfy people who are primarily worried *now* about, say, the health hazards arising out of Chernobyl. Besides, how can we work out a political vision and project for the post-Thatcherite future, unless it is based on a proper analysis of the predicament of Britain, and the world, since the end of the great global boom in the early 1970s?

All this reflects two major weaknesses in Labour thinking.

The first is provincialism: the world beyond the seas is more remote and unimportant in these documents than in real life. In Kinnock-Hattersley it appears only once (para 17), when the division between North and South is condemned and help to the developing world through trade as well as aid is called for. Nothing else. Blunkett-Crick are specifically worried about how to 'prevent international companies controlling national economies and dictating to elected governments' (pp 11-12), and are concerned about the North-South divide, and nuclear disarmament in which 'Labour believes ... as a matter of principle, and in the need to put the principle into practice' (p 25). This is excellent, but hardly exhausts the problem of a Labour Britain in the international economy and power-system. The Benn documents show much the most careful thought about international policy politically, though the combination of a non-aligned Britain and withdrawal from the European Community has its problems, but, like the others, shows little sign of appreciating the nature and recent transformations of the world economy.

None of the documents so much as mentions the experience of any other country, even when one might think it directly relevant to Britain. Sweden, for instance, is just the sort of country which one might expect to inspire anti-Thatcherite democratic socialists. It represents everything that Thatcherites blame for the failures of Britain in the dark pre-Maggie era: it has been

run by Labour, has one of the highest ratios of public expenditure to gross domestic product, high taxes, no fondness for the unrestricted free market, and plenty of controls. Yet Sweden, which must have one of the highest standards of living in the world, together with low unemployment, has had a much higher rate of growth than the USA, and remains at the forefront of technological progress. Why should British Labour not get a little mileage out of the achievements of its opposite number elsewhere? And why don't any of our statements? Probably because none of the authors thought about the Swedes.

The second weakness is intellectual. It may be illustrated by comparing the rethinking which has so far come out of Labour with a recent piece of rethinking by, of all people, a member of the (non-Owenite) Social Democrats: David Marquand's *The Unprincipled Society* (Jonathan Cape, 1988 £18.00). Marquand's analysis, incidentally, demonstrates the considerable potential for a consensus on policy within a broad anti-Thatcherite coalition.

Marquand begins with the breakdown of the Keynesian social-democratic consensus which, in effect, dominated most developed countries for 30 years after the second world war. It proved incapable of coping with British (and world) problems in the 1970s, but the two alternatives which emerged in Britain are equally incapable of coping. These are Thatcherite economic neoliberalism and 'a more inchoate mixture of neo-marxism and the "fundamentalist" socialism of the 1920s and 1930s', which gained ground among the Labour rank-and-file.

Unlike Labour leaders, Marquand does not have to prove to anybody that he does not believe in all-purpose central planning, or to convince activists that markets are not part of pornography. He can take it for granted that mixed economies are normal. He can therefore take the weaknesses of 'state socialism' for granted - even though also pointing out that 'no better way has been found to mobilise society for war or for some great collective purpose' (p 6) - and concentrate on the weaknesses of Thatcherite free markets. For that, after all, is what we are dealing with in Britain. Hence, paradoxically Marquand's centrist analysis makes far fewer concessions to the marketeers than, say, Hattersley's.

The free market by itself, he argues, cannot solve the peculiar problem of Britain, which is how to adapt to the modern world, and to recover its economic impetus, because what makes a country tick, including economically, does not depend purely on economics. It depends on history, culture, politics and a lot else. Neo-classical economics simply explains 'or purports to explain how resources are most efficiently allocated at a given level of adaptability' (p 4), but not how

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a country can be made more adaptable. 'Market-liberalism is a doctrine for those who are already well-equipped for the market. It is no friend to those who need to equip themselves.' (p 5)

Now, for historical reasons Britain, which was peculiarly suited to become the pioneer of capitalism in the 19th century, by the same token found it enormously hard to adapt to its economic and political decline in the 20th. Her institutions and values gave her no help, even though they were well designed to ensure social and political stability. Thatcherism was quite right in seeing that a radical break was needed, but, according to Marquand, its diagnosis was and is the opposite of the truth. For what Britain lacked was not individualist values, ready to be released by the stimulus of profit. It had nothing but these. Britain, the original pioneer of industrialism, didn't need 'to evolve an entrepreneurial or developmental state'. Later capitalist economies had to and did: 'What is special about Britain ... is not that she abandoned market-led adjustment. It is that after abandoning it, she failed to become a developmental state on the pattern of her more successful competitors on the European mainland and in the Far East.' (p13)

But such a state - such a national effort - cannot be built without some sense of a *public purpose*, a public good. This, once again, can't be derived by adding up all the private purposes which all individuals pursue, which is why no definition of the aim of society, purely in terms of the freedom of individual choice and action will do, whether it is capitalist or (like Kinnock-Hattersley) thinks it is socialist. Our problem is to recover the public purpose which is missing (an intellectual and moral vacuum at the heart of the political economy).

I have cited this analysis at some length, not because I agree with it (which I only do in part), or because it has anything concrete to propose for the future (which it hasn't), but because, unlike most Labour rethinking so far, it is essentially a critique of Thatcherism and politically focused on the future. Let us imagine the typical non-Labour citizen who does not belong to the (not very large) ideological core of Thatcherites, and who, of course, is the man or woman who has to be won back to Labour or, more realistically, for a broad anti-Thatcherite coalition based on, and organised round, Labour.

Reading the Benn statements, which are essentially aimed at the faithful, he or she will conclude that nothing much has changed in Labour, though honesty should compel even sceptical readers to recognise Benn's profound concern about democracy and *rights* (he is the only author who consistently uses the term), and that on East-West relations he talks sense.

Reading Kinnock-Hattersley he or she will conclude that a future Labour

government will not renationalise everything that has been privatised, and in general recognise the role of the market more and planning less ('democratic socialists believe in market allocation ... guided by agreement that the competitive system should pursue the objective of greater freedom, greater equality and greater choice' para 25), ie, in something not very different from the 'social market' policies of 'market liberals with tender hearts' (whose contradictions Marquand ruthlessly criticises, pp 224-26). So what? Will readers regard this as an inspiring alternative to Thatcher, or merely as an indication that Labour leaders won't be bound by the old orthodoxies of their left? (When have they ever been?)

Reading Blunkett-Crick, he or she will be reminded once again how *good* and morally desirable the causes are that Labour represents and has always represented: liberty, equality, fraternity/community/solidarity; fairness and justice, altruism and tolerance, hostility to class snobbishness and, not least, self-organisation and democracy. As an alternative set of values to the one represented by the world of the Tebbits and Parkinsons, it is convincing enough, but as a guide to the tasks of Britain and its governments in the late 1980s and 1990s? That is not so sure.

What we need are statements not primarily aimed at inner-party debate, but directly at all who are concerned about Britain's future. We need statements which are not trying to catch up with some free-market Joneses, so that we semi-apologise for what we believe in and believe to be essential to Britain's future, namely, social and public action, where necessary through the state. It is absurd that a more whole-hearted and self-confident critique of Thatcherite claims and of 'social market' ideologies, and a firmer call for a 'developmental state' should come from an ex-Labour and now ex-Social Democratic member of the centre party than anything that has come out of the Labour Party.

What we need is not just a restatement of eternal and general aims and values, but also about aims and values *now*. This does not mean that general statements are bound to anticipate debates on the concrete programmes of a future anti-Thatcher and post-Thatcher government. However, it is perfectly reasonable to offer, as part of statements of aims and values, not just a general demand for 'the fullest access to education' for all, but the urgent transformation of a notoriously under-educated people into an educated people and the reversal of the present educational counter-revolution of the inegalitarians.

Not just generalities about 'changes in the economic and industrial basis of society' which should bring 'benefits which are available to everyone' (Kinnock-Hattersley para 3), but a specific consideration of what the modern

micro-chip economy should mean for labour, leisure, life and education. (None of the statements so much as mentions the current techno-scientific revolution, any more than the new international and transnational pattern of the world economy, though Blunkett-Crick hint at the latter.)

Not just 'stimulating the enterprise and innovation that creates the wealth upon which future generations will depend' (Kinnock-Hattersley para 10), but setting the collective targets for reversing the decline of the British economy and building the 'developmental state' which is needed for it. Not just talking generally about the need for environmental protection, or even that 'only governments have the competence and authority' to do so (Kinnock-Hattersley para 10), but a statement that environmental ruin is perhaps a more immediate danger to the human race than even nuclear war, and that it can be dealt with *only* by governments which put the public and common interest before the market and private profit.

In short, these statements lack urgency, and a sense of national and social mission.

Again, what we need are statements with a sense of history. If Labour's rethinking does not include or hint at a diagnosis of what went wrong with Britain (and therefore what needs to be put right),

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we leave the field open for the Thatcherite diagnosis which lies behind, and gives force to, the Thatcherite project of forcing Britain into total privatisation by total state power. Perhaps some of us may be actually tempted quietly to accept that diagnosis ourselves (too much government and bureaucracy, overpriced workers and the rest). What is more, nobody will believe in a party which passes lightly over the question of what went wrong with Britain, especially if that party was involved in the going wrong. It will not do just to say that we are not like that any more.

Finally, what we need is to aim directly at our target audience, the potential voter for Labour and/or a broad anti-Thatcher alliance who is *not* voting Labour. We shall not convert the hard-core Thatcherites, middle or working class, whether they are 'I'm all right Jack' neo-liberals or those attracted by the chauvinism and racism which surrounds this regime. However, most polls show that these are a minority and not a growing one. We are concerned with men and women who would prefer a non-Thatcherite government, many of whom are increasingly worried about the tendencies of this government, and even more of whom would be rather more worried if they stopped enjoying the economic benefits which, they are constantly told, are due to the economic policy of the past eight years.

I would guess that what troubles these people, irrespective of age, gender or class, is a) whether they see a possibility of actually getting enough of the non-Thatcherite majority together to defeat this regime, b) whether they have enough confidence in the leadership of the Labour Party which will inevitably be the post-Thatcherite government, or the core of such a government, and c) whether such a government has any positive perspective, in addition to the negative advantage of stopping Thatcherism. They want to know: what is Labour's project for the future? Has it got the future in its bones, or is it still, like so many of the Labour left activists, 'more anxious to shelter from the changes of the last 15 years than to adapt to them' (Marquand p 6)? Will these statements satisfy them?

These are the people who will decide whether Labour's operation rethink is a success or not. The products of this operation so far are not yet encouraging. But it is early days yet. That is why it is important, and urgent, to help in getting the debate onto the right lines.0

1 These documents were presented to a joint meeting of the Labour Party NEC and shadow cabinet on February 5. They provide the context for the more detailed policy review, (ed).

2 Tony Benn stresses 'solidarity' which could mean much the same as 'fraternity', as Blunkett-Crick note; but it seems clear that what he has in mind is something much narrower, namely 'a moral responsibility to defend all those who are attacked for protecting their own democratically gained rights', and, concretely, trade union solidarity (*Aims and Objectives*, pp 3-4).