

The Silent Road To Power

As Thatcherism flounders and Labour rides high in the polls, David Marquand turns his thoughts to the prospect of a Labour government

nike the wave of revolutions which swept through Eastern Europe last year, the unravelling of the Thatcherite hegemony of the early and middle 1980s has happened so quickly that it is hard to keep pace with it, and harder still to understand it. We know that Mrs Thatcher is now the most unpopular prime minister since opinion polling began and that Labour's current poll lead would give it a House of Commons majority of 1945 proportions. We do not know why. It seems fairly clear that mid-term protest provides only part of the explanation. As in Eastern Europe last year, the regime has lost confidence in itself; it has lost authority because it no longer knows where it wants to go or how to get there. Public discontent reflects ministerial confusion; ministerial confusion feeds on public discontent. Beyond that, one can only speculate.

Understandably, perhaps, Labour has reacted with a demure negativism reminiscent of the three wise monkeys. Having in the past inflicted immeasurable damage on itself by foolish and ill-considered policy statements, it has now adopted a posture of enigmatic smiles and sealed lips. To judge by its conduct over the last few months, its chief aim is to give no hostages to fortune, to present as narrow a flank as possible to Conservative counter-attack, to do and say nothing which might upset any group of voters anywhere in sight. And so it stands, palms eagerly outstretched, waiting for power to fall into its grasp.

In narrowly electoral terms, this posture has much to commend it. Labour faces a viciously hostile press which is certain to misrepresent anything it says. Though the public mood is obviously changing, nobody can tell how far or how deep the change has gone. False moves on the part of Kinnock or his lieutenants could easily put the gains they have made over the past few months in peril. The policy review has given the party a reas-

surprisingly moderate image which seems to be playing well with the voters. Given that governments lose elections more often than oppositions win them, why risk upsetting a volatile electorate by explaining how the image connects with reality?

Yet even in narrowly electoral terms, there are dangers in this approach. The better Labour does, the more it will look like an alternative government; the more it looks like an alternative government, the more people will want to know what it intends to do with power when it wins it. Demure negativism may satisfy the punters now, but it is unlikely to keep them satisfied through the storm and stress of a general election campaign. In any case, electoral terms are not the only ones that matter. Labour may be able to win the next election by keeping its mouth shut, but it will not be able to govern the country by keeping its head empty. It will need a strategy of some kind - a sense of where it wants to go and of what its priorities are to be. The lesson of history is that if it fails to develop a strategy in opposition, it will be swept along by events once it is in government.

The 1945 government - the one really successful Labour government in British history - had a strong sense of direction and at least a broad-brush set of priorities. Though it fumbled badly on some questions it achieved most of what it set out to do; and most of its achievements stood the test of time. It owed its success to a number of factors - not least to its ability to speak to and for a broad-based popular coalition, extending well beyond the frontiers of its own core constituency. Its greatest single asset, however, was the programmatic legacy of the wartime coalition. Labour ministers knew where they were going because their course had been charted for them by the reports, enquiries and white papers of the preceding three or four years. They had, so to speak, internalised the wartime settlement which it was their vocation to implement. That was why they implemented it



so successfully.

The 1945 government, however, stands out as a glittering peak among a series of molehills. The Macdonald government of 1929 and the Wilson government of 1974 were both overwhelmed by the pressures of a worldwide economic crisis which neither had foreseen. Both left a legacy of humiliation and acrimony which did terrible damage, not just to the Labour Party but to the whole centre Left. Perhaps it is unfair to blame them: it is at least arguable that they were the victims of circumstances which no government could have mastered. The fact remains that their failures were due, in large measure, to a fatal lack of strategic vision. They were shipwrecked partly because the currents were adverse, but partly because they had not realised where the rocks were waiting.

The 1964 government offers an even more salutary warning. Labour's position today is uncannily reminiscent of its position in the early 1960s. Then, as now, a thrice-victorious Conservative government suddenly and almost inexplicably lost its way. Then, as now, the Conservative Party was riven by internal dissension. Then, as now, a Labour Party which had seemed doomed to perpetual opposition dramatically recovered. Then, as now, its recovery was aided by a sharp, almost seismic, shift in the popular mood. Then, as now, the Labour leadership concentrated on short-term electoral tactics and forgot about long-term governmental strategy. The result was the Wilson government of 1964-70 - the most dismal wasted opportunity in the history of the British Left.

That does not mean that history is bound to repeat itself. Labour can almost certainly count on two years before the next election. It has time to put its strategic house in order - time to face and argue through the hard questions which a Labour government would have to answer. For all the glitz of the policy review, however, it has not done this yet. To be sure, it has laid the ghosts of hard-left Bennite socialism and Footite little-England insularity. It has abandoned Morrisonian nationalisation, top-down 'heroic' planning, the siege economy, unilateral disarmament and withdrawal from the European Community. In aspiration, at any rate, it is now another European social-democratic party committed to the mixed economy and further European integration.

The trouble is that it still balks at the logic of its own conversion. It has sloughed off its old skin, but it is not yet comfortable with its new one. It may be social-democratic in aspiration, but it is not yet social-democratic in assumption or mentality. It has abandoned the little-England, anti-European, socialism-in-one-country fantasies of 10 years ago, but (a handful of MEPs apart) it does not yet realise what support for further European integration entails. It is committed to Scottish devolution and flirts with regional devolution in England, but it has not abandoned the traditional Labourist

reverence for the bankrupt institutions of the central British state. Above all, it has failed to see that the social-democratic political economies of central Europe and Scandinavia are, in a profound sense, negotiated political economies, and that the ethos and style of a negotiated political economy are poles apart from the ethos and style of majoritarian democracy on the British pattern.

Thus, it is enthusiastically in favour of the Brussels Commission's social charter, guardedly sympathetic towards the first stage of the Delors plan for monetary union, properly anxious about the democratic deficit in Community decision-making, but strangely silent about the Community's response to the extraordinary European upheaval of the last 12 months. Yet it is clear that European politics are in flux, in a sense which has not been true since the beginning of the cold war. It is clear too that Britain's future is bound to be shaped, for good or ill, by what happens on the other side of the Channel; that she can no more stand aside from the changes which are now re-shaping the continent to which she belongs than she could stand aside from the rise of fascism in the 1930s, from the French Revolution in the 1790s or from the reformation in the 16th century. Finally, it is clear that the most serious single charge against Mrs Thatcher - outweighing even the charges against her management of the domestic economy - is that she has deliberately excluded herself from the debate which will determine the outcome of these changes.

That, of course, is the gravamen of Michael Heseltine's critique of the government and the basis for his increasingly impressive campaign for the Tory leadership. But where Heseltine offers an alternative vision of Europe and of Britain's place in Europe, Kinnoek and his lieutenants have so far offered only a strangulated mumble. Even by the narrow calculus of electoral advantage and disadvantage, this is almost certainly a mistake. There is every chance that the European question will split the Conservatives as badly in the 1990s as it split Labour in the 1970s. Labour has nothing to lose by keeping that pot on the boil, and it may have a lot to gain.

Much more importantly, a Labour government will have to make up its mind where it stands on the great issues of Europe's future. Will it be for the minimalist, de-regulated, businessmen's Europe of the CBI or for the social Europe implied by the social charter? Assuming the latter, does it recognise that a social Europe will need stronger political institutions, more transfers of competence and authority from the national to the supranational level and therefore tighter constraints on the freedom of action of British ministers, including British Labour ministers?

Does it realise that the logic of the 1992 project implies not merely the first stage of the Delors plan for monetary union, but the second and third stages as well? How,

above all, does it see the relationship between the little Europe of the Community and the greater Europe of which the Community is only a part? Does it recognise, as Heseltine seems to, that 'widening' and 'deepening' go together: that the inevitable enlargement of the Community to the east, of which the approaching reunification of Germany is only the first stage, necessitates, like the 1992 project, stronger and more authoritative Community institutions? And does it see that a stronger and more authoritative Community must also be a more democratic Community, with a stronger Community parliament? In office, Labour will have to answer these questions one way or another. The time to start thinking about them is now; and if its claims to have become a party of government again are to be taken seriously it will have to reveal the results of its thinking to the rest of us.

What applies to the community applies equally to the structure of the British state. Once Scottish devolution is on the agenda the government of England and Wales is on the agenda as well: it is impossible to separate power by area in one part of a hitherto unitary state and leave the rest unaffected. In the 1970s, Scottish devolution ran into the sands largely because the instinctively centralist Callaghan government (aided and abetted, it must be said, by an instinctively centralist parliamentary Labour Party) had failed to think through the implications of its legislation for the rest of the United Kingdom. A similar failure in the 1990s would destroy the government responsible for it and might well provoke the Scots to secede from the union altogether. Here again Labour simply cannot afford to fly, Wilson-like, by the seat of its pants. Here again, the guarded hints of the policy review are nothing like enough.

Behind all these questions lies the much more fundamental question of what social democracy implies for political and economic governance. Social democracy as it is practised in Scandinavia and central Europe (and it is not of course a uniform practice) represents an originally second-best compromise which has become a first-best outcome. It sprang from no theoretical blueprint. It emerged, unplanned, from the pressures and contingencies of a generation of social and political change. Yet, with all its theoretical imperfections, it is the much-sought 'third way' between the casino capitalism of Britain and the United States and the now-collapsing command economies of what used to be the Soviet bloc. It is far from Utopian, either in conception or in conduct. It is a little heavy-handed, rather slow-moving, perhaps somewhat dull. Yet it gives a fairer and more civilised life to more of its citizens than any other kind of political economy in human history. Its hallmarks are negotiation, compromise, consensus and power-sharing. The power-hoggers of the Labour Party are still, alas, a long way from learning its lessons. •

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