

Martin Jacques looks beyond Thatcherism

# A Major Change



**A**n era is over. Margaret Thatcher, the most dominant peacetime prime minister this century, has gone. Though we still have little idea of what a Major government will be like, all the early signs are that in important respects it will be different from those of Mrs Thatcher. For one thing the radicalism which was their hallmark is certainly over. It will be a long time before we see their like again, from left or right. The long retreat from Thatcherism has commenced. We are moving back to a world of consensus. Dry economics and a wet social policy will rule the roost.

It took Labour well nigh a decade to find a way of dealing with Thatcherism. For just over a year it held the electoral initiative. Now that strategy looks quite inadequate to deal with what is a new ballgame. It relied upon the unpopularity of Thatcher, not the appeal of Labour. It was passive not active, negative rather than positive.

Of course, it may be that Major will be unable to escape from the unpopularity of the Thatcherite era. This is clearly Labour's hope. The economic problems will prove too acute; the neglect of the social infrastructure too pervasive; the legacy of the poll tax too divisive. Then there are the imponderables like a Gulf war. But Labour would be foolhardy indeed to rely on this. Yet so far there is little sign that it has recognised the scale of the change that has taken place. It still seems to think that it is fighting the same enemy. It appears to believe its own propaganda that Major is simply son of Thatcher.

It is instructive to remember the French experience. Perhaps the nearest west-European parallel to Thatcher was De Gaulle. Like Thatcher, he transformed the parameters of

French politics. He held office for an equivalent length of time. And when he went in 1969, he was similarly unpopular. Then the long retreat from Gaullism began. But he was succeeded by Pompidou and then by Giscard, both of whom were products of the Gaullist tradition. It was over a decade before the Left were to assume power.

Labour would be wrong to think that the recent unpopularity of Thatcher means that the country has rejected that Thatcherite legacy in toto and, furthermore, holds the Tory Party responsible for it. Indeed, the danger for Labour is that precisely as a result of the Thatcherite era, the electorate now sees the Tory Party as the natural party of government, as happened in France with Gaullism, and will be happy to see a social-democratic readjustment presided over by the Tories rather than Labour.

If Labour fails to recognise the possibility of this, then it will fail to make the necessary changes to its strategy. But Labour's problem is more serious than that. It is now required to make a positive appeal, to win support on its own merits rather than the demerits of the Tories. Yet the painful rethink of the last three years has hardly equipped it to do this. The emphasis has been on excision and positioning rather than any new sense of vision or project. What does Labour stand for? It is a question which will grow more and more insistent between now and the next election. •