

After Thatcher Ten More Years

What must John Major do, asks
Sarah Benton, if populist
conservatism is to become the
dominant political voice of
the 90s

If John Major is a strategist, he could reshape the political realignment which Margaret Thatcher kicked off, then almost destroyed. Populist conservatism would become the dominant political force in Britain for the foreseeable future. Labour would then become the voice of particular, special interests: local government, national health service, public transport, the special needs of women or black people, the urban poor, and so on. Each of these would be important, at times passionate, causes. But they would remain a collection of discrete interests. They would not comprise a single, national political force. People would vote Labour, and sometimes nationalist or Liberal Democrat, or Green, in those elections which decide such local, or special, interests, and vote Conservative for national government. This is similar to the pattern in the USA, Japan and Germany, where populist or national conservatism controls national government, but social democracy, militant regionalism or sometimes radical environmentalism remain forces on special issues.

Realignment is the wrong word for this

process. It is not a matter of Conservative cowboys corralling the upwardly-mobile workers who have strayed from Labour. Rather, it is a question of re-composition. What politics is made up of, what drives and shapes political discourse and decision, is in flux. This makes it possible for a political leadership - Labour or Conservative - to reform its community of political interest. By that I mean not just the social composition of its supporters; I mean too what makes its politics: what types of political conflict it deals with; what its constituencies want from politics and how they think they can get it. Labour's old community of interest was composed of working class and professionals looking to the state to protect them, and to redistribute power in their interest. That political community no longer exists.

What is in Major's favour is the changing relations of nation-state and class, and their changing roles as determinants of politics. Actual economic decision-making is moving out of the nation state, into the boardrooms of multinational companies, into international forums, from the EC to the Group of 7,

from the Cairns Group to Gatt, from the Pacific forum to the UN. These are primarily concerned with trade and movements of capital (and labour), though they may carry settlements of political conflicts in their wake (oil and Palestine; Japan's North Islands and trade with the Soviet Union) and also become the site of environmental politics.

On the other hand, regional or local forms of government are becoming the focus for industrial development strategies; thus, someone who wishes to shape West Midlands engineering will look to local structures, including local state bodies, or to Brussels, rather than London. Similarly in the US, devisers of economic strategy are more often to be found in state capitals than in Washington.

This leaves the nation-state with two dominant roles; as the negotiator in international forums, and the symbolic bearer of national unity. Chancellor Kohl's recent victory in the German elections is, in part, due to his adept playing of both these roles. Thatcher's failure to be either symbolic unifier or effective negotiator in part caused her ejection as leader. The fact that she failed does not mean that no populist Conservative could marry the two roles, though there is plenty of conflict between them which an opposition could exploit. For, despite her failure, populist Conservatism still has a lot going for it *if it* is directed strategically and adroitly. Populist Conservatism has an ease with, and affinity to, national symbolism which social democracy does not. What sort of politics produces effective national negotiators is more complex, for it is not at all clear what sort of international agreement is in the best interests of what sort of capitalism - populist, multinational, financial or in any other variety. Here the political market is particularly wide open for any leadership which can produce a settlement between the demand for free trade, the interest of consumers, the Third World and sectors of labour. Populist conservatism does not have an inherent advantage here - and significantly, both President Bush and Chancellor Kohl dropped their nationalist rhetoric to be effective negotiators in the discussions on eastern Europe before the Gulf crisis. When both Bush and Thatcher turned to nationalist rhetoric rather than negotiation over the Gulf crisis, they found it did not work. They'd pressed the patriotic button and got a flat response.

Whether or not Labour can challenge conservatism for the role of national leader thus depends, in the 1990s, on how far it can create an appealing symbolic role for the nation-state, for it is not going to wither away by the year 2000, and how it treats the aim and potential of international negotiations.

John Major has made it clear what sort of party he wants to create, and why it has the potential to be the majority party of the 1990s. The driving force of his conservatism will be a denial that

class is a determinant of politics; instead, ambition - the essential middle-class virtue - will take its place. It will celebrate the strength of the self-made man and be hostile to all those structures and ideas that inhibit self-making. It will continue the Thatcherite destruction of public, collective life, leaving the nation as the only meaningful collective form.

Of course, class is a factor in politics, as are race and religion. In the economic sense, class is ineradicable, and a classless society in a capitalist economy is an absurdity. But class is only a determinant of national politics if national politics are driven by a conflict between capital and labour. If one essential foundation of populist conservatism is to make a classless appeal to men and women of ambition and patriotic fervour, the other foundation is to sever public policy from the conflict of capital and labour. Rather, public policy has to be seen to be pursuing the goal of classlessness, providing rewards for the ambitious, not those who went to Eton. The decisions which *are* driven by class conflict - a conflict of capital and labour - cannot be seen to constitute public policy, nor can such decisions be taken in publicly-accountable groups. Thus, successful populist conservatism must produce a separation between the rhetoric of the public arena, giving politics an intensely symbolic, almost allegorical quality; and the substance of much policy-making which remains esoteric, and in the hands of an elite outside the public arena.

It is this twin-track policy - the classlessness of public policy, the 'private' nature of decisions affecting class relations - which requires strategic leadership. Thatcherism followed this strategy. Class was excised from politics by, among other tactics, redefining labour as the trade union bureaucrats of the corporate state rather than as an exploited, productive force. And Thatcherism speeded the removal of economic decisions from the public, political realm. One of its signal achievements was to toughen the secrecy surrounding company decisions; it was Tory Euro-MPs who defeated the EC's Vredeling directive on 'opening the books' to the workforce; Thatcher's ministers who locked every decision involving a company, from Westland to British Aero-space, in a strongbox of 'commercial secrecy'; and her ministers who slid with such ease straight from cabinet into the closed boardrooms of our major companies.

John Major has only to continue this pattern. He need only re-affirm the distinction between decisions on movements of capital and international trade, which remain opaque; and those which are seen to determine public consumption. The first have to be expressed, if they are made public at all, as too complex and remote for ordinary people to understand. Then if things go wrong,

Major can always blame the Ecu, ERM, EMU, Gatt, or simply the French. However, decisions known to affect public consumption, like tax, credit and the interest rate, have to be recast as simple morality tales of freedom and choice, rewards and punishments, mutual sacrifice and suffering. Less of a storyteller than Thatcher, nonetheless Major has already come up with: 'If it's not hurting it's not working' in the autumn statement, and inflation as a crime against the poor in his speech to the 1990 party conference.

The immediate problem facing John Major, in such a recomposition of Conservative politics, comes from his own party. If John Major is claiming 'the people' for conservatism, he has to let us know who are the people, who are not the people, and who are the enemies of the people. It was Thatcher's mastery of this form of address which assured her political dominance through the 80s; she could conjure an enemy at the citadel gates out of thin air, and, if stuck, there were always a few inside. Significantly, she began her reign talking about the 'swamping' of aliens; Major began his by condemning racist bigots in his own party. The Tories got John Major precisely because he is not a warrior leader and will stop the 'not one of us' syndrome. He must plan on being able to provide his followers, especially fickle Essex man, with economic rewards, where Thatcher was prepared, in lean years, to make do with political and symbolic ones. What matter a hike in interest rates if the besieged citizens could have Scargill's head on the city walls?

For most of Thatcher's reign, Labour provided her with a ready-made enemy if the barrel of demons was getting a bit low. For as long as Labour was, and is, associated with venerating the state for its own sake it will be vulnerable to this usage. And the last thing Labour needs to do is to fill the gap of a vacant enemy which otherwise Major might have to find in his own party or in foreigners. Alternatively, if Labour merely presents the state, or regional government (in which both John Smith and Bryan Gould are interested) as administrative good sense, then it fails to invest state forms with the political, or symbolic, meaning which they have to carry.

Here we come to the question of how far Labour's policy reviews equip it to come out fighting, on its own grounds. Do they offer a different notion of the nation-state? Do they challenge the Thatcherite distinction between what public policy is concerned with and what belongs in private? Do they define the goals of an international policy, the areas of agreement with other countries, or national groups, on which new policies can be slowly built up, and those to which Labour would be implacably opposed? And do they help define what Labour's political community of interest will be, and how this can be converted into an electoral majority?

Probably not. Let us take it for granted that Labour's policy review process was useful, it had to be started, it had some worthwhile results. Let us assume that much still needs to be done. Let us then ask *how* that discussion can take place, with what aims, rather than what the policy outcomes ought to be (for it is a prerequisite of creative policy discussion that you don't decide in advance what the policy outcome must be).

When Labour undertook its policy reviews it went out of its way *not* to invite the involvement of intellectuals (using this word in its non-professional sense). Labour's own backbenchers complained bitterly that they were excluded and had had no chance to discuss the reviews until they were virtually finalised.

Ask a Labour leader why this exclusion happened, and he or she will say that they had to keep out the crazies. The purpose of the reviews was to re-create a modern, sensible Labour Party in the control of professional party managers - not allow their heads to be hijacked by loony Lefties or union bureaucrats. The politics of exclusion shaped the whole. Whatever the rationale, the result is to starve Labour of the allies and ideas it needs - and to isolate intellectuals from the political debate. They are thus not part of the political community which Labour has to recreate. As employment in a high-status state no longer delivers intellectuals into Labour's political community, this is a particularly serious problem.

Labour cannot stop the recomposition of politics. But for as long as it excludes vital ideas and information from the public arena, it assists its decomposition. Labour's enemy is not the idea of 'self-making'. It is secrecy, locked doors, helplessness, passivity; it is the exclusion from public debate of the enduring problems of poverty, unemployment, exploitation of people and resources. It is the unsolved problem, of unresponsive bureaucracies, and the experience of the state as oppressive and shackling. It is, in the age of telecommunication, lack of knowledge and ideas and voice.

Anything which attacks these great forces, Labour should espouse, from right-to-know legislation and public, political debate on investment and production, through constitutional reform to democratic accountability of international forums like the EC. In short, if Labour is to use the political flux to reform its own political community it has to find a symbolic role for the state; invest regional government and international community with political meaning; force into the public arena, and politicise, the decisions which take place behind closed doors and make people feel helpless; and convince us that it is the hero who can both protect us from harm and liberate us from oppression.

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