

After Thatcher Business As Usual

Does Margaret
Thatcher's departure
oblige Labour to
change tack?
Charlie Leadbeater and
Martin Jacques talk to
Gordon Brown about
Labour in the
post-Thatcher era

Gordon Brown MP was born in 1951 in Glasgow. His father was a Church of Scotland minister and his mother a housewife. He was educated at Kirkcaldy High School and Edinburgh University, where he was rector between 1972 and 1975; from 1976 to 1980 he lectured in politics at Glasgow University. He was then current affairs editor for Scottish Television until 1983 when he was elected MP for Dunfermline East. He is currently shadow secretary of state for trade and industry.

How do you think politics has changed with Mrs Thatcher's departure and John Major's succession to the leadership?

Two things are important. One is that Thatcherism has failed. That's quite clearly seen not just by the public at large but by the manner in which the Conservative Party had to get rid of Mrs Thatcher. And it's not just an ideological failure, it's also an economic failure.

Second, what we are seeing in Mr Major is an attempt to change style, to change some of the rhetoric, and perhaps to change one or two of the policies - not necessarily out of conviction, but to move with public opinion - while trying to hold on to what is essentially the failed ideology that was tried in the 1980s. We have had a government that tried to operate an economy as well as a society according to blunt, free-market principles. It's clearly failed. What we don't have in Mr Major is an alternative ideology. We've got a change of style, and a lot of rhetoric about a classless society and opportunity for all - but we do not have a way forward.

Hasn't he recognised the limits of

Thatcherism? He wants to change the style, and he is changing the rhetoric: but isn't this also going to open the way to a different sort of approach? Education, and the poll tax, are clearly targeted, and Europe is another issue.

I've never believed that a change in style or rhetoric is a change in substance. What I do think will happen, and what I predict will happen is that Mr Major will recognise that there are electoral pressures upon the Conservative Party; he will make one or two modifications, which he will suggest are dramatic and significant modifications, as if he was trying to move to the middle ground. But the economics of Mr Major will always pull him back. And if the Conservatives were in a position to win the next election, then after that election, having made the concession to the electorate, we'd be back to where we started with Mrs Thatcher. I do not see the ideology of Mr Major being that different from Mrs Thatcher's.

But isn't it rather beside the point whether Mr Major believes in the ideology of Thatcherism? The fact is, it's a very diffe-

rent style of government, and the fact is he's open to different pressures, which Mrs Thatcher resisted. So on the serious issues, he's already signalled he's going to move - and this is going to present you with a different kind of political challenge. Because he *has* said he'll move on education. He *has* said he'll move on the poll tax. And he's showing signs of moving on Europe. Now you may, initially, dismiss that as just style. But the fact is that over time, without necessarily having any grand vision, it's going to open up a new kind of Tory approach.

The point is, there is an alternative agenda within the country, a new agenda for the 1990s, to which the Conservative Party has very little relevance. They can't grasp the fact that things have changed, and that the challenges of the 1990s are rather different from those of the 1980s. In 1979, Mrs Thatcher could say to the people of this country that the whole goal of her policy was to set the individual free from the state - she said there was too much collectivism, and taxation and so on. But as we begin the 1990s it's quite clear that there is too little training, too little education, too little community, too little fairness, too little research and development. The key question now is how the community can act as a community. How you can have active and accountable government to rectify weaknesses and flaws that damage individual potential.

And that can only be solved by government working *with* the people of this country, and on behalf of the people of this country. It's about how a government working on behalf of the individual can set individual potentials free. And that's a completely different agenda, unrelated to crude, free-market ideology.

But isn't it the case that with the Heseltine review, the Tories are now going to make the running on the poll tax? They are going to be the ones setting out to review it, to change it. And by the time of the next election it's going to be less of an issue than it is now.

I challenge the Conservatives to abolish the poll tax. The central feature of the poll tax is that it is unrelated to ability to pay. The argument between Labour and Conservatives is whether you should abolish it. Although people may welcome refinements that give them a bit of breathing space as individual tax payers, and although the Conservatives may plough a great deal of money into the poll tax over the next few months, they will not solve that basic problem. That is a clear dividing line between the political parties of this country. We want to abolish it. They want merely to amend it.

You have benefited in the Labour Party from Tory divisions over Europe, of which a lot have had to do with Mrs Thatcher's handling of her cabinet. Major has clearly set out a different way of handling the issue. He is sceptical about a lot of what's

going on in Europe, but he's said that he's going to approach it in a different sort of way. Now isn't it the case that the way you've benefited from Europe in the past - from Tory divisions - is now going to be far more difficult for you to do. And in that way, your own positions on Europe will come in for more scrutiny. So the idea that you will agree to a central European bank, or EMU, only on the basis of commitment to full employment, is as pie in the sky as the Madrid conditions for joining the ERM. The difference on economic and monetary union is that Mr Major has kept his party in a position where they are prepared to rule out economic and monetary union. He is a hawk on this issue: he is more in line with the 'No Turning Back' group than Mr Hurd, or certainly Mr Heseltine. There are enormous divisions within the Conservative Party, that did not go away on the Wednesday morning after Mr Major became prime minister. They'll try to paper over the cracks for some time, but the divisions are still there. At the end of the day, I suspect that Mr Major's position is that he would rule out further steps towards economic and monetary union, if he could get away with it. Whereas the Labour Party position is that we do not do so, and we have said that we are prepared to support change in Europe, and greater integration - as long as measures that are necessary to allow for greater convergence of the economies, including regional and industrial policies, actually take place.

Where do you draw from and what have you rejected in Labour's traditions?

I used to study the history of socialism and the distinguishing feature of democratic socialism in Britain, as opposed to crude, free-market ideology, is that we believe that if individuals are to achieve their full potential then the community must act as a community, to enable that potential to develop. I think people would now accept that the state has got to be both active and accountable in the way it ensures that individuals have access to health care, to education, to affordable housing, to childcare; particularly at points in the life-cycle where things are difficult for individuals and for families. It's also true of the economy, where I believe that for prosperity to be achieved, the government and industry must be involved in that process. It cannot be left to crude, free-market forces.

The theme that runs through all this is the idea of a public interest. That there is a public agenda, and that there is a public good. It's not that individuals must sacrifice their own prosperity for that of the community; but that the community, by acting as a community, can enhance both individual potential and the prosperity of an economy. That is the distinguishing feature. And that leads you to ask: what can government do? How is the power of government used? In what form is it used? It leads on to all sorts of questions about the role of the state as enabler; as partner; as



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financier; in some cases as owner; as sponsor; as catalyst - not necessarily a unilinear or a uniform role. And it also leads on to huge questions that we have not properly answered in the past, but are beginning to answer now: about the devolution of power; about decentralisation; about communities being able to manage their own affairs; about devolution particularly to regional levels and tiers of government.

So you would see the theme of a future Labour government as contributing to refashioning the role of the state in society. Let's take the welfare state. Isn't it the case

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that all Labour has managed to do here is to say: 'Look, what the Tories are doing is a mess. We need to spend more on education and health.' A lot of people would agree with that, but there's been no real agenda to reform education and health, and to really change the welfare state; to change the way it's delivered, to make it more efficient, more consumer responsive.

If you take health care, I think we have put forward a vision that's not purely based on curative treatments, but also on preventative care, giving more freedom to the individual as the patient to take control over his own or her own life. And that's related particularly to

the campaigns on women's health, which is a vastly important issue, but has never been fully recognised by past governments.

And on the second question, of education, I think we are within grasp of a new view of the potential for people through education - lifelong, recurrent, permanent education. Education at any point, at any study. I think that is within our grasp. I'm not saying you can achieve it overnight, but I think that is the vision that is there. And that is completely different from the previous idea of education, which was education for all from five to 16, and for a minority after 16, with sub-standard vocational training for those who didn't get to university or college. That wasn't how people put it, but that effectively was the limit of what was available to people. So education is absolutely central. It's not just central to the release of individual potential; it's absolutely central, also, to the other objective - of economic prosperity.

It seems to me that rather than saying that nothing has changed with the Major election, you could say that a lot has changed. Basically, politics is going in your direction. Rather than being defensive and saying: 'no, Major hasn't opted for any new agenda', you should be saying that Major is moving onto your ground - he is talking about education, and health, and Europe, and the poll tax. You should be much more ambitious and imaginative: you should let yourself go a bit more. You're still too cautious. You're still bedeviled by the cautiousness of the post-1987 general election period.

I feel that in what I've said to you, I've emphasised two things. One is, I do believe that Mr Major will change, but there is no ideological change: there is no recognition that Conservative ideology has been out of touch with the outlook of the British people, and with the challenges of the 1990s. The second thing is that we're not saying that we object to Mr Major because of x, y, or z policy. What we are saying is that there is a real dividing line in political beliefs and perspectives.

Let me put it to you that what you have said is completely wrong. That by the time you get to the next election, what politics will be about is pragmatic adjustment. There will be very little to choose between your policy on Europe, and theirs. They'll be committed to changing the poll tax; so will you, if in an uncertain way. They'll be committed to education; so will you. On the economy, I'm not sure there is much difference between your economic policies, given the constraints of the ERM entry. By the time we get to the next election, what will not distinguish Labour is this great divide. It will be style and trust. It will come down to a question of pragmatic decisions about trust. And on that basis, they are likely to win.

I don't think your analysis is right. Since 1987 we have done three things. The first thing was to look again at our

policies, and apply enduring values to the challenges of the 1990s; and we've done that in a way that I think is generally appreciated throughout the country. The second thing, certainly, was to expose the weaknesses of the Conservative Party; and by exposing the failure of its economic policy, as well as the unfairness of its social policy - the incompetence and mismanagement, as well as the injustice of those policies - we have had a great deal of success, both in opinion poll terms and also in dividing the cabinet and bringing down the prime minister. And the third thing, is that the opportunity is now there, with Mrs Thatcher having gone, to put forward a clear, ideological alternative.

Given the change in prime minister, do you think there is anything that you must now do differently?

What has happened is that we now have the opportunity to concentrate more on our distinctive policies, and more on an alternative agenda. Now that Mrs Thatcher has gone, the agenda everybody is looking at is what political parties will offer this country for the 1990s. I believe that what I am saying faces up to those challenges; applies enduring principles that are far more in accord with the views and values of the British people; and not only comes up with imaginative solutions in particular policy areas but also has a dominating theme, which is that there is a public interest, that people see themselves as part of the community, and that government must be active but accountable. In many ways the resistance to public involvement and public engagement in solving many of our social and economic problems in the past, has not been an ideological resistance to government working with people, or government working with industry, but the form and the accountability of that public action.

That's fair enough, but you've said that already: what you've just said is not new; it's a general statement of principle, if you like. What I'd like you to tell me is in what areas will you now push forward, given the change in the Tory Party. I take it, for example, that it's no accident that the Labour Party has just issued statements on health and education.

I think you misunderstand. The education statement was planned last May. The whole campaign on education was planned then. And the health statement was in place long before Mrs Thatcher resigned. Neil Kinnock said, I think in May, that he expected Thatcher to go: so our planning has been based not on Mrs Thatcher staying, but on the likelihood of her going.

So no change?

What I'm saying is, the fact that you've got a new leader - and therefore criticisms of Mrs Thatcher's style are not the most important item on the agenda any more - gives us an opportunity, rather than giving us difficulties. Because it forces on to the agenda the

real, ideological divide between Conservatives and Labour, irrespective of people's emotions about Mrs Thatcher and her style of government. So it gives us a chance to put forward our own, distinctive views. And it's happened in the context of economic failure. I don't think that's going to leave the political agenda, particularly after what will probably be a relatively short honeymoon period for the prime minister. You've got to accept there's going to be a honeymoon period, but the reality is economic failure. And the ideology that was supposed to combat economic failure has been exposed as unsuccessful. An alternative ideology is not available from the Conservative Party - other than an attempt to meet the likelihood of electoral rejection, by changing the policies a little. And yet at the same time, Labour does have an alternative view, as well as alternative policies.

**Charlie:
'It would be wrong for Labour to deceive itself into thinking that this wasn't a sharp break'**



Maybe what's actually happening, now that Mrs Thatcher's gone, is that it's not going to be a clear fight between two ideological systems. What may have happened in fact is some kind of, in effect, passive revolution by the Conservatives which keeps a bit of the Thatcherite legacy - more or less the bit that Labour has inherited anyway - and meanwhile shifts on to Labour's ground in other areas. So it's not as straightforward as you suggest.

I'll put the issue another way round. If the Conservatives were seriously changing then they would abolish the poll tax in my view, not tinker with it. They would abandon the tax policies that brought the 1988 budget. They would admit the economic errors of the last few years, which basically was engineering a consumer boom without sustained long-term investment in the economy. They would rescind the cuts in training, and not only do that, but enter into a partnership with industry to re-skill the British people. And they would have a supply-side strategy for the economy as well as a new European and international strategy.

But Gordon, they're not going to say that. Even if Heseltine had been elected leader, he wouldn't have said that. Even though he would have marked a very sharp break, it would all have been painted in terms of continuity, because that's how political traditions work. But it would be wrong for Labour thereby to deceive itself into thinking that what was happening wasn't a sharp break.

What I am saying is that the Conservatives will change for electoral reasons. I think at root the ideology is no different.

As we look into the 1990s, do you want to be leader of the Labour Party at some point?

I said my ambition is to serve in a Labour cabinet under Neil Kinnock, and that is the limit of my ambition.

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