

Post-Thatcher Blues

From Paddy Ashdown, leader of the Liberal Democrats

Having spent more than 11 years willing Mrs Thatcher to leave Downing Street, there is more than a little irony in the fact that so many opposition politicians now want to believe that nothing has changed now that she has gone. The only people they have convinced are themselves.

Indeed, there is more than irony in this; there is a profound and damaging miscalculation. The interview with Gordon Brown (MT January) was a sad reminder of Labour's inflexibility and lack of imagination. The more things change, the more Labour will say that they stay the same. I can understand Labour's vested interest. To put it in headline terms, if you put sterling into the ERM, abolish the poll tax and remove Mrs Thatcher, what remains to Labour?

If the next election is to be fought by two other parties whose main claim is that they are different from what they were (the Conservatives are no longer ruled by Thatcher, Labour is no longer socialist) then it will be an open contest as to

who is the more convincing. And both will be stuck selling what is, on the bottom line, a negative message - negative about their opponents and negative about themselves. Labour will be hard-pressed to explain what Brown calls the 'real, ideological divide'. It wanted to run on the 'quiet life after Thatcherism' ticket; but you can't get much quieter than John Major.

At its most successful, Thatcherism's achievement was to force all of us to think. At once, it was hugely unpopular yet significantly dominant. For far too many, Thatcher's departure is a good excuse to put the mental processes back to bed and hope in vain that life is going to return to a pre-Thatcher normality.

So where does this leave the balance of British politics? The jury is still out on John Major. While he has certainly appeared to move from Thatcherism, it is not clear what he is moving towards. In many ways, he is doing to the Conservative Party exactly what Peter Mandelson did to the Labour Party after 1987; going through the list of negative

factors working against his party and hoping to neutralise them. Yet he is inevitably trapped between this objective and his inheritance, sustained by those who voted for him in the leadership contest.

This, surely, is the moment when Britain needs clear leadership. The departure of Mrs Thatcher, and the Conservative revival in the opinion polls, argues that it is timely for others to put forward a positive agenda which is oriented towards the future. She has unblocked the arguments, particularly on Europe and democratic reform.

The new agenda will celebrate Britain's future in an integrated Europe; it will work through the arguments for democratic and constitutional change and for a bill of rights; it will resolve the conundrum of how to stop individualism descending into selfishness and greed by a strengthening of citizenship; it will address the weaknesses of Britain's economy and education system; it will learn to safeguard our precious environment; and it will tackle the economic and social divisions that beset our society.*

Boys' Own

Nicholas Lezard's description of Martin Amis and Ian McEwan (MT January) as over-hyped and over-paid aging brats, was accurate, as far as it went; but that was only a short distance. Lezard misses the central point - why were these particular writers so massively hyped in the first place?

The answer is an old and obvious one. In this country, Amis and McEwan - white, heterosexual, middle-class Englishmen - still exemplify the mainstream, from which the best writing rarely comes. Lezard didn't mention Julian Barnes, whose detective novels, published under the name Dan Kavanagh, are excellent; but, seduced by the dream of being a European intellectual, Barnes also churns out such would-be novels of ideas as *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History Of The World...*

Compare these, together with Amis's execrable, self-parodic *London Fields*, or McEwan's derivative *The Innocent*, to examples of the real thing - Milan Kundera when he's on form, Margaret Atwood, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Primo Levi, Italo Calvino - and the superficiality of the English writers is simply embarrassing.

The extent to which Amis, McEwan and Barnes have hogged the limelight is demonstrated by Lezard's comment that Thatcher has 'presided over the disappearance' of the British novel. In the last ten years, we have produced such writers as James Kelman, William McEwan, Alasdair Gray, Jeanette Winterson, Jenny Diski, Hanif Kureishi, and Deborah Levy, just for starters. Our fiction is at least as healthy now as it has ever been.

Amis, McEwan and Barnes are by no means poor writers, though their recent books have scarcely been their best work. But, by the nature of who they are, they fill up space that should be taken by writers at least as good as they. Long feature articles and reviews are devoted to them, while writers considered to be marginal - anyone regional, anyone ethnic, women who aren't bland and conventional - are shunted off onto the sidelines. Any article about the 'brat pack' in *Marxism Today* should address this problem, rather than treating their rise and fall as synonymic with that of British writing as a whole.#

Rhoda Wainik, Berkhamsted

Red For Go

From Allan Todd, a part-time lecturer in soviet history

The collapse of Stalinism in the east has thrown socialist ideology in the west into chaos, as Eric Hobsbawm has observed (MT October); and now, following the fall of Thatcher, two British consequences of this collapse can clearly be seen.

Firstly, as John Lloyd has noted (MT October), Neil Kinnock has continued to use the impact of Thatcherism to finally achieve what Gaitskill and Crosland failed to do. Under Kinnock, there has been a relatively speedy revisionalist elimination of socialism from the Labour Party, thus finally ending the intellectual and political dichotomy present within the Labour Party since its creation. The long-term tension between socialism and social democracy has been resolved by the transformation of the Labour Party into a classical west European social democratic party.

Secondly, with sad irony, while Kinnock was capitulating to Thatcherism by ditching all remnants of socialism in order to accept the 'free' market,

both in Britain and as enshrined in the Treaty of Rome and the single European market, Thatcherism itself was already encountering resistance outside parliament to its divisive and uncaring policies. These tensions became so serious that Thatcher herself was forced to resign; but one consolation for her, however, is that she feels she has seen the fulfilment of one of her ambitions - the wiping of socialism from the British political arena.

Certainly, as Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques have observed (MT December), there is now no dynamic radical (let alone socialist) alternative to Thatcherism. The Kinnockite social democratic Labour Party has become a party without any clear vision of an alternative future, its purpose being now to support a less harsh version of the system, not to transform it. The most immediate effect of such a change has been to cause large numbers of local activists to stay away from meetings, or even to resign.

Yet it is precisely now, more than ever, with so much of socialist philosophy and prac-

tice in disarray, that socialism need to be kept alive, developed and advanced. There exists a real need for a socialist party, based on the assessment and retention of the best of the authentic socialist tradition, and with a clear vision of where it wants society to go.

The creation of such a party is an urgent task, and is best served by the Communist Party remaining in existence, in order to contribute to the development of radical socialist policies, and to play a leading role in promoting socialist unity. Out of this could come the formation of a new, radical Socialist Party.

Such a development offers the best hope for the politics and people of Britain in the 1990s and beyond, into the 21st century. Despite the problems of so-called socialism in the east, western capitalism has no democratic or humane solutions to the economic and ecological dilemmas of eastern Europe and the third world or, ultimately, of western Europe. The choice for humanity will continue to be, as it has always been, between a democratic and dynamic socialism or the barbarism of the 'free' market and its privatisations.*

Moral Majorities

Amidst all the debate (*MT* December) over what John Major's post-Thatcherism might entail, one noticeable absence has been any consideration of what it will mean for family policy and for sexual politics. In the closing months of the Thatcher government, single-parent families, divorce and working mothers had all been foregrounded as issues needing urgent attention, and on the last in particular we could detect evident strains between different strands on the right.

Under the new leadership, these questions have all receded, but they will undoubtedly return, as will other sexual and familial issues. How Major will react will depend on a number of factors, ranging from the cost to the exchequer to the effects it might have on constructing a winning electoral bloc for Conservatism and disrupting Labour's relationship with traditionalist sections of its own voters.

But in this complex of calculation, Major's policies will be no different from the those of the Thatcher government. Beatrix Campbell (*MT* December) suggests that Thatcher sympathised with Victoria Gillick and 'always supported repressive sexual legislation'. But, whatever Thatcher's personal views, her government ensured that under-16 contraception remained available, just as it defeated efforts to lower the abortion time-limit below 24 weeks or to allow parents to withdraw their children from sex education.

Certainly, with Clause 28 and measures on 'family values' in sex education and obscenity, the Thatcher government pursued a moralist agenda. But it has been a very partial one and it would be a great shame if the myth current on both left and right that Thatcherism is Britain's moral majority should be reinforced by a writer who in her book *The Iron Ladies* was instrumental in showing us that the Conservative Right and moral crusades are not the same. O

Martin Durham, Birmingham

Full Marx

What a brilliant article by Susan Strange (*MT* January). Well done: at last, a writer who brings marxism to today, with a clear analysis of the move-

ment of technology as the major determining factor in political consciousness. (At least at the level of the state and multinational interaction.)

Is this the beginning of the long-awaited (by me, if nobody else) rehabilitation of marxism? And who will move to the next-level to discover the post-modern basis of class divides which reflects the post-modern technological changes? O

M Weiss, Hove

Peak Viewing

Suzanne Moore (*MT* December) correctly quotes our research when she says that tv viewing appears to have peaked sometime in the mid-80s and since then has been down by, on average, around 1.25 hours per week.

She is also right, according to our time-use data, when she speculates that away-from-home activities are on the increase; we reckon that, on average, people now participate in one more such activity per week than they did in 1985/6.

But what does this signify? The impact of hotter summers, an increase in car ownership, an intolerance of each other amongst household members? Probably all of these factors. However, in addition, it just might indicate the beginning of the end of the 'indifferent' society. Affluence, education and above all else experience may be conspiring as agents of major social change.

In particular, the experience of a population which for 30 years has been watching up to 30 hours television per week

(and which in general they claim not to rate highly, according to the British Association of Research Broadcasting programme appreciation scores) may be changing their outlook on life. A jaded population may be beginning to think that there are other, and better, things to do with its time than to watch tv. O

Bob Tyrrell, managing director, The Henley Centre for Forecasting

Famous First Word

I can't help taking the opportunity to comment on your claim to fame in coining the term 'Thatcherism'. Surely, if this is true, you have in fact increased the importance of personality over ideas and policy, helping the Tories to convince the public that a change of government has occurred.

In reality, they are still in power, and should you not feel rather ashamed for having helped them cling on? O

Stephen Newton, Student Liberal Democrats, Salford

Ed: To our knowledge, the first use of the word 'Thatcherism' was in an article by Stuart Hall which appeared in Marxism Today's January 1979 issue. We would be interested to hear of any earlier examples of its use.

Closed Book

And there was I thinking that nowadays the Communist Party understood all about the market. Yet in January's issue I find a review by Malcolm Rutherford of *About Turn*, the record of the CPGB's debate in 1939 on whether or not to label the second world war imperialist. I probably differ from

most *MT* readers in thinking that the eventual decision to do so was right, although for entirely the wrong reasons.

But, as a labour historian, my prejudices are not about to be challenged or confirmed by *About Turn*. Why? Simple. The price - £34.95 is absolutely outrageous. One is almost tempted to suggest that the publisher would rather people did not read it.

Whatever happened to glasnost? I suppose there is always a high price to pay for honesty. O

Keith Flett, London

MT Thinking

If the Communist Party really winds itself up (*MT* December), would you please all come and join the Labour Party? I think a sudden inrush of self-criticism would be most welcome. At least inside the Labour Party you would provide an alternative perspective to the people who shout loudly and think little, or those who neither shout nor think. O

Stephen Jarvis, Manchester

Rest In Peace

In Martin Jacques' leader (*MT* January), he described Margaret Thatcher as the 'most dominant peacetime prime minister this century'. During her period in power, Thatcher fought a war with Argentina and took British troops into the Gulf; she sanctioned the American bombing of Libya, saw nothing wrong with South Africa's apartheid regime and kept quiet when American troops invaded Grenada and Panama.

Perhaps we need to redefine the term 'peacetime'? O

John Bissett, Tyne and Wear

Insightful Title

Why not call *Marxism Today* 'Eyes Left'? That does not equivocate about its correct direction, and it reminds us that the fight for a more caring, more equitable and fairer society will need a little discipline on the way. O

John Walton, Banbury

Editorial Note:

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