

Sarah Benton on the dilemma of the Left
Mental Blocks



David Marquand embodies the title of his new book, **The Progressive Dilemma** (William Heinemann, hbk £20). His is the story of a man who has travelled from Labour loyalty through the founding of the SDP to the Liberal Democrats and to tentative intellectual leadership. The dilemma is how to sustain political loyalty while cultivating the capacity for fresh thinking.

Political leadership is created by these two parents, mass loyalty and intellectual leadership. Why the two should have proved so incompatible in Britain, where new thinking is often defined as betrayal, is one theme of this book.

The size and organised solidarity of Britain's working class convinced many in the 1920s that Labour was destined to be the master of the century. It could have been the heir to the progressive liberalism of Asquith; yet it inherited the intellectuals without the progressive tradition, suggests Marquand. And they were rendered ineffectual by the solid weight of labourism.

As a consequence, no coalition of the sort needed to create lasting progressive hegemony was created. Labour hardly managed to get a

toehold in government before the 1939-45 war, and none of its post-war governments was able to renew itself; to use its period of office not only to change society but also to develop its ideas on what to do next, why and how. Marquand is savage about the failures of the Wilson government, with its 'atmosphere of shabby expediency' and 'of febrile and malicious intrigue' and the ineffectual reforms of the Callaghan government.

For these failures, the intellectuals are in part to blame, particularly Tony Crosland who, in the interests of party loyalty, refused to espouse the cause of Europe. Here again is the progressive's dilemma: being true to party and to free thinking. Making the dilemma doubly intractable inside Labour is the distrust, the suspicion of betrayal, the certainty that the arguments of your enemies can only stem from moral weaknesses (ambition, opportunism). Marquand does not offer an explanation of this ethic, but, if it has a connection to labourism, I suspect it lies in the belief that only a shared history of sacrifice, especially in the mines and docks, guarantees authenticity. All else is treacherous.

The blame lies also in social democracy's autocratic imagination: its belief that government should operate on society as the surgeon operates on an unconscious patient. Politics, avers Marquand, in an echo of 1970s eurocommunism, is above all a *process*, pursued by the organs of civil society. It is here that the dynamism for renewal lies.

The questions Marquand asks, with their focus on the relation of intellectuals and class to party, are of the utmost relevance to us in the 1990s. I'm not sure that his book fits the questions, not least because much of it consists of recycled reviews and essays which stem from different preoccupations. He reiterates that labourism has been the chief block to radical thinking, but, in explaining why, relies wholly on the findings of social scientists, who are notoriously weak at explaining *how* structures and ideas come into being. There is no mention of the unique character of British trade unionism. Nor does he explore the sectional conflicts within labour which have shaped so much of its history. There is nothing about the communist tradition, with its fine irony of simultaneously embracing

and repressing intellectuals more thoroughly than any other political trend.

In contrast to the centrality of theory to communism, the British Labour Party has, in Marquand's account, its ineffable Englishness. He is eloquent about the English passion of Douglas Jay and, especially, Hugh Gaitskell (which seems, word for word, like Margaret Thatcher's). What is the import of the Labour Party of imperial Britain being led by passionately English men? What does this tell us about the exclusion from leadership of dissenters from Scotland or the Jewish East End, from the Caribbean and India? Nor does he explore the conservatism of labour's ethic of fraternity. This is disappointing, for Marquand is one of the few authoritative male voices to have recognised feminism as significant; yet sexual conservatism, and its distinction between private and public, was a founding force of the labour ethic (just as it remains a powerful force inhibiting the development of civic cultures round the world).

Where I think this book works best is in its most recent chapters on political culture, reflecting his political journey of the 1980s and arguments over the social market with, in particular, Robert Skidelsky. Marquand suggests various causes of our anti-political culture. One is 'reductionist individualism' which, in a wonderfully lucid passage, he identifies as the dominant belief which fatally denies the possibility of moral, social change. Another is the false trail pursued by TH Marshall who believed that Britain had already assimilated civic and political citizenship; the next task was social citizenship. But, argues Marquand - in a riposte to the SDP's social market - social citizenship demands a larger role for politics and it is here that we can see how illusory is our political citizenship.

Clearly, the answer is for intellectuals to apply themselves with frantic vigour to the cultivation of a political

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culture - dynamic, democratic, decentralised. Significantly, to recover an intellectual tradition for himself, Marquand has returned to the classics of liberalism, strong on the individual, almost silent on the state. Yet his explanation of how progressive liberalism died (destroyed by loathsome Lloyd George) is unconvincing. In

1914, Liberal intellectuals could neither attract the loyalty of rebellious Empires, women, workers, nor find an intellectual frame for their needs. The danger lurking in Marquand's omissions is that, as heir to this tradition, he is answering to his forebears, not to the actual needs and constituencies of today.