

Major's new appeal

## A Sea Of Confusion

John Major's unpretentious civility and generosity of tone contrasts so markedly with his predecessor's narrow partisanship that it is easy to forget that he may well turn out to be a more successful partisan than she ever was. For all the talk in triumphalist right-wing think-tanks and around despairing left-wing dinner tables, Thatcherism never came near to establishing a genuine moral hegemony. Throughout the Thatcher years, the values of the British people remained obstinately social-democratic, or at least social-liberal. As Ivor Crewe once put it, they stuck to Beveridge even when they abandoned Keynes.

Major's purpose is to convert negative acquiescence into positive support, and become the first Conservative leader since Harold Macmillan to embody a genuine national consensus. To that end, he is positioning himself at precisely the point on the spectrum - post-Keynesian, but neo-Beveridgian; economically dry, but socially wet - where the British people have already pitched their tent. He may not succeed, of course. The Thatcherite legacy hangs heavy around his neck; and he may not be able to throw it off in time to win the election victory without which he cannot remodel his party in his own image. Even if he loses in the end, however, he has already shone a vivid light on the confusion of the opposition parties. In doing so, he has gone a long way towards winning the battle of images and impressions which must precede the battle for votes.

Before his accession, the opposition parties had no need to think. All they had to do was to denounce Margaret Thatcher and rely on the electorate's yearning for change. Now Thatcher has vanished and the change has taken place. The parties of the Left and Centre-Left will have to say something positive, instead of relying on negative expostulations: to propose distinctive projects of some kind, instead of producing ever-more sophisticated compilations of detail. To judge by their performance so far, they will not find it easy to do anything of the sort.

Despite obvious differences of emphasis and style, Labour and the Liberal Democrats have been singing essentially the same tune for some time now. Both have put their faith in a curious hybrid, best described as Owenism without Owen, or perhaps Croslandism without Crosland. Both, in other words, have resuscitated the Croslandite revisionism of the middle 1950s, in the guise of the social market as understood by David Owen and his admirers in the middle 1980s. In Owen's language, both wished to be tough and tender at the same time, market-liberals in the sphere of pro-



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duction, and social-democrats in the sphere of distribution.

It is, of course, an attractive view. It chimes with the mood of the *bien pensant* progressive salariat which swung towards the SDP in the early 1980s and which is now dithering between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Though this is less certain, it may also chime with the mood of the upwardly mobile C2 constituency which deserted Labour for the Conservatives in 1983 and 1987, and which Labour must recapture if it is to have any hope of forming a government again.

Unfortunately it has three big weaknesses, none of which has yet been spotted on the opposition benches. The first and politically the most fatal is that it is virtually indistinguishable from the tune which Major and Patten are now singing. As so often in British history the Tories have walked off with the Whig's clothes. Major's ministers are also Owenites without Owen; social marketeers in search of a synthesis of toughness and tenderness. So, in arguing for a social market, the opposition parties are no longer offering a distinctive principle. The most they can offer is more competent management of what has become a new consensus. And in arguments over managerial competence, governments are almost always better placed than opposition.

The second weakness goes deeper. The Owenite social market - market forces to create wealth; a welfare state to redistribute it - is a poor parody of the real thing. Social-market capitalism on the central European model is infinitely more complicated, and

depends on infinitely more subtle social processes than the crude mixture which wears its name in this country. For the whole point about the central European model is that it does *not* rely on the market to create wealth - or not, at least, on the market as envisaged in the dominant paradigm of the Anglo-American economic profession. It blends competition and co-operation in a way that the Anglo-American economic tradition cannot even comprehend; and it is underpinned by solidaristic values and assumptions which are utterly alien to the products of that tradition. When British politicians say they want a social market, what they really mean is that they want a more compassionate and perhaps more egalitarian version of the casino capitalism we have always had.

That leads on to the third weakness. For all its intellectual sophistication, Croslandite revisionism was always philosophically flawed. It stood for redistribution, but it put forward no moral grounds on which those who stood to lose might have been persuaded that it was their duty to make sacrifices on behalf of others. The moral case for equality was assumed, but not argued; fraternity or community - the only secular value capable of filling that vacuum, and of generating a moral language in which the case for redistribution could be put convincingly - had no place in the doctrine at all. Exactly the same flaw disfigures its new, social market avatar. Like yesterday's Croslandite revisionists, today's social marketeers also lack a moral language in which to argue for the redistribution which, if they mean what they say, their whole approach must entail. And, like yesterday's revisionists, they lack it because they also lack a philosophy of community.

It would be a ludicrously tall order to expect Neil Kinnock or Paddy Ashdown to fill that gap in the weeks or months before the next election. A new moral and intellectual paradigm, transcending the categories of traditional Anglo-American liberalism as well as of traditional socialism, is unquestionably in the making, but it will be a long time before it can provide the basis for a governing philosophy capable of guiding a political party. But that does not mean that the opposition parties can do nothing to clothe their current philosophical nakedness. In the economic sphere, at any rate, the case for a real German-style social market, as opposed to an Owenite copy, is waiting to be made. The first opposition leader to make it will reap a rich harvest. •

*David Marquand will be writing a monthly column.*