

Blueprints

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Most striking of all, perhaps, in Chris Patten's view of the Conservative future (*Marxism Today*, February) is the curious fact that British conservatism now seems stuck in the groove of presenting itself as a form of radicalism. My view is that Conservatives should give radicalism back to those to whom it belongs. The reason Conservatives find themselves in this presentational fix is that Mrs Thatcher inherited a ship of state so encrusted with barnacles, so hopelessly waterlogged from incompetent management, that the removal of hindrances to decent navigation looked like a programme almost of social transformation.

For this reason, some people mistakenly thought that she was not a real conservative. What actually was conservative in her attitude, however, was a confidence in the enterprise of the British people, an enterprise being progressively stifled by governmental activism.

In these terms, the worst mistake to make is to think that nothing is happening unless governments are embarking

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Chris Patten (*MT* February) is clearly anxious to lead the stampede away from Thatcherism; either for electoral reasons or for a genuine distaste for the ideas that powered the 1979-1990 period of British politics. There is little substantive in what was said that signalled the end of traditionalist classical liberal economics - Mr Patten's comments were the very model of blandness - but much in the style which indicated that we are set for a period of governmental hyper-activity.

Patten threatens better and more concerned government; Mrs Thatcher simply promised less. Although she was not entirely successful in this (witness the long-term craven submission to the house-owners' lobby, amongst other things) she did represent an attitude of mind which was genuinely sceptical of the claims of politics. In Britain, the likelihood of some form of socialism became an inexorability under previous Conservatives (eg Macmillan, Heath *et al*).

Naturally, Patten appeals to the 'social market economy' to

on grand ambitious programmes. It is particularly in revolutions that governments are wildly active, and the result is to reduce people to ciphers. By contrast, when Burke was writing the greatest of all conservative arguments, the government did very little interfering with society, while many of the people of Britain were creating the 'industrial revolution'. The basic conservative view must be that enterprising people act, and the main business of governments is to respond to these initiatives by making appropriate changes in law.

From this point of view, it is rather dispiriting to find Chris Patten giving currency to new bits of rather sinister jargon. It is not merely my sense of semantic hygiene which induces revulsion against calling voluntary associations 'non-governmental organisations' which then turns into the grisly acronym NGO's. It is the assumption contained in the description that the basic activity of society is government, and that any other enterprise must be specified in distinction from it.

I'm glad however, that Patten

validate the new conservatism. Indeed, there are few people in any of the major political parties who have not appealed to this anodyne concept at some time. Who can deny that there is a social dimension and collective context to any serious individual action? The most ideological *laissez-faire* theorists always maintained that the exchange economy depends on a whole range of tacit rules, social conventions and practices which are not reducible to individual choice. What they objected to was the use of government to dispense collective benefits to politically-favoured groups. It is this 'politicisation' of society, which has undermined all that is genuinely social and voluntary in our society.

Conservatives do not need a new agenda, but rather a restoration of these old principles of limited government: the rule of law, a widened property system and a sound currency. All of these were instrumental in temporarily arresting Britain's apparently irreversible postwar decline. Sadly, these reliable principles were badly compromised in the last five years of Mrs Thatcher's premiership. The 'way forward' for

gives short shrift to Marquand's use of the term 'empowerment'. Much left-wing thought in our century has been adept at finding active ways of describing the process of turning people into the victims of despots. 'Power to the people' for example, or the term 'liberation', which made the false assumption that people were moving from slavery to liberty, and often subjected those who previously enjoyed civil rights to the likes of Idi Amin. 'Empowerment' is the most recent of these terms, and I find it sinister because it suggests that certain possibilities of enterprise are being given to people by a no doubt beneficent government.

In the looking glass world of current political discourse, the project of a bill of rights (along with social charters and the rest) appeals to people who like to think of government as a kind of Santa Claus dispensing benefits. It is not surprising that a rhetoric of benevolence should have great appeal to the current Conservative government, but a replay of Butskellism would be a high price to pay for a bit of brand differentiation.

Conservatives is, in fact, to go backward. These ideals cannot be taken for granted; they constitute intellectual and moral capital which needs constant replenishment. They are scarcely mentioned by Mr Patten.

This does not imply that Conservatives should be anti-Europe or, least of all, unconstitutional. However, it does mean that the attitude should be sceptical rather than enthusiastic. Hence, European decision-making should not be subject to majority rule (about which Mr Patten is thoroughly ambiguous) because it is this principle which allows self-interested groups to form socially-destructive coalitions (the real British disease). Also, any constitution-making should be equally concerned with economic liberties as with civil liberties, since the latter are useless without the former.

It is the identification and preservation of restraints and the recognition of inevitable governmental fallibility (and her failure here was the principal reason for Mrs Thatcher's downfall) that constitute true conservatism. Chris Patten's enthusiasm for the future tends to make him neglect the lessons of the past .

Depth Probe

Kevin Robins (*MT* March) provides an example of how mystification of the Gulf war through cultural jargon has arisen. While revealing some simple antagonisms between east and west, he ends up himself in a tangle of complexity and ambiguity about the essentials of the Gulf war.

In his article, there is nothing specific about the conditions and reasons for this conflict. It sounds like a timeless explanation. There is no history in it. Robins is apparently criticising Francis Fukuyama's 'post-historical' approach. Nevertheless, what Robins himself is doing is more than the 'end of history'; it is the disappearance of real images of history.

Islamic fundamentalism vs reason and truth, modernity vs pre-modernity, and so on. He does not refer to the basic question of why at that very moment and in that very region a world-war type of war was fought, unusually, behind the fig-leaf of the United Nations. Instead he provides all the substitutes for any genuine historical consciousness. There is, therefore, no historical depth, no past, no present, and no future.

The antagonisms and gaps between the east and the west have long existed. What exactly changed in the outbreak of this war? Again, he gives no answer. What is missing is the loss of ability to position ourselves within this space. At the end of this 'post-Reason' article one might feel that Robins is talking, we are listening, and nothing has really happened in the Gulf in February 1991.

Bulent Gokay, Wolfson College, Cambridge

Post-marx

I have been thinking about a new name for *Marxism Today*, and have now narrowed it down to two possibilities: *The Post*, to reflect the post-modern, post-industrial, post-communist, post-Thatcherite, post-Marxist nature of the magazine, and *The New Times*, for obvious reasons.

Please change the name soon. At present it's very misleading. I'm sure people who have seen me reading it are afraid to discuss politics with me on the grounds that I may become aggressive, try to sell them a grubby Trotskyite paper and start using words like 'vanguard' and 'struggle' a lot.

Robin Brown, London

Iraq And Ruin

During the Gulf war, religion has been used by both sides as a powerful ideological weapon. The war has been presented as a triumph of high technology, the cleanest war in history - yet its moral force draws strength from evocations of the crusades.

Saddam Hussein has made repeated calls for a *jihad* (holy war) and added the words *allahu akbar* (God is great) to the Iraqi flag, in a cynical attempt to exploit the emotional solidarity felt by Muslim people. In parallel, George Bush has been blessed in what he called a 'just war' by his closest spiritual adviser, the evangelist Billy Graham, who was an overnight guest at the White House. The Church of England has acted as an arm of the establishment by finding reasons for a 'just war', as has Cardinal Hume, while the Conservative Party's research department has published a pamphlet justifying the war according to Christian teaching.

The religious definitions of the conflict from both sides have played into the hands of both racists and fundamentalists. It was inevitable that this would cause a backlash; Arabs, many of them political refugees, are being detained. Having constructed the 'enemy without', the media has set about finding the Muslim/Arab 'enemy within'. Religious intolerance is alive and well. •
Estella Schmid, Women Against Fundamentalism, London

Left On The Shelf

Sarah Benton's review of David Marquand's timely book *The Progressive Dilemma* (MT February) pinpoints the weakness of centre-left thinking and its failure this century. In June 1983, after Labour lost by five million votes, I briefly thought that it should offer an echo of Thatcherism. Then the post-marxists of *Marxism Today* used their gurus, Althusser, Foucault and Gramsci, to invent a new politics, trying to breathe fresh life into the corpse of marxism.

The left still swings from one issue to another trying to appropriate various causes for itself - feminism, green politics, Charter 88 - without purpose or examination of the left's basic principles. Kinnoch's policy review rightly made Labour a post-socialist

party - it still has to acknowledge this openly to win support, develop a new language of politics beyond labourism and find a new purpose.

The solution for this country is not another Labour government. The failure of the left goes back further than the 1920s, as Marquand suggests. Under mass suffrage from 1885, the Tories have only lost four elections with a working majority. What has gone wrong with the left? The centre-left needs Labour, but Labour needs the centre for a wider base and vision to conceive and govern a better Britain.*
Gerry Hassan, Dundee

Bed Bugs

All anti-Gulf war marchers should feel duly chastened by Jane Taylor's criticisms of our futile antics (MT March). How could we all have been so unimaginative, so old-fashioned, as to demonstrate around four simple slogans? How could we have failed to realise that public protest would 'subvert' and 'diminish' our opposition to the Gulf war?

It should have been obvious to us all from the very beginning that the most effective course of action was to do nothing; to sit at home and agonise over the fact that nobody else is doing anything on our behalf either. In that way we can all help develop a 'new', 'higher quality', 'empowering' form of politics, without even getting out of bed! •

Francis King, London

Dodgy Header

It is a nauseating fact that Sad-

dam Hussein sees himself as the heir of the 'Saracen', Saladin, as well as more ancient empires. Does this have to be compounded by your headline, 'The New Saladin' (MT March)? Salah al-Din was a Kurd. The suffering of the Kurdish people at the hands of the four nations which presently control their destinies, but especially at the hand of Iraq, should have precluded such a headline. In this case, 'comparisons are odious'. O

David MDuckels, Yorkshire

With A Whimper

In a recent article (MT October), Eric Hobsbawm concluded: 'let us commiserate with Mr Francis Fukuyama, who claimed that 1989 meant 'the end of history'... Few prophecies look like being more short-lived'. The Gulf war, so it is claimed, has shown Fukuyama's thesis to be nothing more than a fashionable intellectual trinket, of which the world will soon get bored.

However, if one recollects the *Marxism Today* response to Fukuyama, it becomes clear that news of the death of his thesis is greatly exaggerated. For MT did not criticise Fukuyama for heralding the demise of marxism as such, but for not recognising new potential challenges to the hegemony of 'liberal democracy'; challenges from ecological movements and Islam.

A close inspection of the nature of the Gulf war has shown that Islam presents no such threat. The sight of Islamic countries like Syria and Egypt 'cannibalising' another in the name of American interests has shown that Islam is not much more than a local and residual pre-modern consciousness. It

is not a world-historical movement capable of challenging western capitalism.

With the demise of the Green Party in Germany (its most fertile political environment) it seems that your new social movements are not moving very far. If MT embraces such post-marxist concepts as post-Fordism, then consistency demands that you adopt a post-historical perspective as well. Otherwise, you are just Zeitgeist picture-painting (with very thick brush strokes) and this, to say the least, is intellectually disreputable.*

Neil Turnbull, Tyne and Wear

Sweet Freedom

Revolution should be fun. Dissidence need not always be expressed in the self-righteous babblings of burned-out marxists. For most of us lesser mortals, life is not an extended Iris Murdoch novel. Jane Taylor's article (MT March), on her search for new forms of dissent simply emphasised the lack of imagination which is characteristic of much of the British intelligentsia, as well as producing some valid tips for the future.

I can sympathise with her reasons for not attending demonstrations any more, but some of the most dynamic ideas and strategies of the Left have emerged from groups she dismisses as parasitical. We should be able to salvage the best traditions of socialism and democracy - mutually exclusive categories until recently.

New ways of political participation are essential; media subversion and cultural terrorism are infinitely more threatening to the *ancien regime* than any attempt to 'storm heaven' again. A culture of opposition and dissidence, reminiscent of Hoffman, Kerouac and the best of Gramsci and McLuhan, must, unlike the marxism before it, embrace the traditions of surrealism, humanism and libertarianism and reject the certitudes of the past. Liberation is just a word of forgiveness away.

Cynthia Framel, Teesside

Editorial Note:

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Cartoon: Nick Newman