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Who Wins Dares

New Labour - New Politics

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Within a matter of weeks Labour will be in government and Tony Blair will be Prime Minister. All the evidence suggests that people made up their minds about this a long time ago and are waiting only to convert this settled judgement into votes. They want the Tories out and they are prepared to give New Labour a chance. The 'time for a change' theme that failed to work in 1992 will work in spades this time. We are not supposed to tempt providence by saying it, but I would not be at all surprised if Labour won by a mile.

This view is now so unexceptional that it requires a real effort to register how extraordinary it is. In the whole post-war period there has never been another moment when a change of government was so confidently and universally expected. Not in 1945, or 1951, or 1964, or 1970, or 1974, or 1979: only in 1997 will there be a real shock if it does not happen. It is an event that has already entered the thinking and shaped the assumptions of mandarins and markets alike.

Yet what is even more extraordinary is that it was only yesterday, in the wake of the 1992 defeat, that Labour's final obituaries were being written. The future was to be found in Basildon; and just down the road at the University of Essex the clever analysts explained why Labour was finished. Texts were hastily produced on the emergence of a political system in Britain that was dominated by one party. Yet here is New Labour now making a plausible bid to become that dominant party. Those with a taste for such language might even describe this as a hegemonic project, as the party endeavours to become the new commonsense. The combination of Conservative disintegration and Labour renewal has transformed the landscape of British politics in dramatic and unexpected fashion. It is a moment of quite exceptional opportunity for the centre left.

It is seen as such by social democrats elsewhere. After years of intellectual and political retreat, New Labour suggests the promise of a turning tide that may reach well beyond these shores. Whereas Labour once looked to social democrats in Germany or Sweden for modernising models, the gaze is now firmly in the opposite direction. The hope is that 'new' Labour offers a model for a new social democracy. As well as a moment of opportunity, this also makes it a moment of exceptional responsibility.

For if Labour does not win after all, or if victory is merely the prelude to further defeat, then the implications for social democratic politics are dire. If, having renewed itself so comprehensively, Labour still does not win, then it is difficult to know what else it can do or where else it can go. But if, having won, its project turns out to be a chimera, then it is difficult to know what social democracy as a whole can still do. It is as well to be clear about how high the stakes are.

It is also as well to be clear about how unusual the position is in which Labour now finds itself. In its entire history the party has governed with a secure majority for only nine years. That fact should be repeated every day by those who think it is easy for Labour to win elections and re-elections. One of the fatal delusions of the old ultras on the left was to believe that the behaviour of Labour in power was the problem, instead of the failure of Labour to secure power over a continuing period. The present moment should not be confused with a permanent condition.

Nor should the luxuries of opposition be confused with the tribulations of government. There has probably never been a more professional opposition anywhere than the current Labour Party. It has had lots of practice of course. But it is awesome nevertheless. The trouble is that it provides little real preparation for government. Opposing an unpopular Government is an unreliable guide to the politics of power in a world of fickle electorates and thin allegiances. The former invites professional spinners; the latter requires a political project.

A Governing Project?

Does New Labour have one? This has always been the key question. The answer to it will determine whether we are on the eve of a new progressive period in British politics or merely entering an interlude in Conservative rule. It is a question about whether the Blairite project for the Labour Party, including the audacious revision of Clause IV, is to be matched by an equally audacious project for the country. In my view it has to be, if it is to fulfil its promise rather than

ending in tears. Who dares wins certainly; but, in this case, it has to be who wins dares too.

The danger is that the business of winning an election has inevitably preoccupied Labour's outlook for so long, subordinating everything else to it, that the even more difficult business of preparing a strategy for government has received less attention than it should have. Yet governments need bold themes and strong narratives if they are to sustain their purpose and win popular support and understanding over a protracted period. The Thatcherite narrative, first told in the late 1970s, managed to endure until the early 1990s. New Labour's needs no less force and reach.

This suggests a further danger, of a critical and pivotal kind, to which attention now needs to be paid and a response established. There may be those who think that a governing project can be assembled and sustained within the parameters of spin-doctoring, media-managing, polling and focus-grouping. It can not. I am prepared to believe that these black arts are indispensable to the conduct of modern politics; but I am not prepared to accept that they provide a substitute for a governing vision. In this respect the example of the Clinton White House, now chronicled in all its unappealing detail, is a model to be avoided rather than emulated. An obsession with keeping the ship afloat can too easily divert attention from where it is supposed to be going - at least until it hits the rocks.

But enough of dangers. It is more important to grasp the opportunities. The fact is that we simply do not know what New Labour in office will turn out to be like. What we do know is that there is now an opening for the left centre in Britain of a historically significant kind. Whether we take advantage of it, and how we do so, is up to us.

In crucial respects we are in uncharted territory. The old ideological paradigms have collapsed, along with the old allegiances that sustained them. New issues have appeared that confound the traditional categories of left and right. We are forced to think in new ways on a whole range of fronts. The immediate post-1989 atmosphere of market triumphalism has proved short-lived, but the succeeding atmosphere remains cloudy and confusing. Social democracy has finally been liberated from the guilt-by-association of communist tyranny; but it is not yet clear what this liberation will bring with it.

This new environment can seem threatening and unsettling. The fashionable rhetoric of globalisation seems to promise, or threaten, an end to politics, as choices are dissolved and imperatives are asserted. That is precisely what is intended in some quarters, allowing the forces of global capital to roll back the social democratic gains of the second half of the twentieth century and claim an

untrammelled sway. For those who want to feel gloomy, there is no shortage of material to feed on. But this is an abdication, not a response.

The same is true, to come nearer home, of some of those on the self-styled left who affect a scornful disdain for the renewal of Labour. This kind of attitude is so ingrained in the traditional culture of the left that it should perhaps no longer surprise us. It is disabling nevertheless. Above all, it misses the nature of the moment and fails to engage with the opening that has been created. It has the great advantage of course that it dispenses with the need for any fresh thinking and can luxuriate in the mind-set of permanent opposition. Yet this is precisely the moment when fresh thinking is most urgently required.

It may be comfortable for some to believe that New Labour simply represents an accommodation to the New Right world that has been created since 1979. Comfortable, but wrong. When business leaders line up to endorse the social chapter and the minimum wage, it suggests that arguments have not been abandoned but won, and that the limitations of the New Right project are increasingly apparent. The terms of political debate are changing, and Labour's renewal has been central to this. A new language of public interest, community, stakeholding and security has already succeeded in puncturing the airy certainties of market individualism. Of course the task now is to carry this project into government; but it is also necessary to acknowledge the importance of what has already been achieved.

What can be said with certainty is that if Labour in government did turn out to be merely an accommodation with what went before then its days would soon be numbered. It would be conservative where it should be radical. Sooner or later, people would opt for the true believers again. What is distinctive about the New Labour project, which is why it terrifies the life out of the Conservatives, is that it is neither a return to old labourism nor an embrace of neo-liberalism. It offers a new synthesis - of market and state, public and private, individual and collective, rights and responsibilities - that opens up a distinctive political direction.

But it is a project still in the making. Nor does it have a ready name (though elsewhere I have described it in a revived language of 'liberal socialism'). Tony Blair has frankly acknowledged its open and evolving character and issued a standing invitation to those with ideas to contribute to its further development. If only we dare say so, this is a time of intellectual and political excitement. The centre left has begun to win the battle of ideas again, after a long period of demoralisation and retreat, and is poised to translate this into political victories.

The importance of the internal changes in the party is that they are the pre-

condition for the party's ability to change the country. The former does not substitute for the latter, but instead enables it to happen. Far from removing the party's ideological underpinning, the translation of Clause IV into a statement of core beliefs and values provides a serious reference point against which to measure policies and achievement. The old statement, in all its irrelevance, could be safely ignored; the new one is a discipline and a challenge. And the biggest challenge of all is to develop the political project that connects beliefs and programmes. The old axiom about the left needing always to combine a fundamentalism about aims with a permanent revisionism about means has never been more appropriate.

The Radical Centre

It is becoming usual to describe what is being embarked upon in the language of a 'radical centre'. This captures the crucial sense in which it is not an accommodative consensus of lowest common denominators but a radical new departure. We may talk of synthesis and balance in describing it; but the product is something different and distinctive from its parts. Instead of state *or* market (the basis for the post-war 'mixed' economy), the radical centre thinks in terms of state *and* market. It deals similarly with a whole range of other false opposites. The left's critique of markets and the right's critique of states have usually been lost in a sterile dialogue of the ideologically deaf. Once combined, new possibilities are immediately opened up. Instead of merely thinking about intervening in, substituting for and regulating markets (the approach of the traditional left), the radical centre will also explore ways in which a clever state can frame and shape markets for public purposes.

There is also the need to think radically about the state itself. For too long the left's approach to the state has seemed only to consist of an ambition to make it bigger. Not only this, but there has been a curious neglect of how well the state actually performs the public services with which it is charged. It might be imagined that those people who most believed in public services would also be those who were most energetic in ensuring that such services performed effectively and efficiently on behalf of those for whom they are provided. Yet, for a variety of reasons, this has often not been the case. It now needs to be.

This means thinking about what the state should do and how it should do it. The radical right wants to 'shrink' the state as its central ideological mission, with public spending cut to an ever-diminishing share of GDP. There is no evidence to suggest that this will contribute to economic growth, but it will produce a drastic erosion of public services and the principles upon which they are

based. The radical centre must emphatically oppose this project with its own. However, if this is seen in merely defensive and reactive terms, it will eventually fail.

The central truth of traditional collectivism, that it is both sensible and equitable for a range of services to be provided through common rather than individual provision, remains as relevant as ever. For most people the only way to get better health or education is to pay more into the common pot and it is a basic duty of the centre left to provide them with this choice. But this does not mean that old-style collectivism should be defended. People want more control over where their money is going, new mixes of public and private provision, and more diversity in what is provided. A new collective individualism will take seriously the task of enabling and empowering people to achieve their own purposes in their own way. No single model or approach flows from this, but many should be tried. Forms of hypothecated taxation (with the NHS as a prime candidate) could reconnect what people pay into public services with what they get out of them. New mutual institutions could be sponsored to undertake a range of activities, nourishing a sense of direct ownership and breaking the individual / state dichotomy. The state could franchise out provision (including, perhaps, schools which are under-performing or failing) to new suppliers. As with the current discussions about the future financing of pensions and continuing care, opportunities for new forms of collective provision present themselves in relation to developing needs. The public service 'charters' need to guarantee enforceable rights rather than managerial aspirations.

Only those who have come to believe that higher public spending (and higher taxes) is the hallmark of progressive politics will be troubled by this sort of agenda. Decent public services require decent taxes. Paying your taxes is a duty of citizenship. Those who have most should pay most. The battle to ensure that public spending gets its proper share of the proceeds of a growing economy is an important one. However, when all this is rightly said (and part of a growing confidence on the centre left should involve feeling able to say these things without the constant fear of being misunderstood) it is no longer enough to define centre left politics, even if only implicitly, in terms of a belief in more public spending and higher taxes. If it was, then the Conservative Government could be enlisted as supporters. The truth is that a bigger state is not necessarily a better state. To say this is not a retreat but an advance.

The real retreat, and abdication, is not to be prepared to think our way through the situation in which we now find ourselves. The fact that Western electorates want ever better public services but seem ever more reluctant to pay for them is not an invention of the right. Nor is the fact that states are

constantly besieged by a mass of interest groups (not the least of which are state employees) demanding more money for their own causes. In the past Labour has too often been content to construct its policies out of such interests, which is why it has frequently ended so badly and with such disillusionment. The honest course is to acknowledge that Labour has access to no magic money and that spending more on one thing usually means spending less on something else. Then we may at last get a serious discussion on the famous 'language of priorities' and decide what we would like the state to do more, and less, of and how we would like it to do it.

Not to engage with this task is to ensure that the right's agenda will win. An old kind of social democratic collectivism had run into the sands. Unless a new kind of social democracy is now developed, the pass will have been sold. But this implies a commitment to radical imagination and policy innovation. Having declared that a new kind of social democratic project of the radical centre is available, Labour will have to demonstrate that it can be delivered. The tough issues - welfare reform, pathways into work, education and training, crime - will yield to nothing less than radical approaches.

This is why a project of the radical centre can not be merely a matter of trimming and tacking in search of some centrist middle ground. There may well be pressures for Labour to proceed in this deracinated way, both from within and from without; but to succumb to such pressures would soon prove fatal to the enterprise that has been embarked upon. There is a new consensus in the making, and Labour is its midwife. But it is a consensus for radicals: it must be actively delivered, not passively inherited.

The same is true of the stakeholding argument that has already opened up much interesting new territory. It is an argument whose applications are still being explored, both in relation to business and social inclusion, but it is a tool for radicals. The fact that we have, for the first time ever, the prospect of Labour and business in constructive partnership is a matter of historic significance and much to be welcomed. But if it is not to be merely a passive partnership it needs to be seen as the basis for an active programme that combines economic dynamism and social decency, making British capitalism both more successful and more responsible. Only conservatives, in each party, will resist such a programme.

New Labour, New Politics

The argument so far has been that New Labour's project is distinctively new and inescapably radical. Although its outlines are now clear, the filling in is still

going on. It represents the most serious and ambitious attempt anywhere to construct a viable basis for a centre left politics in the intractable and uncertain conditions of the modern world. It is full of risks and its success can not be guaranteed. But it has turned the intellectual and political tide in a way that seemed inconceivable only a few short years ago. In doing so, it has opened up exciting new spaces in the tired old landscape of British politics. How these spaces will be exploited, and what a new landscape will come to look like, is still unclear. What is clear, though, is that politics in Britain is on the move.

It needs to be. Labour's new project implies and requires a new kind of politics. These are indissolubly linked. It is not just that it is hard to make new models with old tools, but that we have inherited tools that are wholly unfit for our purpose. Reinventing social democracy means reinventing politics too. This involves a mixture of styles and structures, with some elements that are common to contemporary political life elsewhere and some that are particularly relevant to Britain. There is a disengagement from traditional politics, with some people turning to specific issues and causes but many more simply giving up on politics and politicians altogether. Clever people announce the 'end' of politics, as a world out of control makes a mockery of those who pretend to be able to control it. A strategy of *sauve qui peut* can easily come to be regarded as the only sensible life plan.

This should be seen as an urgent challenge by everyone who clings to the classical ideal of politics as the activity through which free citizens engage with their common concerns in the public interest under procedural rules. If we give up on this, or allow it to be subverted, then we really are in trouble. It means that politics is more than the swamp of particular interest and pressures; but it also means that conventional politics has to find new ways to connect with the vibrant world of groups and causes. A fundamental requirement is that the political process itself is not felt to be corrupted, or people will turn away in revulsion and contempt. Not the least of Labour's obligations will be to repair the real damage done on this front by the Conservative sleaze merchants.

But the style of politics needs to change too. New Labour's project is designed for a world of radical uncertainty and flux. If it is to engage people honestly with it, it needs a vocabulary and style to match. The normal language of politicians is one of glib certainties, yet there is a disjuncture between this kind of language and the realities of the world in which people know they now live. The effect of this is that people simply stop listening. It is all too easy for the casual listener or viewer to spot a politician - the leaden blocks of words, the truculent certainties; the routine swipe at opponents - and the effect is instant disengagement. The sound-bite is the enemy of the conversation; yet it is a con-

tinuing conversation between politicians and people that is needed. The pressures to feed the daily media machine are intense and genuine conversation is difficult when words are reported not as contributions to a debate but as deviations from the utterances of somebody else. But a political project has to break through this if it is to keep its narrative going in a way that people will understand and identify with. The big themes and the middle distance should not be obscured by the myopia of the daily spats. Instead of being enslaved by these new restraints, new politicians should walk through them. They may well be pleasantly surprised by the results.

The British case is particularly dire. Yah-boo adversarialism is a political model that is wholly inappropriate to the kind of world in which we now live. It would be thought to be outrageous if it was applied to other areas of life - such as running businesses or governing schools - yet it dominates the whole culture and structure of Westminster politics. It has a bias against political learning built into it and makes sensible co-operation almost impossible. It is embedded in the electoral system and expressed in the ritualised conflict that structures the House of Commons. It polarises every issue and inhibits independent thinking. It is a model for a world that has gone. Labour should have no hesitation in saying that it wants to break it and replace it.

Only in Britain does it come as a revelation or a heresy to suggest that it is quite possible for parties and politicians to cooperate and compete at the same time. The current discussions between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, following the example of the Scottish Constitutional Convention, are significant precisely because they break a sterile mould. The sky does not fall in and it looks like politics for grown-ups. Some in both parties may prefer the old games, but most know that there is a new politics in the making. It is long overdue.

This also responds to the unique nature of the opportunity now available to the centre left in Britain. If this opportunity is not seized with imagination and vigour, then history will rightly be unforgiving. New Labour's project requires for its implementation the building of a progressive majority and alliance that can sustain it for a generation. The means of putting this together are within our grasp. The collapse of old ideological and sectarian dividing lines has created a new political mansion with many rooms. A new progressivism taps into the early century inheritance of New Liberalism and ethical socialism that represents our most fertile political tradition. The opportunity is glimpsed not just to win an election and end a long period of Conservative rule, but to construct a governing majority on the centre left that can finally end the much longer Conservative hegemony in British politics. This is not a moment for those without historical imagination or with an aversion to risks.

It may seem that this is just a covert way of talking about electoral reform. In part (but only in part) it is. This will not be understood by those who are hostile to such change on the grounds that it will simply give excessive power to small parties, with sundry examples easily plucked from assorted places to make the point. This is a perfectly sound argument, and there are other equally sound arguments that can be called in aid too in defence of the status quo. The problem with them is that they miss the moment that is now confronting us. For this is the moment when we are called upon to decide whether we want to make a serious bid to construct a governing majority on the centre left that will dish the Tories for as long as we can see. We may, of course, decide that we do not want to attempt this, that it is too risky, that we would rather go on hoping to get a turn from time to time at winner-takes-all politics. But if we do decide on this course, we should be honest in acknowledging the choice that has been made. It is a time for boldness, but if timidity is chosen instead we should at least know what we have done.

Labour's referendum commitment forces the issue. Again, boldness demands early action on this front from a new Government, before the window of opportunity closes and politics-as-usual sets in. 'If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly.' The signs are that this will not happen. But just as remaking Clause IV was generally thought to be impossible to do until it was done, so too with electoral reform. Both involve imagination and audacity, the former for the party, the latter for the country.

Doing Politics Differently

It is because it is for the country that the argument can only partly be cast in terms of electoral calculations. Electoral reform matters primarily because of its contribution to a new way of *doing* politics in Britain, in which voters have more choice and are more engaged as citizens in electoral participation. Likewise, the referendum commitment (on this issue as on others) is important not just in itself but because of what it signals about a desire to explore new forms of democracy. It is odd that, while there is so much attention to the way in which economic and social change is forcing us to rethink our approach to whole tracts of policy, there is not yet the same attention to the way in which political life is also part of the same process of change. Inherited political structures, and the assumptions behind them, demand no less radical revision than we know we have to bring to other areas. More than that, it may well be that the ability to make enduring change in these areas will depend upon the extent to which the political process can be refashioned.

It is from this perspective that Labour's programme of constitutional reform should be approached. If it is seen simply as a shopping list of institutional fixes it will come to grief. However, the importance of this programme should not be underestimated. It marks a historic advance in Labour thinking and its implementation will almost certainly come to be seen as the most enduringly significant achievement of a Blair Government. Even those Tory defenders of the 'ancient constitution' must sense that the moment for reform has come, as their familiar song fails to elicit its traditional chorus. We are on the brink of a period of reform of our political system unmatched since the early years of the century.

But the way in which this is approached is crucial, and will determine its fate. Here, too, audacity is essential. As Labour is committed to a big programme of political reform, the only sensible approach is to talk and act big in relation to it. People need to feel that they are living through, and are part of, a process of political renewal. Its elements have to sit together and form part of the wider enterprise. The practical questions of delivery and detail are real enough, but if Labour's boldest programme is approached mainly in a spirit of political management it will soon run into trouble. It can only be managed successfully if it feels like a democratic crusade.

The issue of the House of Lords offers a good example here. The sensible approach for radical reformers is not to pretend that only modest adjustment is intended, or that deals can be brokered on the removal of the hereditary element, but to make sure that the issue is clearly seen as one of People versus Privilege. Only then will it acquire the political momentum to see it through. A similar consideration applies to the proposed freedom of information legislation, on which early action is essential (not least because it would be an excellent 'union' measure to balance the early preoccupation with Scotland). This should not be presented as a straightforward piece of tidying up, converting voluntary codes into statutes on the basis of Bills that have been in draft form for many years, but as a historic moment when information ceases to be a grant from government and becomes a right of citizenship.

The whole political reform agenda is so central to Labour's programme that it will require strong focus and leadership of both a political and administrative kind. The diffusion of responsibility in this area needs to be overcome and a political and administrative structure put in place that is committed to the enterprise and its delivery. However I believe it needs two further ingredients, if the show is to be kept on the road. First, a bold declaratory (or paving) Bill setting out in general terms the new Government's reforming ambitions on this front would be of huge symbolic significance. Such a Governance of Britain Bill

would connect the disparate parts of the programme, raise its public profile and provide a landmark reference point for an unfolding process of political reform. Second, the Nolan Committee on standards in public life should be converted into a proper Constitutional Commission, with new membership and terms of reference, able (like the Law Commission) to provide authoritative advice and recommendations on the mechanics of reform. Nolan has demonstrated that an authoritative standing commission can prevent politicians losing issues in the long grass. A Constitutional Commission would not only fill a gaping hole in British political arrangements, but would ensure that a reform process would be sustained over the long term. Once such a body existed, it would soon be impossible to imagine how we managed without it.

What is essential in all this is to ensure that Labour's constitutional reforms, important though they are in their own terms, are seen as part of a much wider ambition to revive civic life and reconnect people to the political process. This requires, paradoxically, both boldness and modesty. The boldness involves re-asserting a belief in public action and public purposes after a period in which these have been systematically undermined. Stakeholding applies as much to politics as it does to other areas. But the modesty is a proper response to a world in which electorates have learned to have diminished expectations of politics and politicians and are wary of rhetorical guff. It may have been more exciting to promise a generation ago that a Labour government would deliver an 'irreversible shift of wealth and power in favour of working people and their families', but it is more honest to promise what you have some realistic chance of delivering - and that is what people want. It is called serious politics. This does not mean a world fit for policy wonks, but a world ready for honest politicians.

Of course reinventing politics means much more than this. The Conservative claim to have 'reinvented' government needs to be matched by a reinvention of politics. Both Old Labour and the New Right, in their different ways, set their face against any such enterprise. The former preferred a bureaucratic, top-down collectivism; the latter prefers to replace politics with markets. The recent leak of a document setting out the Government's approach to public services is particularly interesting in this respect. The headline reports focused on its plan to find cheerleaders for the Government's policies from within public services, but the rest of the document is even more interesting. After recording its belief that 'the best way to improve public service is to put delivery in the hands of the private sector', it rejects alternative approaches that involve new forms of community or user representation: 'We were not attracted by the idea of new democratic bodies, on the model of community health councils. They attract the

enthusiastic . . . Options for establishing national users' panels or Citizens' Juries were not attractive'. In taking this line, the Conservatives are deliberately dismissing some of the most interesting developments currently taking place aimed at finding new ways to involve people in the making of public policy at different levels.

It will be for Labour to sponsor and nourish such initiatives. The false dichotomy between 'consumer' and 'political' democracy peddled by the New Right must be rejected. Both are important and need to be strengthened. Individuals-as-consumers need to be equipped with what they require to make choices, ask questions, exercise influence and assert rights. Individuals-as-citizens need to have a role in shaping the provision that they receive as consumers. The field is wide open for a whole range of new initiatives on both fronts. In education, for example, parents still lack an effective complaints mechanism in relation to schools, while it would be possible to have elected local education commissions that could contract with schools for quality provision (whereas the Conservatives, in their desire to break anything resembling an education *system*, have revealingly failed to explore a purchaser / provider model here).

Civics For Socialists

The main point is that Labour in government should demonstrate an innovative zeal in its approach to institutional reform and democratic renewal. There is a real opportunity to rescue civic life from its moribund and cynical condition and equip it for the tasks it confronts. There could scarcely be a more important project. Unless we improve the process of governing, we are unlikely to get its product right. This means a more open and grown-up relationship between politicians and the people they claim to represent, sharing information and being honest about choices. For example, it is difficult to see how Labour can change spending priorities in the way it wants, reforming welfare and shifting the balance between social security and education, unless it first finds a new way of doing politics.

Perhaps the best example of all is provided by the environmental agenda, that Labour claims will be at the heart of government. Unless we (and others) get this right, there may be no next millennium. Yet it positively demands a new kind of politics, because it is a new kind of problem. It is big, messy, complex, inescapable, cross-cutting. It demands political creativity and cooperation in a context where there are rarely straightforward 'answers' and with daunting competing pressures. It compels fundamental changes, yet for these to happen (and to stick) they must be indisputably legitimate. This in turn requires an

open, learning mode of democratic politics, with a constant testing of 'expert' opinion as other perspectives are brought to bear.

But tackling environmental issues in government requires even more than this. It demands 'wide-angle' policy making, explicitly building in complex choices over different time-frames, challenging traditional measurements of 'costs' and 'benefits' and forcing redefinitions of the goals (quality of life?) towards which public policy is directed. It also challenges the conventional functional structures of government, demanding both separations (food from agriculture) and integrations (food and health, land use and transport) that reconfigure government in new ways. A green audit of government, with new mechanisms of the kind that Labour is proposing, forces change right through the system. The public trust in government that has been so eroded by food and health scares can only be rebuilt through new structures of trust of a conspicuously independent kind, with proper information rights as their cornerstone. This approach to government - strategic, intelligent, learning - needs to operate at a range of levels, respecting the principle of subsidiarity. The flowering of small-scale experimentation around Local Agenda 21 is an indication of what the right kind of stimulus can generate. More ambitious programmes will only get off the ground if initiatives are supported at every level, from grassroots explorations of educative and participatory mechanisms to concerted attempts to forge a new politics for Europe.

It is not just green issues that demand a response of this kind. They merely make the point most forcibly. New approaches to politics, and to governing, are required by the nature of the problems we face, the people we now are, and the world in which we live. A narrow departmentalism is wholly inappropriate in relation to the central issues that confront us; we desperately need structures that are capable of getting hold of problems in the round. The fragile status of all intermediate and independent institutions in a political system which is hostile to institutional pluralism and formal checks and balances has to be remedied if the policy process is to be opened up and made more intelligent. The lone example of the existing standing Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution could usefully be built on here, with standing commissions of broad (and less predictable) membership in a range of policy areas. Similarly, if a new version of the old central government think-tank is to be created, it must not be the secretive operation we had in the past, whose inevitably leaked thoughts were seen as a problem whenever they threatened to frighten the political horses, but an open forum for strategic and intelligent policy debate.

There is no shortage of sites and opportunities to develop new ways of governing - and new forms of politics. Reforming the Commons and redesigning a

second chamber offer ample scope for democratic inventiveness. The new communication technologies open up opportunities for civic interaction of an exciting kind. The conspicuous need to renew local government after 'the Tory nationalisation of Britain' (in Simon Jenkins's phrase) is a challenge to develop innovative democratic models and techniques at the local level (which provides the most fertile terrain). Reforming the quango state should be seen as an invitation to explore a whole variety of new ways in which efficiency, effectiveness and accountability can be combined. In all of this the emphasis should be on diversity and experimentation, trying things out in different ways in different places. This is why decentralisation is not a nice slogan but a prerequisite for a learning politics. Centralisation and uniformity are the enemy of experiment and innovation. A messy and untidy world requires a messy and untidy kind of politics. This may once have been a heresy on the left, but it is a heresy that Labour now needs to convert into its governing orthodoxy.

This returns the argument to its beginning. As Labour approaches government, it is offering the prospect of a renewed centre left project and of a transformation in the way that Britain is governed. The success of Labour in government will depend upon the extent to which these prospects are turned into achievements. The argument here is that the two enterprises are intimately connected; and that both are radical in their implications. Out of the contradictions of market individualism, there is the promise of a new politics of community. Out of an antique constitution, there is the promise of a new way of governing. But for promise to become achievement, political creativity and audacity are essential. Labour is about to road-test a prototype in a territory without reliable maps. Those who think they are in for a quiet ride should prepare themselves for a surprise ●

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Tony Wright is Labour MP for Cannock and Burntwood and a member of the Fabian Society Executive Committee. His recent books include *Citizens and Subjects* and *Socialism Old and New*, and his *Why Vote Labour?* has just been published by Penguin.
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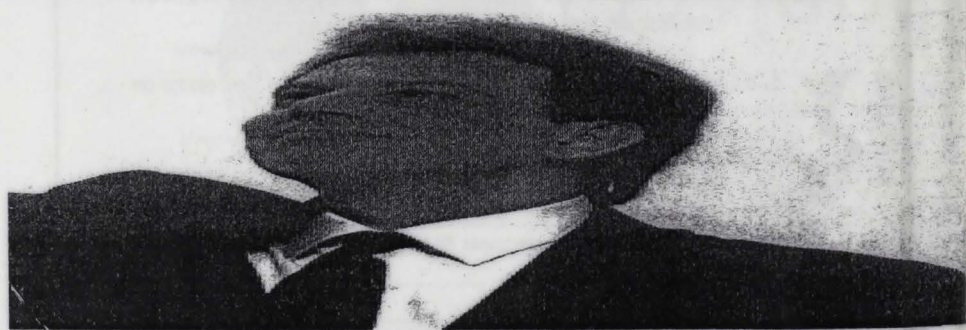
Who Wins Dares

New Labour - New Politics

As Britain prepares for the most important General Election in living memory, **Tony Wright** argues that New Labour's project requires a new kind of politics in Britain. The radicalism that changed the party now needs to change the country - and the way it is governed.

Tony Wright is Labour MP for Cannock and Burntwood, a regular contributor to *New Statesman*. His recent books include *Citizens and Subjects* and *Socialism: Old and New*, and his *Why Vote Labour?* has just been published by Penguin

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