

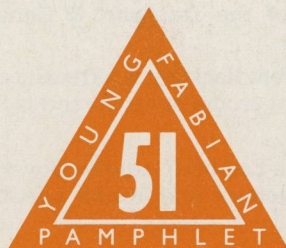
FABIAN SOCIETY

Can socialism be popular?

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Sally-Anne Lomas, Jacques Peretti*



FABIAN



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Introduction

The essays in this pamphlet were originally submitted for the first, 1988, Webb Essay competition. They have been edited by Owen Tudor and their publication marks the launch of the 1989 competition (see page 23).

Contributions were solicited from a group who would not have experienced a Labour Government since their school days—people under 31. They grew up when Labour was the party of government, and inherited a Tory administration confident of its long-term future.

What was shared throughout these and the other essays was a concern for local initiatives, for green politics, and an inspiring confidence in people: individuals living in communities.

The essays are not the top four. They have been selected for publication because they address four themes key to the creation of a popular British socialism:

- Michael Jacobs' essay examines the findings of *British Social Attitudes 1987* that Britain's people are committed to socialist values. What they don't like is the Labour Party;
- Jacques Peretti argues that Thatcher's individualism is less a social revolution, more a successful attempt to catch the spirit of the time—and that Labour should do the same;
- Neal Lawson suggests that Labour needs to demonstrate a user-friendly way to create wealth;
- finally, Sally-Anne Lomas outlines the case for a socialist strategy built on people's actual experiences, with a feminist approach that involves neither window- nor power-dressing.

Together, these contributions represent a view of socialism which has outlived any of socialism's shortcuts.

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1 A socialist people

Using the results from *British Social Attitudes 1987*, Michael Jacobs argues that people do believe in basic socialist principles. The challenge for the Labour Party is to construct an ideological framework from which it can present a coherent world view which people can recognise and support.

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Well, here's a surprise. Socialism *is* popular. No, this is not a prediction that Labour will win the next election. Nor is it an assertion that Labour *would* win the next election if only the Party leadership adopted the policies of 'real socialism'. It is not even a claim that more than a small minority of people in Britain would describe themselves, if asked, as socialists.

But then, it has always been misleading to regard the Labour Party as representing socialism. Neither the Labour Party, nor socialism, is like that. And—though it would no doubt make the world simpler for opinion pollsters—it is not necessary for people to give a name to their beliefs for those beliefs to be widely and strongly held.

To say that socialism is popular is simply to recognise that values, beliefs and behaviours which can fairly be described as socialist in origin and effect *are* widely and strongly held and practised in Britain. It is a reflection of the stunted conception of politics we have in this country that the idea of socialism has been reduced in common discourse to the policies of the Labour Party, and its 'popularity' therefore measured by election results. (When Herbert Morrison declared that socialism was whatever the Labour Party happened to be doing at any one time, he was not joking.) But politics is not simply about Parliament and parties, the gossip of the lobby correspondents and the incestuous analyses of 'political commentators' self-imprisoned at Westminster.

Politics is about the everyday stuff of life: the relationships between people at work, at home, in their neighbourhoods; about the space and the bridges between individuals and the state, both national and local; about the identifications (and enmities) people make with each other, their voluntary associations and isolations. It is about the power people have—and feel they have—over the things that most concern them; the equalities and hierarchies and discriminations and tolerances

that people *experience* in their ordinary day-to-day existence.

It is here, woven deep into the fabric of British society, that socialism is 'popular'. Indeed it is commonplace. The values of mutuality and sharing, of co-operation and collective self-help, of equality and fairness, of democracy and participation; these exist not only in textbooks of political theory but in the real lives of all of us, in practice, and usually without question. This socialism is not named or identified; no neat fences are placed around it and marked off with signs denoting ideology. Here socialist values and beliefs are among 'the things we know but cannot tell'. But they are no less there for that.

They are there, for example, in the ordinary neighbourliness which defines our immediate sense of community: borrowing some sugar, feeding the pets when next door is away, doing some shopping for the old age pensioner down the road. Such actions should not be mistaken for 'altruism', with its connotations of self-sacrifice; they demonstrate rather a belief in mutual support, helping out when needed with the expectation that others will reciprocate. In the case of assisting the old age pensioner, the expectation is separated in time (I hope others will do the same for me when I am old), which defines it all the more as an expression of social mutuality. Derided though they might be on the Left as 'bourgeois', Neighbourhood Watch schemes for protecting property and children illustrate the same impulse, and are popular for it. (Working class communities, of course, have long practised informal social networks of this kind.)

It is precisely because these sorts of activities are made with the expectation of personal benefit (not simply benefit to others) that they can be described as socialist in origin. The New World will not be built on goodness, but on the gains that everyone can make by co-operation. The thousands of pre-school playgroups voluntarily organised in practically every community in the land are based on just this assumption. Constant, individual, private child care is a burden; regular collective provision gives parents time off and rejuvenates their own capacity to love and care for their offspring.

Collective action

This implicit recognition of the value of collective action is expressed also, of course, by membership of trade unions. It is easy to forget, amidst declining numbers and opinion poll unpopularity, that there are still nine million people, over one third of those eligible, who belong to unions. (The vast majority do so voluntarily. The decline in total membership is mainly a product of labour market fragmentation, rather than dissatisfaction.) The polls actually show a very interesting relationship between unions and their members. People generally think their own union does a good job for them; they are merely anxious about

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the national political power union leaders are seen (in the media) to wield. In this context, it is the first view that is important: the belief that it is worth putting one's personal income into collective protection and bargaining. The popularity of this view should not be underestimated. The extraordinarily large margins by which the political fund ballots were won—for an *extension* of the basic collective role of unions—provide an indication. As is well known, by no means all trade unionists vote Labour.

This fundamental socialist principle of collective action for individual (as well as social) benefit is not confined to the workplace. It is to be found politically in community organisations, residents' associations, tenants' groups, and in hundreds of local campaigns for a community centre or children's play area or better street lighting. Here, it is evident that the individual alone is powerless, and his or her interests by themselves do not constitute a political force. But when they are shared by others, who combine together to act, an agency is created which is immediately and obviously greater than the sum of its parts. That experience of collective power, which many people who are not Labour voters, let alone 'left-wing', have had at some time, is the basis of socialist change.

It finds particular expression in local community activities because the very notion of 'community' holds within it the germ of the most basic socialist idea, that personal identity cannot be confined within a single individual, but must also rest on extended social relationships. Given the powerful forces of 'social privatisation'—more spacious housing, the retreat into the nuclear family, the motor car, television and video—which have changed the structure of everyday experience in the last 40 years, the persistence with which the idea of 'community' is retained (even if only to lament its passing) is evidence of its primitive popular strength. Surely this accounts for at least part of the popularity of soap operas such as *Eastenders* and *Neighbours*, with their idealisation of neighbourly closeness, where everyone knows everyone else, shares each others' houses and comes together in crises? Calls for "more community spirit" can be heard everywhere; inchoate and contradictory as such calls frequently may be, they nevertheless express a popular resistance to the dominant patterns of post-war life which give the lie to the triumphant egocentrism of Thatcherite propagandists. Even for Thatcher's generation, individualism is not enough.

There is a sense of a wider society here, several layers beneath the 'politics' comprehended and reported by political journalists, which is both deep-rooted and widespread. Mrs Thatcher recently declared that "there is no such thing as society; there are only individuals and their families". A more telling encapsulation of her beliefs could hardly be conceived. But it isn't a view that is shared by the populace. People

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do feel themselves part of society. It may be true that class allegiance is diminishing. But this does not entail a simple retreat into private individualism. Most people identify quite strongly with their neighbourhood and town (and country). This is not a chauvinistic tribalism, but the grounding of their own identity in a physical space—and this space is necessarily collective. People 'belong'.

Such feelings of belonging blossom in a multitude of ways. Voluntary blood donation—a remarkable expression of civic identification and responsibility—is one example. Private charitable giving (for the elderly, for children, for medical research) is surely another. Ninety per cent of British people give to charity: this is not *noblesse oblige* but a recognition ('there but for the grace of God go I') that in some sense we are all part of a single family. The huge sums and public interest raised for famine relief and development in Africa by Live Aid, Sport Aid and Comic Relief are evidence of how widely these feelings of belonging—to a global family, in these cases—extend. The hundreds of thousands of hours of unpaid labour given to voluntary organisations confirm this. (The objection that volunteers get personal satisfaction from their work entirely misses the point; the satisfaction from 'feeling useful' is precisely an expression of belonging. Useful to whom, if not to the community, to society?)

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Attitudes and beliefs

If a simple, unidentified (and unremarked) socialism is present in these everyday activities and behaviours, it would be surprising not to find it also in the attitudes and beliefs which people express in words. And indeed one does. In my own work as an adult education tutor and community worker I meet and talk to quite a wide range of people; not only about politics, but about ordinary everyday life. I am always struck by the attachment to basic socialist principles expressed in the apparently unlikeliest of places. I find a belief in basic human equality, for example, which requires very clear justification (on the grounds of need or effort) to be overridden. (One need only listen to children playing to know how deeply this sense of fairness based on equality is ingrained.) I find a dislike for hierarchies, especially at work, and for the arbitrary exercise of power by those in authority. I find wide support for the idea of a welfare state based on the principle of social insurance. I find a belief in democracy (particularly by voting) and the 'right to one's say'. I find support for co-operation as a principle, and a willing adherence to the common philosophy of share and share alike.

There is more than anecdotal evidence. The social surveys compiled into the 1987 edition of *British Social Attitudes* indeed go further, showing that such beliefs find concrete political expression. Collective provision of health care by Government, for example, wins an

extraordinary 98 per cent support, as does social provision of a decent standard of living for the elderly. Perhaps more remarkably, 62 per cent of people think it is (“definitely” or “probably”) the Government’s responsibility to find a job for everyone who wants one. 75 per cent of people believe the highest priority for Government should be keeping down unemployment rather than inflation (*despite just over half the sample seeing inflation as a greater concern for themselves and their families*). 83 per cent believe the Government should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed. 72 per cent of people feel the Government should reduce income differences between rich and poor. These are quite clear endorsements of basic socialist principles.

The surveys go further. They also find 65 per cent agreement with the contention that “ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation’s wealth” (only 14 per cent disagree), 59 per cent supporting the statement “there is one law for the rich and one for the poor” (22 per cent against), and 54 per cent claiming that “big business benefits owners at the expense of workers” (19 per cent dissenting). As the report says, “the balance of public opinion tends towards the radical or egalitarian”.

Why then, it may be asked, if socialism is so ‘popular’, have the Tories won the last three general elections? The answer is distressingly simple. Conservatism is *also* popular—and amongst the same people. If this statement, after all that has been said previously, sounds self-contradictory, it just shows what tricks the electoral system has played on us. Because people have only one vote each, and those votes are translated into ‘all or nothing’ parliamentary (or council) seats, we assume that people only think one thing. They are *either* Labour *or* Tory (or Democrat or Nationalist).

But this is patent nonsense. Outside the membership of the parties themselves (a tiny proportion of the electorate, much smaller than in most other industrialised countries) there are very few people who believe only the views of one side or another. The people I meet, certainly, hold a mixture of views; frequently, by the standards of political theory, inconsistent or contradictory ones. Conservative values, beliefs and behaviours co-exist with those of socialism.

Thus, for all their belief in co-operation and collectivity, people are also individualistic and competitive. They believe in equality, but can be authoritarian and hierarchical too. They want more sense of ‘community’ and they help their neighbours, but don’t want a home for the mentally handicapped in their street. They believe in sharing and tolerance, but may be racist and homophobic as well. They give to charity, but think the unemployed are lazy. As well as radical views, *British Social Attitudes* also records conservative ones, particularly on traditional moral issues.

None of this should be surprising, and none of it negates what has

gone before. Though it would no doubt be easier if everyone could be neatly confined to pure categories labelled socialist or conservative, they cannot. Most people are both, in varying and variable proportions. It is the function of political parties so to distil the mixture that it crystallises, in the single act of voting, in support for one label or the other. Of course, it is not just general values and particular policies which are important, but also less tangible factors such as leadership, party image, a general impression of the national condition, media influence, personal security. Voting behaviour is extremely complex. What is clear, however, is that 43 per cent of the electorate is not 'Thatcherite', and 32 per cent 'Labour'. Labour's task is not the wholesale conversion of people from one set of beliefs to another, opposite set. It is the articulation of the beliefs that people already hold in such a way as to highlight and define these in people's own minds and thereby provide an expression for them in the ballot booth.

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This is what Mrs Thatcher has achieved with such remarkable success. She has not made people more selfish or competitive, more xenophobic or authoritarian. But she has articulated these existing traits and given them public and political expression. Her constant reiteration of Conservative values in support of her policies (often when her policies are actually different from her rhetoric) has underlined them in people's own thoughts and experiences. Her housewifery, family-based metaphors are chosen quite deliberately to chime with the ordinary everyday things people feel; to say, "what you feel is Tory". It isn't; or rather, what most people feel is sometimes Tory, sometimes socialist, but Mrs Thatcher has captured the language of everyday life—and with it, political support.

In doing this the Tories have constructed a coherent and plausible ideological framework, a world view, through which people can understand politics. It centres on familiar key ideas such as the nuclear family and the household budget, "not spending more than you earn", lower taxes ("having more of one's own money to spend"). It highlights concern for law and order and for traditional morality, patriotism and strong leadership. It emphasises private consumption and the right to a 'choice'. It glorifies the market and the mysterious qualities of 'enterprise'. Through skilful assertion and frequent repetition, these themes and their accompanying images have come to dominate our political culture, so that it is difficult to see beyond them. Those experiences and ideas people have which don't fit in the world view become excluded from public politics.

Thus, for example, most people's *personal* experience of trade unions is (polls show) generally positive. But the *public*, 'political' image of unions is almost entirely drawn from negative television and newspaper reports of them being undemocratic, obstructive and violent. Such characteristics (however unfair) are genuinely disliked. But what

the Tories have done, with the connivance of the media, is to make such dislike occupy the whole ground of public opinion about unions. People's own direct experience has been pushed out: it doesn't fit the ideological framework Mrs Thatcher has provided, so it remains only in the private sphere, without political expression.

Again, in polls, most parents say they are satisfied with the education their own children get at the local comprehensive school. But the Tories have chosen to highlight the lack of 'choice', and created a myth of declining educational standards (illustrated by a tiny minority of cases) and been able to make these the way education as a public political issue is now understood. Privately, most people have sympathy for the unemployed and are in favour of adequate welfare payments to them. But the Tories have placed (genuine) concern about scrounging and dependency at the centre of the debate and these are now the terms in which public opinion about the welfare state is formed.

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Ideology

This capacity of ideology to frame the way in which people think about public issues—by excluding certain experiences and perceptions, and highlighting others—is much like the way in which a Kuhnian 'paradigm' in science operates as a framework for understanding the universe. Scientists, Kuhn observed, do not take all the evidence before them, but only those pieces of it which fit their operating paradigm. Those pieces which do not are ignored, until a new paradigm which explains them is developed. Thus in politics it is ideology which gives public meaning to people's experiences and perceptions—but only selectively; those experiences and perceptions which do not fit in are neglected. If they are to become part of people's political understanding, a new ideology is required which draws on, highlights and makes sense of them.

At particular periods in history—in the post-war period, one might think of 1945 and 1964, as well as 1979, and now—this function of ideology becomes crucial to the relationship between parties and the electorate. Conventional wisdom tends to see politics as a marketplace: the party offering the most popular policies wins. Thus Labour sometimes appears concerned simply to find that marketing mix of policies and advertising image which the opinion polls indicate will cause the voters to buy. But politics is not a form of consumption. Parties need to offer more than simply gratification of voters' desires through the 'best' policies.

Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the Thatcher phenomenon is the way that consistent public agreement with many of Labour's policies—reducing unemployment, defending the National Health Service, improving pensions—has failed to dent the Tories'

popularity. This is because it is not the detail of her policies which gives Mrs Thatcher her support; it is the ideological clarity with which she has proclaimed them. 'Thatcherism' is a paradigm: it has given people (and not just those who vote Tory) a way of seeing the public world, of understanding politics. It has made sense of their various, frequently contradictory experiences and perceptions. Yes, when asked in individual opinion polls, people may support Labour's *policies*; but overall political allegiance is holistic, not simply the sum of the policy parts, and it is *ideological* domination which has given the Conservatives their majority.

It is this ideological domination that Labour has to challenge if it is to make socialism electorally popular. Sometimes it appears that Labour's spokespersons have given up on this. They present socialist policies such as collective worker control of companies as wider share ownership and 'leapfrogging Thatcher'. They claim to offer voters even more 'choice' in education than the Tories. They seem to want to outdo Mrs Thatcher as guardians of the state and its secrets. Such an approach cannot work, because socialist policies will always, ultimately, be in conflict with the Thatcherite paradigm; within this world view, the Tories inevitably offer the best solutions. Either the policies will be exposed, or they will begin to change.

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The only chance that Labour has to be both socialist and electorally popular is if it can construct an ideology to replace Thatcherism as the dominant way in which people view politics. The materials from which to do this are already there, in precisely those everyday socialist values, beliefs and behaviours which I have described. For it is not as if people do not understand socialism, or have no experience of it. They do, as we have seen. But this experience, and the views that accompany it, must be articulated so that they are recognised as expressions of political allegiance. Labour needs to reclaim those socialistic moments, to highlight and define them, and to project them into public consciousness. It needs to build a paradigm by which they can be understood and given public meaning. In short, Labour has to help people feel that what they feel is socialist.

Partly this is a question of language and imagery. As Mrs Thatcher's principal metaphor is of the household and the private family, so Labour's must be of the neighbour and the community. The Tories reduce everything to the market and the idea of private consumption; Labour should emphasise the tradition of social insurance and mutual support. It should articulate people's feelings of belonging to society, their belief in equality and co-operation. It should express people's knowledge and acceptance of the benefits of collective activities: the playgroup, the community association, the trade union, the charity. As the Tories present their measures as an extension of choice, so Labour could frame its policies (for industrial democracy, for local

government, for participation in housing and other public services, for example) as extensions of democratic rights. Similarly, to counter the myths of enterprise and dependency, Labour's job creation, minimum wage and welfare programmes should be expressed in terms of citizenship. If Labour's policies are not just seen to be more effective, but heard to resonate thus with the socialistic experiences, feelings and philosophies people have in their everyday lives, the space will be opened up for a new popular ideological framework.

It is possible to see this happening already over the National Health Service. For the first time in nine years, the Thatcherite paradigm is beginning to crack. It cannot accommodate the attachment held by the British people to the principle of social health care free at the point of use. People do not think that health care should be provided on a market basis; and they like what they have experienced of the NHS. Despite Edwina Currie's attempts (for example, comparing non-urgent operations to second holidays as alternative ways of spending private income) the Tories have been quite unable to find a language and imagery to displace these convictions. The result was the extraordinary poll finding before the 1988 Budget that 84 per cent of people would have preferred £1.2 billion to be spent on the health service to a 1p income tax cut, and 62 per cent would have preferred £2.4 billion for the NHS to a 2p tax cut. Only 6 per cent of people supported the Government's policy of a 2p cut and no more for the NHS.

This is a quite clear ideological defeat for Thatcherism, which has placed both income tax reductions and the private, market-based provision of public services at its centre. It is imperative for Labour to inject, not just a different policy (more spending), but an alternative *ideology* into the gap created. There are several elements to this. First, Labour has to reclaim the popular view of taxation that the Tories have submerged beneath their rhetoric of "governments spending your money". It needs to restate the evident truth that no one could earn any income without the contribution of government, whether through the education they have received or the roads they drive on, and that taxation is each person's repayment. It is for *public* expenditure, for social investment; for us all collectively, as the NHS illustrates.

Second, Labour should reappropriate the idea of wealth from the limited, private, material usage favoured by the Tories. The NHS creates wealth like any service industry: the wealth of good health, of well-being. Wealth is not just material riches, the product of manufacturing industries, but welfare; not just privately created by entrepreneurs and multinationals, but socially created too by public services and nationalised industries.

Third, Labour needs to demonstrate the extension of the principle of collective provision to areas other than the NHS: to education, to pensions, to social services, to recreational facilities, and so on.

Fourth, the Party needs to use the NHS as an example of the failure of the market and the undesirability of allowing it free rein in every field.

This is crucial, for it is only if the limitations of the market can be *ideologically* established that popular consent will be gained for a socialist economic strategy. Labour will need to carry out, and justify, the control, regulation and in some cases abandonment of the market in a whole variety of areas, from public transport through local government services to the financial sector and transnational corporations. Given the intense political opposition such measures will provoke, they will require public support based not simply on the merits of each individual case, but on a general ideological acceptance. The failure of markets to meet social needs, the inefficiency of private monopoly, the value of collective provision, the need for non-commercial and non-material valuation of welfare—these need to become part of the world view by which people understand politics. Socialist policies will be very different from those of the present Government: they will not win consent unless the whole paradigm of political culture shifts.

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Policy priorities

The popularity of the NHS provides an opportunity to begin this movement. Where other areas of policy already have public support they should be given particular priority for the same purpose. Three might be mentioned. They have in common the fact that they would be popular in themselves, and they also clearly demonstrate those ideological principles that need to become the basis of Labour's appeal.

The first is child care. A Labour policy to establish universal and affordable child care for all under-fives (and for others during school holidays) would almost certainly guarantee more support amongst women than any other measure. It would not only create a large number of jobs but enable many women to fill others. But the important point here is that collective, socially-provided child care illustrates a basic socialist principle, one that women in particular are familiar with from their most personal, everyday experience. Its ideological value would therefore be immense.

The second area is the environment. Green issues, from additives in food to nuclear power, are increasingly recognised as important—not just to the middle class but to all sectors of society. Labour's existing policy commitments to protect and enhance the environment and to ensure public health could, if known, be a major source of political support. But again, it is the basis of the green principle in people's ordinary experience which make this particularly significant. The environment (whether human-made or natural) is collective. The space

around me, the air, the land, the rivers and seas, the buildings and streets, is the same space as that around you. Everybody understands this; we know from what we see around us every day that I cannot protect 'my' environment privately, by myself; I can only do it in co-operation with the rest of my community. Indeed, environmental protection is not only necessarily collective; to work, it must often be compulsory, involving the state—for example through the taxation of pollution. The market, which can register only individual preferences, is simply unable to secure the clean and beautiful world we all need. Moreover, since most pollution and resource depletion is directly caused by the profit-motivation of companies, environmental protection requires their regulation. These arguments are so obvious as to be commonplace: which is precisely why it should not be difficult to demonstrate their application elsewhere.

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The third area is working time and conditions. In the last five years there have been major changes in many people's experience of work, with the growth, not only of unemployment, but of short-term contracts, part-time work, sub-contracting and unsocial shifts. Many people are now faced with insecurity, authoritarianism and health and safety hazards unknown in recent years. The quality of their lives—and those of their families—has deteriorated markedly. Yet political debate has hardly noticed. Issues of work remain in the area of experience closed off by the dominant ideological paradigm. The parties, including Labour, simply have not regarded these changes as part of public politics. Entering this territory now would both win Labour support and bring issues of working conditions into the political arena. Labour could pledge, for example, to work for a gradual reduction in the length of the full-time working week to 35 hours; and it could encourage employer-union agreements which give employees the right to choose, within reason, the number and pattern of hours they work. All employees, whatever their hours, should receive the same protection of their conditions and terms of work.

Such a policy would be popular, and it would create jobs. It would also, most importantly, turn the fashionable notion of flexibility in the labour market to the advantage of the workers rather than management. As the recent Ford and P&O Ferries disputes have shown, employment restructuring has the potential to become a significant political issue. The ideological importance of this is then that economic debate escapes the narrow confines of efficiency and competitiveness and concerns itself also with their human implications. By representing such common, but up to now politically unarticulated, experiences in this way, Labour would not only attract support but begin the shift to a new ideological paradigm.

The point of these examples is that the popularity of socialism will not rest simply on better policies, but on Labour's ability to project

the ideological principles they illustrate into a coherent world view, a view which draws on and magnifies the everyday socialism which people already know from their own experiences and perceptions of the world.

People on the left often speak of how things would or will be “under socialism”. But socialism is not a roof. It is the materials from which the building—society—is made. The materials are already there, in people’s own lives, in their values and beliefs and actions. In this sense their popularity is not at issue. But for this to be turned into a mandate for wider social reform, the task of socialists is to help people recognise the materials for what they are, and to show how they might be put together to change the world. It is to construct a new paradigm, which captures the sense people have of themselves and of the sort of society they want to live in. This is what the Labour Party did in 1945 and in 1964. It is what it needs to do now.

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2 Individuals

The Labour Party must put individualism at the centre of its philosophy, according to *Jacques Peretti*. It will, in this way, demonstrate that real choice can be achieved only through socialism.

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While many socialists regard socialism as extinct, Mrs Thatcher treats it as an ever-present menace. For her, socialism does not depend on the election of Labour governments. On the contrary, every statist solution, every bureaucratic hindrance to reform is in some sense socialist-inspired. It is the machinery of government which Mrs Thatcher inherited that is her constant reminder of socialism.

But there lies in the achievement of Thatcherism, as surely as in the election victories of 1945 and 1964, an optimistic message for socialists. Parties do not inhabit different universes, they deal in the common currency of ideas from which political strategies can be moulded and remoulded.

Socialists discuss socialism using the same vocabulary as Mrs Thatcher: "freedom", "choice", "competition" and "enterprise culture". This is a sign of the recognition given to these ideas by socialists who reject, as Mrs Thatcher does, corporatism as a means to freedom.

Examine the justifications that the Government has given for reform. In education, choice and standards. In housing, ownership and flexibility. For trade unions, democracy and participation. With privatisation, wider share ownership. Against benefits, initiative and self-esteem. These are ideas which socialist parties in France, Spain, Australia, New Zealand and West Germany have been striving to implement. Not as a cynical attempt to make their parties electable, but as the principles of the parties.

Democratic socialists should be appealing to the instincts which Thatcherism has attempted to take to its soul. Beliefs in self-reliance and self-determination, a desire to have the dignity of looking after yourself and not having the state or local bureaucracy telling you what to do, or how to do it. These simple ideas remain abstract notions unless they are used to create a vision of an enterprising society, like Mrs Thatcher's.

Ideas are not the domain of any one party. Our empiricist

philosophical tradition, though by no means socialist, placed individualism centre stage in Britain. But British socialists continue to deny individualism's importance as the common battleground.

Ruptured consensus

When Labour Governments were elected, they were able to encapsulate the mood and articulate the desires of the people at a particular moment in time. It is this particularity which is highlighted most clearly by 1945 and 1964. Moments which could not have been further apart in mood, yet which were captured by the Labour Party because it accurately judged that mood.

The failure of these Labour Governments to place individualism at the centre of their political programmes was a failure for socialism. By contrast, the failure of Tory Governments to confront statism during the post-war boom was seized on by the New Right. Tory Governments had, for them, colluded with Labour in maintaining the predominance of the state over the individual.

The New Right argued that Butskellism had not only failed to regenerate wealth, but made wealth creation impossible. By invoking the spirit of individualism at a time when the Left were retreating into protectionism, and when the Butskellite consensus had broken, the New Right appeared to offer a project for reconstruction.

That reconstruction matches current social transformations. From 1979 to 1991, two million workers will have moved from manufacturing into services. The male:female ratio in full and part-time employment will be 50:50. Over 65 per cent of homes will be owner-occupied, the proportion paying for private health care will rise from 5 per cent to 18 per cent. Capital transference will double; private education triple; share ownership quadruple.

But the halving of Labour's skilled working class and clerical support since the sixties has been a sign not of Labour's crumbling 'natural constituency', but of its failure to identify the real locus of conflicting social interests and renew its strategy accordingly.

Production-consumption cleavage analysis identifies three structural fault lines. Firstly, unionised and non-unionised labour and public and private sector employees. Secondly, the polarisation of consumption between the public and private sector, within for instance, housing and transport. Thirdly, between the increasing dependency of those living on pensions and benefits, and those who have seen their real wages rise faster in the UK since 1979 than anywhere else in Europe (*British democracy at the crossroads*, P Dunleavy and C Husbands, Allen & Unwin, 1985).

Around 30 per cent of employees work in the public sector, yet non-manual workers are predominantly involved in individualised

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consumption. It is manual workers who are subject to a collective-individual consumption cleavage and as sectoral cleavage has replaced class alignment, Labour traded support amongst a large group of private sector, manual workers for support amongst a much smaller public sector, non-manual group.

The opportunity for self-renewal has now been presented by the ideological cleavage within Thatcherism itself. In the past, Thatcherism maintained its multi-faceted character by moving on several fronts at one time, but the emphasis has now shifted to economic momentum at the expense of political reform.

The discrepancy is between the rhetoric and reality of Thatcherite individualism: parental choice and centralist *diktat*; patient choice and an inadequate NHS; local democracy and the abolition of local government; and competition through tender and the deterioration of services. Over the Government's head hangs the Damocles' sword of infrastructure renewal, which the market will not tackle.

Socialists must grasp the significance of this by effectively turning the tables and making socialism appear bolder and more imaginative. They must embrace prosperity, not deny it. They must make an issue of the quality of service provision, not the method of delivery. They must recapture individualism by placing choice at the heart of socialism and demonstrating, by contrast, its incompatibility with Thatcherism.

Morals in the marketplace

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Neal Lawson argues that Thatcherism has changed the political landscape and taken so many voters with it through economic success—the ability to deliver the goods of material prosperity to a sizeable chunk of the electorate. Linked to that success has been a more complex shift in popular morality.

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Since 1982 the Tories have promoted a mood of economic optimism amongst a significant element of the population. The reality for the majority may be different, but the perception is of opportunity, enterprise and reward for hard work and initiative. The spending power of those in work, especially in the South, has risen in a way that has not been experienced for over 20 years. It has been this increase in consumer spending power that has motivated and mobilised support for the Conservatives.

Does this signify a shift in attitudes and beliefs that undermines the basis for socialism? Is Thatcherism able to go on increasing living standards in a way that destroys the social base for socialism?

No. Thatcherism, while certainly creating the conditions for a limited economic growth, is unable to deliver material benefits for the whole of the nation. Their election victories have been won with about 40 per cent of the vote. Thatcherism has never appealed to a majority. And there is a world of difference between a prosperous consumer society in the South-East of England, built largely on the windfall of North Sea oil, and the establishment of a modernised and healthy British economy.

But 40 per cent of the vote (a third of the electorate) is enough to provide the Tories with victory. Thus, the creation of a society of included citizens and an excluded underclass, is the ultimate goal of the New Right.

Their new moral order matches their political strategy. The continued success of the Right has been based in part on their ability to sever the link between economic growth and social justice. The last budget institutionalised the morality of the enterprise culture, where the growing gap between rich and poor is an indicator of a healthy economy.

This morality of aggressive individualism, selfishness, competition and greed represents a fundamental rupture with the underlying morals of the post-war consensus. It has taken root so easily precisely because of the failure of that consensus, which was determined largely on Labour's terms. The failure challenged the ability of the government to run the economy, as the material progress enjoyed since the war was halted and forced into retreat.

Undermining society

Thatcherism is not just a solution to the end of consensus and corporatism. It eases the changes in Britain's economy that have been occurring over the last decade.

Capitalism has been going through a profound alteration. From being a centralised and large-scale system, advanced capitalism has started to become disorganised, with smaller units of production and a flexible approach to output, often in semi-rural areas rather than the inner cities. Some believe we are entering a post-industrial era. Thatcherism has made this transition as smooth as possible and on terms acceptable to capital rather than labour.

It is this change which has broken the old solidarities and collectivities that were the bedrock of Labour's support. The Party was born out of the first and second waves of industrialisation. Its roots were in the culture of mass production, assembly lines and male blue-collar workers. But the age of Fordism is dying, especially in the South, but increasingly in the North as well. Labour's prospects are being undermined by the decline in manufacturing and the growth in the service sector, the increase in newly affluent home-owners, the fall in union membership and the rise in share ownership.

The experience of actually existing socialism which dominated the post-war agenda, and which helped pave the way for the New Right, has no place in the 1990s. The reality was of institutions that were alienating, at best hostile at worst threatening, and which promoted clientism and paternalism. They were Fordist examples of collectivism.

Any future agenda for socialism must therefore break with the statism of the past. Instead of socialist governments doing things for people, policies will have to enable and to empower. Forms of public ownership have to be devised that encourage accountability, participation and democracy. That rethinking needs to restate our conception of collectivism in a way that produces the economic goods.

Say it with money

However, a socialist alternative cannot only be based on questions concerning the economy. The challenge must also be to Tory

conceptions of morality. People are co-operative and communal beings. We are social animals that survive on communication and interaction. People crave solidarity, friendship and acceptance. Families, friends, colleagues and associates are the most valued aspects of life.

Yet we live in a world that stifles such emotions and urges, that promotes individualism and greed because only on those grounds can capitalism regenerate itself and survive. The best things in life are certainly free, but love, sharing and solidarity do not meet the demands of consumerism. Capitalism thrives on human nature by translating the need to give and to share from love and friendship to the exchange of material goods. Public displays of affection are frowned upon. Gift-wrapped consumer durables will do nicely, thank you.

Labour's victory in 1945 was built on notions of collectivism and solidarity engendered during the war years—the electorate had experienced what it was like to work together. For once that feeling we all experience in crowds and teams translated itself into an overtly political domain. The challenge for the Left now is to build upon that strength in new circumstances.

Co-operation and planning are a superior basis for production and distribution than competition and the sometimes anarchic consequences of the free market. Labour has to present socialism as an alternative to Thatcherism in terms of both morality and efficiency.

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4 Neither Liverpool nor Chingford

Sally-Anne Lomas believes that the Labour Party has to return to its roots in order to rediscover the gentle face of socialism. Only if it does this will it attract those who want to live in a more equal and harmonious society.

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Most of the people I know who work, work too hard. My mother running a guest house on the south coast works too hard. My Auntie Trudie, a widow with two sons to support, works too hard for the Social Services in Stoke. My Auntie Barbara, redundant at 58, works hard trying to set up her own business. Pauline, a single parent with three children, who cleans offices at night, flats during the day and her own council house on Sundays, works too hard. I mention these people because none of them has ever voted Labour.

Yet where would they be without that work? No work means no money and money buys freedom and security, a roof over the head, some dignity, some choice. It's said that "hard work never killed anyone"—a doubtful statement—that "it makes a man of you".

Alas and alack, these workers are all women. Nor are they feminists striving for equality, they work from necessity to pay the bills. Their work is low paid, low status, traditionally female. In the jungle of market forces only the tough survive. Women are survivors, they get tough, but do they want to? It doesn't have to be a jungle, there must be a gentler alternative. Is socialism strong enough to say it will be gentle?

If socialism is to be popular it must be a new form of socialism. It should speak not to the party faithful but to women like my mother, my aunts, to Pauline, people who have not believed that socialism could improve their lives.

Healing rifts

Britain in the eighties is deeply divided. To make way for change, Mrs Thatcher has ripped open the fabric of society. People felt there was a need for change, they were prepared to accept drastic measures. But

now that we are in fragments, we need to recreate, rebuild and heal.

There is nothing in the philosophy of the new Tory Party which makes them able to create balance and harmony. Only Labour can offer social cohesion, the balance of equality, the comfort of fraternity.

But socialism can be as divisive as Thatcherism, in both language and methods. The Labour Party of the seventies and eighties has seemed to offer working class brutality as an alternative to market brutality. What is there to choose between Tebbit's Chingford skinheads and Liverpool Militants—I wouldn't like to meet either on a dark night.

A new socialism must look to its earlier roots, in the ideas of the co-operative movement and the desire to build a post-war consensus, not to replicate the precise policies but to recover that spirit of cohesion. A new socialism should establish itself as a healing force.

We cannot deny that there is a lot more money about. But whereas the Conservatives call it a dynamic economy, is it not a dangerous economy? Money spins faster and faster. We buy shares in options of future futures; house prices escalate; television is full of programmes on how to tackle money.

Money is energy and it has electrified our society. But it is rather as if Mrs Thatcher has pulled a giant electricity cable out of the ground, and it is jumping loose, throwing out live energy—manic, destructive and explosive. Socialism must show that it can take that energy and use it safely, not kill it, rather to earth it.

A growing number of people are tired of chasing money. They are worried about the future—what if the bubble bursts? For every ‘I'm all right, Jack’ there are two concerned Jills.

When I was canvassing in the 1987 election I walked around the North Derby council estates and observed the warmth and enthusiasm of older people's support; the apathy and hostility of the young. Labour is seen as the party of the state and whilst the old regard the state as provider the young see it as controller.

To the young, state education means massive schools in which they were anonymous, state housing means tower blocks that smell of urine, state benefits mean degrading experiences, state health a doctor who hasn't the time to listen, pills and waiting lists.

Labour-controlled local authorities such as Sheffield and Islington have begun to find new models for state provision which are more personal, friendly and offer a more efficient service.

The anarchy of the market which unchecked creates enormous disparities of wealth and opportunity needs a strong state to maintain order. Mrs Thatcher dislikes dissent, is impatient of democracy. She rules in the name of freedom but tramples on our democratic freedoms. A new socialism must be serious about its commitment to democratic freedoms. It should put its own house in order: one person one vote within the Party, strike ballots, open government, a Freedom of

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Information Act, and proportional representation. It should actively seek to enrich our democracy.

Looking to the future

The most striking feature of the 1987 election result was the shift to the left of women voters. Women have been most affected by the Thatcher revolution. They know the need for social provision, they experience the brutality of low-paid, unsatisfactory jobs, they think about their children's future.

The Labour Party still presents itself as a tough, working class male party (though the election campaign was most successful when it moved away from this) through its links with the trade unions, its brand of macho rhetoric, its predominantly male politicians. Yet still in 1987, unsolicited, women voted Labour.

The society we live in now is brutal, divided, dirty, aggressive, short sighted, and uncivilised. If socialism offered an alternative that was kind, united, clean, gentle, far sighted and civilised then I think that a great many people, my mother and aunts included, would vote Labour.

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1989 Webb Essay Competition

In the bicentenary year of the French Revolution, the subject of this year's Webb Essay Competition will be *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*. Entrants must be under 31 on 31 March 1989 (ie born on or after 1 April 1958).

The winner will receive £500, with £250 for the runner-up. Essays should be between 2,000 and 5,000 words, preferably typed on one side of the paper only. They must be submitted to the Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth Street, London SW1H 9BN no later than 5.30pm on 30 April 1989.

Entries must be accompanied with the name and address of the entrant, their date of birth and telephone number (daytime where possible).

The result of the competition will be published in the *New Statesman & Society* on 14 July 1989 and the July/August issue of *Fabian News*.

The decision of the judges will be final, and no correspondence will be entered into about the results of the competition. Essays will not be returned unless submitted with a stamped addressed envelope.

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Can socialism be popular?

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The essays in this pamphlet were originally submitted for the first, 1988, Webb Essay competition.

Contributions were solicited from a group who would not have experienced a Labour Government since their school days—people under 31. They grew up when Labour was the party of government—and inherited a Tory administration confident of its long-term future.

What was shared throughout these and the other entries was a concern for local initiatives, for green politics, and an inspiring confidence in people: individuals living in communities.

The essays have been selected for publication because they address four themes key to the creation of a popular British socialism. The first, by winner Michael Jacobs, examines the findings of *British Social Attitudes 1987*, to show that Britain's people are committed to socialist values. What they don't like is the Labour Party.

Jacques Peretti argues that Mrs Thatcher's individualism is less a social revolution, more a successful attempt to catch the spirit of the time—and that Labour should do the same. Neal Lawson suggests that Labour needs to demonstrate a user-friendly way to create wealth. Finally, Sally-Anne Lomas outlines the case for a socialist strategy built on people's actual experiences, with a feminist approach that involves neither window- nor power-dressing.

The Fabian Society

The Fabian Society exists to further socialist education and research. Its members are thoughtful socialists who wish to discuss the essential questions of democratic socialism and relate them to practical plans for building socialism in a changing world. Beyond this the Society has no collective policy. It is affiliated to the Labour Party. Anyone who is not ineligible for membership of the Labour Party is eligible for full membership; others may become associate members. For membership and publications details write to: John Willman, General Secretary, Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth Street, London SW1H 9BN.

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