

# Blue Election, Election Blues

Labour fought a good, competent campaign. But, **Stuart Hall** argues, there is no way such a traditionalist appeal can any longer deliver the goods.



Kinnock and Hattersley: is the dream ticket still valid?

hatcherism's third term was not unexpected, but the reality of it is devastating and will take some time to think through properly. It is all the more depressing because, in the event, Labour had such a good campaign. For three weeks it looked like a party that could actually win and hold power. Kinnock's self-confidence, though over-played, proved infectious. Organisationally, the party looked for once as if it belonged to the 20th century. The manifesto was muddled; but, once the campaign got off the ground, it found an image and acquired political definition. Labour managed to 'stage' a broad political choice for the nation between the party of greed, privilege and self-interest and the party of caring, collective provision and the underprivileged. This was the only chance Labour had, and it went for it with surprising energy.

However, though Labour's 'good' cam-

paigned put heart into party activists and the committed Left, it did not in the end shift the overall disposition of the vote. Some voters may have changed their minds but the swings cancelled one another out. There was no massive change of heart in the final three weeks. Few voters, for instance, seem to have been swayed by the famous party election television broadcasts, which caused such excitement amongst media pundits and so much heart-searching amongst the Labour faithful. The election, in short, was won (ie, lost) in those terrible months and years since 1983. Thatcherism's victory was rooted not in any temporary fluctuations of support, but in the deep movements and tendencies which have been re-shaping the British political map. The problem the Left now faces is structural and organic.

One clue to this may lie in a persistent trend over the past five years. Asked



Margaret and Norman celebrate their third victory

what *policies* they supported, significant majorities consistently preferred Labour on unemployment, health, housing, education - the 'welfare' issues. During the campaign, these remained the most important issues for the majority of voters polled. In fact, Labour actually had some success in pushing them up the political agenda. However, both before and during the election, if asked about *image* - who was 'doing a good job', 'giving the country a lead', making people 'feel good to be British again' - a majority consistently said 'Maggie'. The same thing has been going on in America, where no majorities could be found for specific policies like winding up welfare programmes, yet, when it came to 'making you feel good to be American', people said Ronnie was their baby.

One way of interpreting this trend is that, increasingly, the electorate is thinking politically, not in terms of *policies* but of *images*. This doesn't

**'In and through images, fundamental political questions are being posed and argued through'**



mean that policies don't matter. It does mean that policies don't capture people's political imaginations unless constructed into an *image* with which they can identify. Far from this being a sign of voter irrationality, there are a number of quite 'rational' reasons why there should be a trend in this direction in the advanced 'class democracies' like Britain and the US.

First, we live in a world where decisions are both complex and remote, and the big bureaucracies of state and market control a great deal of social life. So people are quite 'rational' to believe that they can't intervene with much hope of success, *in detail*, into policy matters, nor can they affect the fine-tuning of economic or policy machines.

Second, the electorate is now mercilessly exposed to ceaseless massaging by the media and to 'disinformation' from the politicians. It isn't surprising that politics, too, is

being absorbed into this game of impression-management.

Third, voters know perfectly well that, these days, a five-year mandate will be interpreted any way the party in power likes. The abolition of the GLC was never 'popular' but that didn't stop Mrs Thatcher from doing what was politically expedient. Democracy, even in the narrow sense of 'government by popular consent', didn't once sully the lips of a single Tory spokesperson, and is a concept altogether foreign to Thatcherism's universe. 'Choice' was counterposed to 'democracy' precisely because, whereas the latter is public and social, the former can be defined in wholly private and individual (ie, 'family') terms.

In all these circumstances, people aren't wrong to imagine that what is required of them as citizens is simply to express a broad, undefined 'preference' for one scenario or another, this image or that. Some people regard this

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as a trivialisation of politics. But images are *not* trivial things. In and through images, fundamental political questions are being posed and argued through. We need to take them more seriously than we do. Mrs Thatcher claimed she was excited to be not just fighting for power, but helping to 'set the agenda for the 21st century'. But, how else can you discuss what Britain and the British people are to become, except in terms of broad images? The future has to be imagined - 'imaged', to coin a word.

The question of political imagery is not a matter of presentation, but of *ideology*, which is a different and altogether more serious matter. One reason why Labour did better than most of us expected is that, this time, it did engage in ideological struggle. One reason why the campaign failed to shift minds, hearts and votes, was that it lost that struggle, despite its efforts. And part of the reason why Labour lost it is that, while it has only just begun to take these questions seriously, Thatcherism has been intervening ideologically with consummate skill *ever since 1919*.

**W**hy has it taken Labour and the Left more generally so long to appreciate the strategic importance of the ideological arena? In part, the answer lies in the way the Left normally thinks about 'polities'. Electoral politics - in fact, every kind of politics - depends on political identities and identifications. People make identifications symbolically: through social imagery, in their political imaginations. They 'see themselves' as one sort of person or another. They 'imagine their future' within this scenario or that. They don't just think about voting in terms of how much they have, their so-called 'material interests'. Material interests matter profoundly. But they are always *ideologically defined*.

Contrary to a certain version of marxism, which has as strong a hold over the Labour 'Centre' as it does on the so-called 'hard Left', material interests, on their own, have no necessary class belongingness. They influence us. But they are not escalators which automatically deliver people to their appointed destinations, 'in place', within the political-ideological spectrum.

One reason why they don't is because people have *conflicting* social interests, sometimes reflecting conflicting identities. As a worker a person might put 'wages' first: in a period of high unemployment, 'job security' may come higher; a woman might prioritise 'child-care'. But what does a 'working woman' put first? Which of her identities is the one that determines her political choices? Take another example. I am a socialist and therefore passionately in favour of state educa-

who is taking 0 levels in a hard-pressed LEA. Do I stick by my political



The flags out at Tory HQ

principles or squeeze her into a 'better school'?

In fact, the harder things get in Thatcher's Britain and the more competitive they become, the more divided society is. And the more divided it is, the more these ideological conflicts bear down on people's actual lives, cutting their 'natural' social and political identifications in two. Appealing to the 'real experience' of poverty or unemployment or underprivilege won't do the trick. Even poverty and unemployment have to be ideologically defined. A young unemployed person *may* interpret this experience to mean that you should work and vote to change the system. But it could equally be defined as a sign that you should throw your fortune in with the winners, climb on the bandwagon, earn a fast buck and look after 'number one'. Material interests did not, on their own, guarantee an automatic majority for Labour in the working-class this time, and it won't necessarily do so in the future *because it never has*.

This does not mean that ideology determines everything. If nobody was prospering under Thatcherism, ideology alone could not parachute such an 'illusion' into the heads of the majority. However, if *some* people are doing well - as they are, especially, in personal terms, in the 'South' - and the ideological climate is right, and the alternative ways of measuring how 'well' you are doing are effectively silenced or stigmatised, then the small number who define themselves as 'doing well' will be swelled by a much larger number who identify with this way of 'getting on'. Elections are won or lost not just on so-called 'real' majorities, but on (equally real) 'symbolic majori-

ity' includes all who identify ideologically with the enterprise culture as the

way of the future, who see themselves in their political imagination as likely to be lucky in the next round. They form an 'imaginary community' around Thatcherism's political project.

The whole point of Thatcherism as a form of politics has been to construct a new social bloc, and in this project ideology is critical. A social bloc is, by definition, *not* homogeneous. It does not consist of one whole class or even part of one class. It has to be constructed out of groups which are very different in terms of their material interests and social positions. The question is, can these differences of position and interest be constructed into a 'unity'? (It never is a unity, in the strict sense.) Can these diverse identities be welded together into a 'collective will'?

In the second term, Thatcherism did not make a single move which was not also carefully calculated in terms of this hegemonic strategy. It stepped up the pace of privatisation. But it took care, at every step, to harness new social constituencies to it, to 'construct' an image of the new, share-owning working class, and to expand the bloc, symbolically, around the image of 'choice'. It has not only attacked state education and the health service. It has created, side by side and in competition with them, among the majority of users and right in the heart of the working class, an alternative image: quicker service via private health and a better chance for kids in a deregulated education system - the 'fast-lane' schools and inner-city technology colleges.

Don't for a moment underestimate the resonance which a slogan like 'power to the people' carries in our over-bureaucratised, over-managed, under-resourced society. Of course, only a few can actually *choose* to be better off in these ways. But, for the time being, a lot of people think this is the only way open to them to advance in a society where competition and selectivity have become the name of the game. If that's the only game in town, some of them will play it!

**B**uilding a new social bloc means not only 'symbolically' including as many different groups as you can in your project, but also symbolically excluding the enemy. The 'loony Left' image was one powerful example. Once the one-liner was launched, the deep symbiosis between Thatcherism and the press guaranteed it an uninterrupted flight. It locked together in a single image high rates and political extremism with those powerful subliminal themes of race and sex. The discourse of the 'loony Left' was a code. In London it made it possible to expunge the legacy of the GLC, and to bring into the election, race (the anti-anti-racism backlash) and sex (the anti-feminism, anti-gay, anti-permissive, post-Aids backlash -

Thatcherism's hidden 'moral agenda') without a word having to be explicitly spoken. So successful was it that the Labour leadership, the party machine, much of the traditional 'hard Left', slick New *States-men* and all, could also make a heavy investment in it without having to reveal their hand about race, feminism or sexual politics.

Instead of engaging with the 'loony Left' image, Labour in effect colluded with it. In the weeks before the election, the leadership cast its vote unflinchingly for the 'traditional' image, in search of the 'traditional Labour voter'. Again, everybody understood that this, too, was a code. It is a code for 'back to the respectable, moderate, trade unionist, male-dominated working-class'. Mr Kinnock appeared as a manly, 'likely lad' who owed everything to the welfare state. His 'familial' image carried not a single echo or trace of feminist struggles over two decades. The investment in 'strong leadership' and in 'ordinariness' carried its own message. It signalled the distancing of Labour from all those 'fringe issues' and a commitment to rooting Labour political loyalties exclusively through an identification with the traditional culture of the Left.

This was the image with which Labour chose to engage, ideologically, with Thatcherism. The key question is, can Labour win with it? Can it harness the fragmented experiences of living in Great Britain Limited to a new, radical, political will? Can it construct around Labour a new social bloc?

Of course, millions of people desperately need the welfare state. And identification with parts of it remains strong. So, in some areas, the traditionalist appeal did lend conviction to Labour's programme. It also contained an element of forward-projection - in the form of the question 'what sort of society would you prefer to live in?'

On the other hand, it was also fatally narrow and backward-looking. It does not have roots in the things which are transforming social and economic life and it lacks a convincing strategy for, or image of, modernisation. Labour may have carried conviction on the 'fair shares', redistribution, front; but it lacked credibility on the 'wealth-creating' front. It could not construct a picture of what a wealthy *society* might be like or how it could be created. And since many identifications were made, not in terms of social wealth but in 'family fortunes', it had no image to set against Thatcherism's image of personalised and privatised 'prosperity'.

The sober truth is that Labour probably did as well with this traditionalist image as it was possible to do. It does not and cannot carry majority support. It appeals to some sectors of, but cannot unify, the working class. And it certainly is not hegemonic enough to construct out of our increasingly frag-



Labour's future?

mented and divided society a new social bloc or collective political will for the future.

In the aftermath of the election, many people have been seeking consolation in the belief that the appeal to the 'traditional Labour voter' could, at least, carry half the country - the 'North'. The 'North' has become a sort of geographical metaphor for where the traditional Labour voter now resides. If only things were so neatly divided, Labour's traditionalist appeal would make more sense. But, unfortunately, that story is deceptively neat.

The 'North' is not just a geographical entity: it is also a state of mind. Looked at in this way, the picture becomes a good deal bleaker.

First, the 'North' is not as solid as it looks. There are plenty of 'South-minded' working-class people living in the 'North'.

Second, the disaster which Labour suffered in London and the South East suggests that many people there who may be 'North' in their living standards, conditions and even origins have, nevertheless, become 'Southerners' in their heads. The 'new' working class in the geographical 'South' now identify and vote in a majority for Thatcherism. They no longer identify themselves with Labour's traditional working class Labour voter. What is more, many people in the underclasses - the unskilled, part-timers, young unemployed, women living alone, black people, the homeless, inner-city casualties - don't see themselves or identify with this traditionalist image either. Looked at, not so much in terms of economic class, but as ideological identification,

Labour could not and cannot for the foreseeable future make any inroads into the social landscape of the 'South' on the narrow basis of the image they chose.

Third, the 'North' is not impervious to Thatcherite inroads as we shall see in the coming months. The inner-cities strategy will not bring about long-term sustained growth in the 'North', but it is going to erode Labour's political base in the great industrial urban areas. Thatcherism in the 'South' has already had considerable success in targeting the big-spending Labour councils, the comprehensive schools and council housing - three major pillars of Labour's political base. In the next months we are going to witness a similar assault, economically and ideologically, on Labour's base in the 'North', with blistering effects.

There will be a flood of small businesses, pump-primed, by industrialists who know on which side their political bread is buttered. The press will trumpet its immediate 'success' and Lord Young will be 'economical' with more statistics. Labour authorities will be side-lined by 'alternative' private channels of growth, and isolated for attack (some version of the London 'loony Left' ideological missile is at this very moment cruising up the M1). Thatcherism can't 'restore' Britain's old industrial base - but that is not the project. It may not be able to positively win over everybody - but that is not necessary either. It has never had an overwhelming social majority on anything. But it can mobilise the crucial two-thirds, which is enough. Not all of them are, as yet, Tory voters, but many who still vote Labour or Alliance have begun to benefit from Thatcherism, or are making pragmatic adjustments to it.

What's more, not all the two-thirds needs to be in any real sense 'prosperous'. All Thatcherism has to do to erode Labour's 'Northern' bastions is to lay a base for *just enough* people to put their feet, tentatively, on the new Thatcherite ladders of success. Firstly, it has to convince them that, concretely, this is a more likely way to a better, more prosperous life than any other alternative on offer. Secondly, it has to convince others who have not yet begun to do well, to cast their lot in with the free-market society. Once this threshold has been crossed, a much larger number - a strategic majority, the necessary two-thirds - move in their heads. The balance shifts. The 'North' has begun its symbolic journey 'Southwards'...

What, then, about the possibility of constructing the different social constituencies into a new social bloc around Labour's traditionalist appeal? Clearly, few modernising industrialists can be harnessed to Labour's current strategy. Big business is now pro-Thatcher, not

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simply in pragmatic but in ideological terms. They 'believe'. They understand that Thatcherism is not just a strategy which favours capital; it must also be a strategy for the whole society, 'for capital'. The middle classes are interestingly split. The self-made middle classes - numerically, the overwhelming majority - who inhabit the culture of the private sector, are Mrs Thatcher's ideological vanguard. They have talked their way into an impregnable philosophy of 'number one'. The 'public sector' middle classes in education, local government or the social services are not so directly in touch with the new prosperity and are more inclined to seek rewards from socially useful and personally rewarding forms of work which have been brutally savaged by the new criteria of 'value-for-money' and 'efficiency'. They are more detached from Thatcherism. But this does not help Labour as much as it might, since the Alliance now soaks up their disenchantment with Thatcherism - it's a 'nicer' option.

In the aftermath of the election, many people on the Left are arguing that Labour's only hope lies in the working class. However, Thatcherism's electoral hegemony continues to rest precisely on certain parts of the working class vote. Where Labour commands a majority, that majority is overwhelmingly working class. But the working class is not overwhelmingly Labour. Indeed, there is no such thing as 'the

working class vote any more. Divisions, not solidarities, of class identification are the rule. There are large and significant sectors of the 'working class' as it really is today - the unemployed, semi-skilled and unskilled, part-time workers, male and female, the low-paid, black people, the 'underclasses' of Thatcherite Britain - who no longer see themselves in a traditional Labour way. In Greater London and the South East, Labour failed to connect with the forces that are remaking the working class. Skilled workers in the new industries, and the expanding clerical and office workforce, are, in their majority, voters for Thatcherism. There are more of them in the South East than in the North, but the balance is changing and will continue, unevenly, to do so. The sectors of this vote who are home owners or new shareholders are even more committed.

What then of the new social constituencies which, in any case, have less of a clear-cut class identity? Women, whether in or out of full-time work, did *not* vote overwhelmingly for Thatcherism and have not done so since 1979. But Labour made absolutely no direct, strategic or distinctive investment in what, from any point of view, is a historic shift of political identification. Presumably, on the analogy with 'black sections', to do so would be 'sexist'. By the same token, the 'ethnic' vote is less and less a Labour possession - and

after the disastrous handling of the black sections issue, who can blame them? More owners of Asian small businesses are beginning to vote by class rather than by race. A proportion of Afro-Caribbean people will not be far behind.

**N**one of this augurs well for the future. Politics does not reflect majorities, it constructs them. And there is no evidence that Labour's commitment to traditionalism can construct such a majority. Certainly, the consequences of Thatcherite restructuring are horrendous. But larger and larger numbers of people no longer experience all this as 'traditional Labour voters'. Even less can they articulate their aspirations through the traditional Labour image. The question of Labour becoming in a deep sense the majority party of society is therefore not whether it can rally and mobilise its past, but whether it has a convincing alternative scenario to Thatcherism for the future. It cannot build such an alternative by, however honourably, replaying '1945' in 1987. It can only honour its past by aiming to move forwards. But to do so it needs a strategy for modernisation and an image of modernity. What the election suggests is that Labour far from opening the hard road to renewal, largely turned its back on it. It is therefore not surprising that - despite the good feelings and high morale - its historic decline continues. •

**'What the election suggests is that Labour far from opening the hard road to renewal, largely turned its back on it'**



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