



Clearing The Decks

A Roundtable Discussion

After years of huffing and puffing, the Left is rethinking its policies from the foundations up. Labour's Conference this month will look at the first fruits of the party's year-long policy review. The Communist Party last month launched its strategy discussion with *Facing Up To The Future*. Here, some of the key movers for change discuss ideas and perspectives for the new times

The participants in the roundtable are: David Blunkett MP, member of Labour's National Executive Committee and chair of the party's policy review group on 'consumers and the community'; Beatrix Campbell, freelance journalist and member of the Communist Party group which drafted *Facing Up To The Future*; Bryan Gould MP, shadow secretary for trade and industry, Labour Party NEC member and chair of the policy review group on 'the productive and competitive economy'; and Charlie Leadbeater, *Financial Times* labour correspondent and member of the CP drafting group. The discussion was chaired by Sarah Benton, political editor of *New Statesman & Society*

Bryan, would you like to summarise what you think are key new points of the Labour Party policy review?

Bryan I think the Labour Party policy review addresses fundamentally the same situation as the Communist Party document, *Facing Up To The Future*. We have to recognise that society has changed in the interim period and the requirements of the modern economy are different. If we're to grapple with those requirements we have to not just outflank, but *leapfrog* Thatcher in terms of what we intend to do with the economy, the relevance of our policies, how we get popular support for those policies. That's not in any sense to *abandon* what we've stood for traditionally, but it means we have to be prepared to update and modify it to meet those new conditions.

So I think there's a very great commonality of approach between the two documents. Both understand that Thatcher is by no means as dominant as right-wing mythology would have us believe, that there are powerful potential alliances of opposition; it's the way in which those have to be mobilised that is the challenge for us.

Charlie, would you just say what you think are the key points of *Facing Up To The Future*:

Charlie Well, the key starting point is to draw a distinction between capitalism and Thatcherism, and how the Left has to focus its attention on a set of changes, not just in the economy but in the way people work, consume, live; the culture which surrounds production and work. There has been a fundamental change there, which Thatcherism has appropriated, but the Left's focus should crucially be on the character of those changes: the introduction of new technology, new forms of control in the economy. This isn't just an incremental change; the document suggests there has been some sort of break; that an old order of production, work, consumption, investment has given way to a new order based around information technology and new forms of production.

And so from that, our document then suggests a series of new approaches to a set of areas which really argue for the Left standing back from particular institutional arrangements or policies and looking at what it wants to achieve and how it can achieve it. And it suggests a new configuration of the state's role in welfare services, new approaches to regulation and social ownership and to international alliances. Those ideas aren't complete, but they're sketching the outlines of a

new sort of vision of where the Left should be.

What do you think the Left has learnt from Thatcherism, and what has Thatcherism exposed about its own weaknesses?

David It seems to me that there isn't one amorphous political and economic culture in Britain, and if we don't recognise that, we make the mistake of believing that there is one audience, one social and economic set of parameters to deal with. When people are defending those who are in the greatest poverty and have paid the greatest price for rapid social and economic change, we shouldn't dismiss that and say there isn't a role for us on the Left to be playing in hearing and reflecting what they're saying and the enormity of the price they've paid. But we do on the other hand have to ask the questions about that part of society which *has* experienced rapid change in a more successful and, in personal terms, a very gainful way.

I think we're at the crossroads that the Liberal Party was at at the end of the 19th century, when they either had to adapt to rapidly-changing circumstances, the enfranchisement of the population, the change in aspirations and in economic and social life; or they were going to be bypassed. And of course they *were* bypassed. I was very struck as a student 20 years ago by reading *The Strange Death Of Liberal England* by George Dangerfield. I think everyone on the Left should re-read it and reflect on where we are now. If we don't start talking about people as they are, and their aspirations, then we will be marginalised.

Beatrix What's very important about Thatcherism is that it's fierce, it's an insurgent challenge to us. It wants to wipe us out, and we've not been faced with that before. I think we've faced the challenge of Thatcherism in a way that's either pious, or lazy, given an enemy that is incredibly active: our side seems to be conservative and defensive. And yet *our* politics are meant to be the politics of transformation! That's the first thing to learn, I suppose, particularly for someone like me coming out of a life lived in the Left, to face up to the shock that right-wing Conservative politics have real resonance and real popular roots.

But what I like about the discussions that formed our document, and the *mood* that informed it, was that there was a real commitment to get away from the factionalism and sectarianism that's defined debates on the Left about the nature of the Left and Right. It was like saying: 'Right, we're going to walk out of that sectarian smoke-filled room and back into the world.' That freed-up the mind to think about what we have to become in order to take on what the other side already is.

Bryan This question about what can be learned from Thatcherism actually covers two separate sorts of questions. There's the implication that we can

emulate Thatcherism, that she's done things we ought to try to copy. Now I think that there's virtually *nothing* that we ought to emulate. We learn from Thatcherism in the way that Bea and David have both described. Thatcherism has been a lesson in the harsh realities of electoral politics. We'd got sloppy, we'd taken a lot for granted, we'd assumed that there was some inexorable tide of history which was bringing socialism towards us. It was a terrible shock to realise that Thatcher could stop us in our tracks and *reverse* us. If we are to re-establish the socialist project, we have to work at it, and that means we have to face some difficult questions. If we're to be true - as I think we have to be - to our traditional commitment to defending the defenceless, we have to recognise you can't do that in modern electoral politics unless you get some support from those who feel they're doing perfectly ok.

Now, the one difference between the CP document and what we have to grapple with in the Labour Party is that the CP travels light. The Labour Party, which has the ambition to secure popular support and form a government, can't - nor should it, in my view - so easily jettison some of the old structures, the old ideas, the old values. As a Dagenham MPI can hardly rejoice in the demise of Fordism in the same way that others might! In other words we still have our old constituencies to accommodate, represent and incorporate in the new structures.

Beatrix But surely we're *not* talking about jettisoning the old constituencies? Because the dominant company in your constituency is actually an insurgent modernising company, so what we're going to see within the crucible of Fordism itself, is the emerging post-Fordism. Moreover, I think Thatcherism has faced us with the fact that what our politics were about in the old constituencies wasn't up to much.

One of the things that both documents seem to want to arm the people with, whether it's battling with Ford or battling with Margaret Thatcher, is the idea of democracy. What makes you think that greater democracy is what people are yearning for?

David Most people are still voting Conservative because they think they will gain marginally from it personally, or their families will gain from it. If we are going to put an alternative view of how the future should look, firstly we've got to get our act together in terms of making it coherent and credible, and secondly we've got to have sufficient people believing in it to carry the momentum forward. A lot of people won't want to be involved, but they will pick up the atmosphere and climate. That's what Thatcher's doing. She's not necessarily helped the vast majority of people at all, but the climate engages them in believing that things are better.

So it strikes me that the consumer



Bryan: 'It's not crisis we face, it's a drab, difficult, mean future of a society that's crumbling away'



Beatrix: if these policy reviews are going to do anything, maybe what they'll do is demolish the fortresses of sectarianism'

needs to be empowered and organised. If you don't organise people then they remain powerless, they have the illusion of having some rights without actually having any clout to make it work. We actually have to decide that we will employ and give people skills to be able to organise so that our politics goes out to people, rather than waiting for them to come to us.

Charlie Thatcherism has appropriated desires for autonomy, choice, responsibility, which should be the natural terrain of the Left. There was always this complacent assumption that the Left's collectivism would promote these individual benefits. Thatcherism has torn that asunder and offers people a very narrow, acquisitive, consumerist kind of individual responsibility, but nevertheless the impression and image of a measure of control over a limited, protected, individual space.

One of the things the Left should do, I think, is to just stand quite clearly for individuals taking more responsibility for things which affect their lives. Its strategy should be to expand that radical individualism which Thatcherism has unleashed. The logic of that kind of assertive individualism could be taken up in politics, in production, in areas of work. So you can imagine a number of areas like individual rights to ownership of assets of a company, of rights to consultation, of rights to training or education, of rights to retraining after redundancy.

Now, that will clearly require collective action and one of the problems that Thatcherism has both tapped into and created, is an enormous distrust of the sort of theological collectives that the Left is addicted to: namely the state and class. The assumption that you can link the achievement of individual interests and aspirations to the delivery of state services or the progress of class, has come in for a great knocking. So you have to have some new agenda for collectivism, and that should, it seems to me, involve 'intermediate' collectives. What the Tories find really difficult are things like pre-strike ballots, employee buy-outs, the opposition at the moment to housing action trusts with people wanting a ballot. That claim to the individual deciding whether they will or won't engage in collective activity is very powerful.

David We need to be able to show, through the concern that people have with what's happening to their environment, why it is inevitable that things will get worse without a democratic socialist alternative. The same applies to the development of the use of technology, to what's happening to our transport network, to a health service which is based on ill-health and not on preventative health. All those things are major concerns of people that we could show are going badly wrong with the ideology and the values of Thatcher, and where we could put forward our own values of empowering and liberat-

ing people.

Beatrix But the trouble is that the alternative models you've got don't really match the kind of challenge that you were talking about, because people's experience of something like the health service is that it will see them through a dire illness; it is not an experience which I imagine will make them feel inclined to celebrate the NHS as a model of access, opportunity and choice. If we were in a different moment in history, would we be celebrating the health service in the way that we do, as a model of socialism? Of course we wouldn't! Because what people are faced with in the health service is precisely, in terms of their commonsense grievances about it, all the things that Thatcherism opposes and complains about. Now, it doesn't offer an *alternative* to that but it does speak to people's pessimism about the way in which centralised provisions are run in authoritarian ways, in which knowledge is hidden and you're not allowed to say, 'Well I don't like this doctor, I want another one'. If we really meant it about empowering and liberating people, David, then it would not be possible for a midwife to lose her job because she's prepared to defend a woman having a child at home, without that causing a rebellion.

Bryan Charlie made the point earlier that the Tories have appropriated that territory of autonomy and choice and freedom. One of things that's gone wrong with the Left I think, over a long period, is the defeatism with which we've approached that contest for territory. As soon as our opponents raise the standard and say 'This is ours', we depart the battlefield! We see this happening every day: as new practical applications of choice and individual freedom and power for people to control their own lives become available, we leave, saying: 'Well, those are Tory concepts, nothing to do with us!' Too often, I think, we've been so mesmerised, so preoccupied with the *collective* nature of what we're doing that we've forgotten - and indeed are unwilling to face the fact - that the whole purpose of provision of whatever sort is to deliver to individuals. That's where we fall short, we constantly shy away from the connection between the absolute essential nature of collective provision - because you can't get half these things without collective action or provision - and the notion that the end result is delivering to individuals.

I hesitate to raise this vexed question of shares which has caused me such difficulty, but there's a very good example of how we get frightened by labels. As soon as you mention, in some quarters of the Left, the word 'shares', you're assumed to be a raging capitalist. Shares are simply a form of property which carry with them certain rights and if they're organised in certain ways it may on occasions be appropriate to transfer the rights of share ownership from one group of

people to the people we would like to see exercising them. It's as simple as that in a sense, and we ought not to be frightened by these ghosts.

Beatrix It's interesting *why* some people are frightened and feel endangered by all this talk. It's ironic that it's the fundamentalists who're opposed to all of this, because you return to fundamentals and the classic text reminds you of one thing, which is that capitalism is nothing if not innovative, modernising, urgent and insurgent.

Well, if we move on to the question of capitalism which Bea has just raised: one thing that strikes me as being new in these documents, is that the concept of 'crisis' has disappeared. Let me point to two areas of crisis which are missing. One is the notion of economic crisis produced by some sort of inherent contradiction which capitalism must produce. The second is an era we're living through of very profound environmental crisis. I would say that the Communist Party document was extremely weak on the environment. I mean, one wouldn't know that we have actually entered into an era of environmental crisis which is dominating more and more people's thinking, and which, I would say is one of the few areas where you can genuinely sense a popular desire for collective and state action to do something about it.

Charlie I completely disagree with your reading that there is no sense of crisis in *Facing Up To The Future*. There is a version of marxist crisis theory in this document: it suggests that capitalism is capable of having structural crises which aren't the final crises of capitalism, and that it is possible to be moving from one distinctive form or structure of accumulation - the technological core of which was established before the war - to another. And that is actually a very traditional historical materialist analysis. So, implicit within this is, and what I think is distinctive and important about it, is *precisely* a theory of crisis; that capitalism is capable of having structural crises which change its form.

I agree with you that the whole question of the environment is underplayed. However, one of the things that runs throughout this document, perhaps not as strongly as it should, is that it points to the growth of a culture of progressive international humanism, not just around the environment but also around peace and other issues. And that sort of culture is extremely popular, it appeals across classes and simply cannot be accounted for within Thatcherism's very nationalistic, very materialistic individualism. That is an important development. But where that goes to, where it fits within the Left's impression of its relationship with constituencies, reveals the crisis of representation on the Left. It simply doesn't know within its traditional structures how to represent those sorts of struggles and those sorts of crises.

David Whether it's on the economy or



David: 'If you don't organise people then they remain powerless, they have the illusion of rights without any clout'

on something as critical as the environment, how can we re-awaken people's confidence that democracy is the way in which you can actually resolve problems? The notion that governments should disengage has quite an appeal to people. If we're going to tackle major problems of the future - 'crisis' is a grossly over-used word - then people have got to believe that coming together and using democracy, whether in the community or on an international scale, is the effective way of doing something. That means we've got to be internationalist, it means we've got to accept the challenge that comes from recognising the power of transnational corporations, it means we have to recognise the limitations of the power of individual governments as well as their strengths, and we've got to build on people's commitment to those around them.

Beatrix Both documents are limited by the boundaries of the organisations that they come out of. What I like about our document is that it's modernised the examination of what the leading edge of modern industry is in Britain today, and what the ramifications are for politics and the culture that we all live in. Where it's weak is on all sorts of things that are not part of its party life, and exactly the same goes for the Labour Party documents. I think Labour's policy review is much more imprisoned, forgive me for saying it, in a way of thinking about politics as if it were thinking about *policy*: overly-concerned with getting the policy formulations right. I don't think it's the case that we need to get across to people the imperative to take care of the earth in order that it survives. I think people know that already. They care and weep about the seals, and feel utterly frustrated that the machinery that ought to enable them to do something about it, whether the Communist Party, the Labour Party or the trade union movement, actually are inert when it comes to dying seals or polluted oceans or holes in the sky.

Bryan As politicians seeking popular support we're always tempted to talk in terms of crisis. That's why as David says, we've been talking about crisis of all sorts, it's the most familiar word in the political vocabulary. But for heaven's sake, if people weren't prepared to recognise the crash of the early 1980s and mass unemployment as a crisis, and they still voted Thatcher in, we've really got to think again about what we mean by crisis. What we have to say is, that it's not *crisis* we face, it's a drab, difficult, mean future of a society that's crumbling away, that doesn't feel good about itself. And that we need to respond as a community, to take some responsibility for the health of society as a whole, for planning our future, making good all our deficiencies of the market: this ought to be the Left's 'pitch'.

David Yes, the twist against Thatcher in that case would be that personal

individual responsibility is meaningless without social responsibility in coming together to achieve those goals. And if we are to offer people personal responsibility, which we should, and insist that they play their part, rather than some sort of nanny state, then we actually have to challenge what the Right is saying about the individual and their role; in other words, we *do* have obligations and responsibilities to each other.

Charlie It does seem to me that there's an important sense in which the Left should offer a collectively-ensured guarantee of housing, education or whatever, but that certainly doesn't mean that those things should be collectively *provided* and it doesn't mean that they should necessarily be collectively consumed. And so one of our problems is in persuading people about *how* that collective provision meets those individual ends. One way of doing it is just to be a lot more open about it, and say that some of these things are going to be done by the private sector. There's nothing non-socialist or anti-socialist about saying that the private sector is more efficient at repairing houses than a lot of direct labour organisations in councils...

Beatrix Or that they're as inefficient as each other...

Charlie If we continue to insist that direct labour organisations are the model of socialism, people simply won't think we're living in the same world as them. And that goes back to our understanding of democracy. A lot of the time people don't want democracy in a way: I mean they don't want to go to meetings all the time, they just want a good service delivered.

Bryan That's a very important point, what people look for from the political process is not some sort of constantly-operating arrangement which requires that they turn out to meetings all the time: they want a disposition of power which guarantees them that in their moments of personal crisis when they *need* something from the political process, it's responsive to them.

Beatrix Fascinating, isn't it, that we think of politics as being meetings! It speaks volumes that political culture in Britain has become, as one of my local MPs told me, a case of going to 400 meetings a year. Now what kind of human being is that? No cooking, no nappy-changing ... He's probably *proud* of the squalor in which he lives, because that's a testament to his political commitment. Now, I'm being trivial here, but actually what people do as political acts is, they read, they buy, they refuse to buy, and they commit all sorts of acts which are about participation in the culture. It's only nutcases in ever-declining political organisations who think that the only political act is to go to a meeting.

David And what's more you can't expect people to identify with those who enjoy living in squalor or looks as though they really revel in being dirty!

Can we look at some of the collective possibilities? Because everybody here accepts that one needs more individual choice but to a certain extent this has to come about through collective acts. So, is David for example proposing to set up new collective organisations of a permanent nature, let's say, Narks and Spencer consumers? What are the ways in which we imagine people are going to come together democratically, to say what they want, that they cannot simply achieve by going to the shop with their money?

Beatrix One of the things that the CP document tentatively tries to do is to identify a 'third sector'. It struck us that there's a plethora of collective comings and goings in what you might call 'civil society', that are outside the political system. What troubles us, but what is also interesting about British politics at the moment, is that political parties on the Left are relatively isolated from this miscellany of movements and organisations within civil society, ranging from organisations which are simply to do with pleasure and hobbies, to organisations that provide, in a radical form, services which represent a critique of statist forms of provision.

David I agree with that. They don't look to us and we don't look to them. Although I criticised the word 'crisis' earlier, the irony is I was co-author of a book called *Democracy In Crisis!* 'In Crisis' in the sense that people aren't able to engage with traditional forms of political expression easily; they don't feel happy with them. I think if we could begin to link people into a process of being able to affect change, that would be very good. I talked earlier about helping people to organise. I didn't mean in a terribly bureaucratic way, I just feel that people are often floundering, and they do need support. We used to call it 'community work' and in its best sense it was enabling people to do what they wanted to do, and supporting them in doing it.

Now, when you're talking about people coming together in one form or another, would you imagine, Bryan, for example, that a Labour government would actually give these bodies statutory powers of representation? If we take the example of parks: most people just shudder at the idea of them simply being handed over to the private sector, and yet there's no campaign being run to preserve our parks which many of us love, dogshit and all. Do you think that you ought to have an environmental group that would have the power of representing the people? Or dog-lovers, or mother and toddler groups?

Bryan It's relatively easy for me to state what I think is the desirable objective, but much more difficult, as you rightly point out, when you come to look at actual mechanisms. To me, what socialism is about is the diffusion of power. How we react to what I regard as a quite inevitable tendency for all societies to concentrate power in a few hands, what we do about that is, I think,



Charlie:
'That claim to the individual deciding whether they will or won't engage in collective activity is very powerful'

the central political question. Just thinking off-the-cuff: there are two dimensions to this. One is that in modern society power has become more rigidly and remotely exercised by the existing mechanisms, so that when people say: 'I want to do something about that because it's affecting me and I don't like it', they find it terribly difficult to get to grips with the existing structures of power. So one solution to that is to bring those structures closer to people: to go for decentralisation, smaller units and so on, in terms of the orthodox exercise of power. The other matching movement, as Sarah's suggesting, would be to provide instruments of power which can be used when needed by groups on particular issues. And there I think you probably are in the business of giving them statutory roles and so on, because without that, under our legal system, though they may have influence, in the end they don't have powers.

Charlie We should not get too caught up in the sort of voluntary sector/local authority ambit because the idea goes far beyond it. I mean the idea that there should be, if you like, a focus for democratic discontent in the economy provided by regulatory bodies. Even OfTel, the British Telecom watchdog, which is extremely limited, has unleashed incredible consumer disenchantment with British Telecom. That could happen throughout the economy, potentially. And it is a form of democratic involvement in the sense that people realise they have interests in common. They don't need to go to a meeting to do that. Why shouldn't it be Labour's policy to set up local private industry councils, or private industry/union/consumer councils which have some sort of statutory obligation to provide training for the unemployed or to get involved in local housing projects, or whatever?

In the 70s I think we all thought that government could do anything that we wanted it to do, and every change that we wanted we would demand that the government did on our behalf immediately. Has being involved in writing these documents changed your views of what government ought not to touch?

Charlie The range of things that government has to have a responsibility for, I think, is probably larger rather than smaller. But what the government then directly *provides* is a different matter, and I think the crucial distinction is: even if there is a collective guarantee of something being provided, like childcare, that does not entail that the state or the local authority should directly provide it: that can be left up to other people. It's like the public park: the state is there to guarantee a space exists but within that space a variety of regulated activities can take place, and as long as they're regulated, individuals, private initiatives, even companies can quite happily enter that publicly protected and reg-

ulated space.

Bryan I very much agree with that. I think the ambit of overall government responsibility is likely to get greater as society becomes more complex and planning needs to be more long term and so on. But if you take for example the way we run the economy, I don't think we ought to say that because the government has the overall responsibility for context-setting and enabling, that its civil servants in Whitehall are actually going to do all this. All the evidence is that it doesn't work terribly well. The people who are actually going to make the economy work are - as we say in our document - salespeople, technocrats, the scientists and so on. They're the people who are going to do the job, but they can't do it if they're operating without the proper facilities, training and macro-economic context. Those are all the responsibilities of government.

But having made that overall point, I think politicians ought also to be very much aware of their sometimes over-weening pretensions. In a moderately-well ordered society, the things that determine whether people are content or not are about their own personal lives. And the job of politicians very often is no more than to remove obvious injustices, correct mistakes and make sure that things work as well as can reasonably be expected, so that individuals can get on and enjoy and

fulfil their lives.

David We have to be enabling, and we also have to be aware of the power that does exist to distribute resources and make it possible for people to live a decent life. It's not that people can't be happy in a grotty 10th floor flat, it's just that they stand a better chance if they've got a garden and the children can play outside. We can enable that to happen, both from government and through local government at the community level. There ought to be a changing pattern of responsibility for particular aspects of collective life, who delivers it, how it's implemented, so that we don't atrophy.

I just wanted to say this though, which is that we're inevitably more engaged with what parliament might do than the CP will be, because of having 229 MPs and hopefully at least 350 after the next election. It's a serious point because those of us who are very sceptical about parliamentarianism (I am, and I've seen nothing in 15 months to change my mind about that), are well aware that people like clinging on to the illusion that they're exercising power or making decisions about people's lives, rather than being able to let them go. The other thing is that we will unleash - if we manage to get elected - enormous aspirations and desires to change things. We're going to have an enormous problem to be enablers, and to satisfy in that kind of environment.

If we're not prepared for it, we'll simply be swept away by the tide.

Beatrix I was struck there by the way that a notion of politics got reduced to 'What is it that politicians can do and give?' And I do think that's a dilemma. That will be a crisis for you, David, if it's thought of in that way, because if Labour's constituency is a pacified, a passive, and needy constituency, rather than an active and demanding and creating constituency - in other words if you think of politics in terms of what politicians give rather than that politicians are simply part of a nexus of processes in which people do things and make things - then we're in big trouble. That brings me to the second thing. I can't stand the current political atmosphere - in the nation and on the Left - I think both of them are horrible. The seizure of left debate by sectarianism and particularly, the way in which ultra-leftism moved in to crucial positions in socialist politics and set up moralistic, fetishistic polarisations - I want that era to be over. If these policy reviews do anything, what they're going to do, with a bit of luck, is demolish the fortresses of sectarianism. Because these fortresses are based on not thinking any more. What we've got to do is not just change the terms, but change the tone, so that we can have a context in which we can think for a change rather than hit each other with blunt instruments.



**Sarah:
'We're living through an era of very profound environmental crisis, we're seeing it all around us'**

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