

THE TIMES

THURSDAY AUGUST 10 1995



New left for new labour

Labour needs an ideological cutting edge even more than the Tories do, says **Richard Burden MP**

The "summer madness" that followed the article I wrote for *New Statesman & Society* in the wake of the Littleborough and Saddleworth by-election confirmed that there is something wrong with the way we do politics in Britain.

When people in a political party seek discussion, it is always reported as a split. Every party is obsessed by the need to avoid being portrayed as divided. In this atmosphere, what hope is there for rational political debate? When discussion suffers, it isn't good for politics, it is not good for party members and it is unhealthy for the electorate. This isn't just a problem for Labour: it is a problem for all parties, a problem of the political

process itself. But for Labour, as a radical party, it's particularly important to surmount it.

So how do we do that? Maybe we should just do it. People in the world outside actually want politicians and political parties to be different. The House of Commons they see on their TV screens is a bit like a circus: fairly amusing, but not hugely relevant to their lives.

I think that Tony Blair recognises that people want a different kind of politics. He understands that, to win support, it is not enough for politicians to have the right policies. It is also about connecting with the electorate at the level of ideas.

Will Hutton made a similar point in *Tribune* recently, when he said that Blair

Richard Burden's article in NSS on 11 August prompted an outbreak of "summer madness" with rampant press speculation (above) about the new Labour leadership

understood the importance of hegemony. Someone else who understood hegemony, though, was Margaret Thatcher. For a decade or more, she was able to define her politics in terms that people could accept as "common sense". She could make a statement like "the unions have too much power" without backing it up. Indeed, it didn't matter that there was no basis in fact for it; it became established "common sense". She also projected the Tories as something new—as offering a different kind of politics.

Blair has understood this—and there's no doubt that his emphasis on "new Labour" and "modernisation" has struck a chord with many people. I have no difficulty with that. But Thatcher offered something else as well. She had a political project that may have been revolting, but was emphatically radical. She described it in terms of ever-expanding individual freedom and liberty: in truth, it was all about individual greed. The important thing, however, is that it was her ideological radicalism that lay behind her original victory and helped to sustain the Tories in office for so long. One reason for the mess they are now in is that they have lost the ideological distinctiveness, allowing the sleaze that lies underneath to be that much more obvious.

Labour needs an ideological cutting edge even more than the Tories do. The theme of modernisation may be a good starting point, but more is needed. If Labour is to recapture common sense from the right, it needs something more distinctive. And I believe that the idea of empowerment could be that theme.

The Tories have presided over the biggest centralisation of power this country has seen in generations. It spans all areas of life—government, economic affairs, civil liberties. As we move towards a new century, Labour must make clear that the principle of diffusing power is right at the heart of what it is about.

This is why constitutional reform is so important, and why I worry about Labour's tendency to "wobble" on the constitutional agenda. A weakness of the labour movement throughout its history has been its faith in the ability of our existing state institutions as instruments of social change. After just three years in the Commons, I am absolutely convinced that the political system in this country acts as a massive brake against radical change.

It is easy enough in the chamber of the House of Commons to feel that you are having a real impact when you make this speech or score that point over the minister. But the fact is that ritualistic conflicts in parliament all too often allow people to let off steam, while keeping the lid on change. And we ought to do something about it.

Some of the basics are already there in Labour policies—a freedom of information act, a bill of rights. But we could do a lot more to open up parliament itself, both in its procedures and its composition. And electoral reform has got to be part of the equation.

I know that the standard argument against electoral reform is that it is alleged to lead to backstage deals between parties and coalition politics. But hasn't our own experience in the past ten years shown that the present system encourages decisions being made behind closed doors, within parties if not between them? Doesn't our "winner-takes-all" system simply encourage a "safety-first" approach, in which the elimination of negatives takes precedence over positive policy discussion? Could it not just be that, if we changed the electoral system, parties might become more distinctive, more willing to be radical? And if deals have to be done and compromises reached, would these not be more honest and transparent if they arose from a recognition that no party had been able to command majority support?

Not that minority governments would be inevitable under a changed electoral system. Different electoral systems have also led to majority governments in other countries—just look at Sweden. The only difference is that those majorities have reflected actual support among the electorate, and thus have provided a much firmer base for radical politics.

And then there's the issue of devolution. Some of the things that have come out of the Constitutional Convention in relation to a Scottish parliament are positive. Devolution is also vital to Wales. But Labour really must regain its confidence when it comes to regional government for England. Tackling the regional question south of the Scottish border demolishes any problems with the so-called "West Lothian question". But it is more than that. Establishing a strong regional tier could be a crucial part of transforming the power structure in this country—although only if it is remembered that regional government is about devolving power from the centre, not cobbling together local-authority functions.

Some people will say that Labour should not devote precious time to dry constitutional questions when there are more important problems to address—the economy, the National Health Service and so on. I disagree. The constitutional agenda and the economic agenda are inseparable. Our highly centralised political system reflects and reinforces a highly centralised system of economic power. The influence of the City of London and finance are part of this. Of course, other countries' finance sectors wield tremendous power with very different political structures. But the prob-

lem here is particularly acute and requires specific action. That's one of the really powerful messages that comes through from Will Hutton's *The State We're In*, and it needs to be taken far more seriously by Labour.

So when we talk about wide-ranging constitutional reform, it should mean diffusing economic and industrial power, not just political power. Constructing a regional level of government could be the key to stimulating investment growth in those areas that so desperately need it. Labour needs to develop the work that has already been started in changing the nature of company law. Whatever happens to ownership of the utilities, regulation needs to be strengthened and made more democratic.

Labour should also revisit the whole question of industrial democracy. Back in the 1970s, an opportunity was missed. Perhaps if Labour had grasped the nettle of industrial democracy then, there would have been a better chance of resist-

ing the attacks on employment rights that have accompanied 16 years of Tory rule.

Legislation coming out of Europe on works councils has pushed industrial democracy back up the agenda, and the principle of social partnership could prove a vehicle not just for economic success, but also for changing power relationships in industry. But, again, I think Labour can be bolder.

The party should be clear that, when it talks about social partnership, it means that employees have a right to have a say where they work. It follows from this that employees would be encouraged to look not merely at their own self-interest, but at wider questions affecting the economy as a whole.

It also follows that Labour should not be defensive about its links with the trade unions and should not imply that the unions should keep out of politics. In his book *Ayes to the Left*, Peter Hain discusses whether the left needs to confront the questions of incomes policy. I agree about that: not to go back to the old days of pay norms, but to recognise that there is nothing inherently socialist about an unrestrained market in pay any more than in anything else.

But this means that unions have a role not just in the workplace, but in the for-

mation of public policy. Trade unions are part of the democratic fabric. Social partnership, if it means anything at all, also needs them in mainstream political life. Another example is in the economic sphere, where it is vital, both constitutionally and economically, to diffuse power in pension funds. The pension scandals from Robert Maxwell onwards have forced even the Tories to some grudging reform of pension law. Labour should go further, saying clearly that pensions are people's deferred pay and that it is part of their right of citizenship that they should have far greater control over them.

This means radical legislative changes. It is a democratic issue, but it is also important to our economy. The amount of financial fire-power held in pension funds these days is phenomenal. Current structures of pension-fund management are part of the short-termism that bedevils our economy and locks such a lot of economic power in the hands of so few in the City.

In other words, empowerment has got to be central to Labour's message. Of course, it's not an easy road to go down. There are no certainties, no guarantees that when power is devolved everyone will always use it in the way we would like them to. But I think that's something we have got to face. Because unless we have people with us, I don't think we can ultimately do the things we need to.

And there's one more thing. If Labour wants to devolve power in society, it should practise what it preaches internally. We need to find ways of fostering debate and encouraging ideas to come up from the bottom as well as down from the top. This is nothing to do with splits or disagreements, or being for this leader or against that one. It is about ensuring a healthy democracy in our own movement as well as outside.

In the past ten years or so, a consensus has developed in the Labour Party that we need to connect with mainstream opinion. We now need to recognise that mainstream opinion may be more receptive to a more radical agenda than we have allowed ourselves to believe.

This isn't a call to go back to the politics of 12 years ago, or to go back at all. It is about establishing a "new left" for "new Labour"—a left that is part of a modernisation project, but sees modernisation as a way of advancing radical politics and promoting social change rather than searching for a centre ground that may have disappeared by the time we get there. The development of such a left is not about a kind of oppositionist backlash. Nor is it a threat to anyone. It's about broadening Labour's support and, equally important, motivating the party's core vote, the people who've lost so much over the past 16 years.

Ritualistic conflicts in parliament all too often allow people to let off steam, while keeping the lid on change

The author is Labour MP for Birmingham Northfield. This article is based on a speech delivered at the What's Left conference in Manchester the week before last