

A CHANGE IN THE WIND



This is a time to explore some important contradictions.

When I went off to Rome 's anti-war rally on the anniversary of 9/11, the British press were obsessed with something else. Blair had just appointed Alan Milburn to a Cabinet post that will take charge of Labour's next election manifesto. It was seen as a direct challenge to the power of the Chancellor, Gordon Brown; an open declaration of civil war in the simmering hostilities between the PM and his Chancellor.

Blair and Brown may be neighbours in 10 and 11 Downing St but there is no love lost between them. The press interest, predictably, was in whether the new appointment would mean that an internal civil war in the Labour Party would become the most intriguing part of the next general election. Calls were already coming in from journalists wanting to know whose side you were on. The programme

of events in Rome gave precedence to a different set of questions.

Rome's week long programme had an anti-war theme to it, but Italians were quick to point out that the hundreds and thousands of them who still have rainbow flags flying from their houses are part of the Movimento di Pace; a peace movement far more than just an anti-war movement. Speakers had been drawn in from all over the globe and the theme, Cambio il Vento – a change in the wind – also invited people to take sides. The debates were about the muddle of today and the possibilities of a different tomorrow. It would be tragic if Labour's debate was about who should be the rightful heir to yesterday. If anyone were to make a film of the Blair/Brown/Milburn disputes it should be called Dead Men Squabbling. Oh the people are alive alright, but the arguments are sterile, the choices false and empty. I asked one reporter "if Saddam had died before the war had started, and his sons were squabbling about the succession, whose side should we have been on?" They looked blank. The point was not to make comparisons between the people but to understand the limit of the choice on offer.

Rome forced me to come back knowing that the real task, inside the Labour Party, is to set an agenda of wider choices. Labour will go to its Brighton conference still trying to sell itself the case for globalised capitalism. Widening gaps between the rich and poor will be papered over. The structural over-capacity in every part of the global economy – that sends transnational companies into the pursuit of ever cheaper labour and ever fewer environmental liabilities – will be re-written as 'Europe needs to improve its productivity and markets must be freed from the burden of regulations.'

There will be so much that the dead body of New Labour's 'Third way' will not allow the Conference to mention. In the same month, Florida will have been clearing up \$20 billion of damage caused by 3 hurricanes that drew on the warmer sea temperatures climate change brings about and Dhaka will have had its worst floods in decades. This climate change itself is fed by the deregulated markets New Labour promotes; markets that allow business to run riot with environmental pollution. Speaking at the Banqueting House this month, Tony Blair stressed the urgency of the climate change challenge...but then went on to say we could meet it without disturbing "the essence of our way of life" and by encouraging

change rather than directing it.

Trade Union leaders who demand more assertive government policies will make little progress. They will be told that intervening in such markets to make them sustainable, accountable or compatible with improved employment rights, is the politics of the past. In reality, it may be the only politics that can save us from the past...but Conference will not be allowed to say so.

In Rome , people walked into their Conference from the street. In Brighton , the Conference will take place within a high security bunker. There will be more police armed with guns than delegates armed with ideas. Stalls in the Conference will be dominated by companies selling products or patronage rather than social movements peddling ideals.

I sat in the open air arena where people ate together and marvelled at the fact that no distinctions were being made between the public and party organisers. When Fausto Bertinotti, Leader of the Rifondazione Party, sat down to eat the only security protection he had was probably the friends eating with him. But the biggest difference was in the involvement of young people, eating, debating and laughing in the same arena.

Formal political parties on the Left in Italy manage to have a connection to young people that we are in danger of losing completely in Britain . It is a long time since Labour set out to connect itself to young people who wanted to change the world rather than just merchandise it.

It is a long time since local parties were encouraged to connect with movements that would challenge the status quo rather than reinforce it. It is a long time since the labour movement went out on a campaign with the public, to wrestle the control of pension funds from the hands of market speculators and put it into direct public investment bonds or common ownership programmes.

This is the 'choice agenda' Labour has to engage with. Let Brown, Blair, Milburn and whoever, argue over who is most wedded to the follies of PFI schemes, to the absurdities of global deregulation, or to the obscenities of debt relief programmes that force the poor to sell their most valuable natural resources of tomorrow in exchange for crumbs that will keep them alive today. This is a dispute between the dead, when Labour has to reconnect with the living.

Many of those who have remained within the Labour Party talk about the need to 'reclaim' it. Perhaps the more appropriate question is how we re-build it. This cannot be done by tinkering with the status quo. The war sucked in huge amounts of capital that should have been directed into social renewal. It also provided a fear agenda in which it is easier to justify investment in state security than social security.

At the end of this path, the warfare state becomes the new welfare state. The rights of citizens get reduced or removed. The accountability of governance becomes restricted (on the grounds that openness would be a gift to the terrorist). But the power of capital – particularly that of corporate, transnational capital – grows ever unconstrained .

Those who remain in the Labour Party as democratic socialists must understand that the terms being set in the current 'succession' debate, will reclaim or defend neither democracy nor socialism. To do so,

we have to shift the terms of debate. Rebuilding the Labour Party rather than reclaiming it may be the real challenge we face.

Most of us know that the legacy of New Labour will be that of a marketing machine for a product long past its sell-by date. The Party can no longer party on the streets. We do not generate (or welcome) the big irreverent ideas that would re-shape the future, for these would offend our sponsors. Yet this is where the debate must start, and from where the Labour Party must be rebuilt. Everyone knows that all roads do not lead to Rome . But the current one, whoever leads on it, is the road to nowhere.

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