

PUTTING A NEW FACE ON BRITAIN



Look at the colour. Look at the style.
 Look at the cat, it's designed to beguile.
 See how it shimmers
 In everyday light
 What? You can't see it? You're not
 looking right! How can you ask If it's red or it's blue?
 When the one thing that matters is
 just that it's 'new'.

WHERE were you when Labour unveiled its plans last weekend for a pathway out of the ruins of John Major's "bankrupt Britain"? Like most of the country, I suspect you might have missed it. Those who didn't might (sadly) be not much the wiser. For, what emerged was a vision wrapped in caution and contradictions; grand, eloquent phrases which remained stubbornly difficult to pin any meaning to. However, now

that I have read the text I can reveal its innermost secrets. Labour has gone off the idea of nationalised industries. Or maybe it hasn't. It is in favour of mixed economies — but not obsessively so. We like individuals, but then we also like communities. We want to build "a society in which you can achieve and reward hard work" but we're none too precise about how we get there. Labour, in short, likes everyone. Does that get us anywhere? First reactions in Nottingham suggest that the answer is No.

One of the best qualities of this city is that its people are intensely practical — not afraid of change but wanting it spelt out. "Will it give me a job?" ... "Will you protect state pensions?" ... "Will you build houses, stop repossessions?" ... "Will you save the pits and the railways?" ... "What about taxation?" — these were some of the myriad questions I was asked.

THEY were not the questions which John Smith's spin doctors and advisers had prepared answers for, but they are precisely the ones that must be addressed.... and sooner rather than later.

The good news (for me) is that John Smith is, without doubt, the most open and generous-minded leader that Labour has had in a long time. This makes it easier to open up a real debate about economic and political priorities, rather than an exchange of platitudes. So let me begin with some offerings which will, constructively, rock the boat a little.

First, Labour must offer a fairer tax system. Mrs. Thatcher spun illusions that we could all pay less tax. By shifting taxes from direct (on pay) to indirect (VAT, National Insurance etc) she convinced large numbers of people who have been paying out more in taxes that they were paying less. Paul Daniels would have been proud.

Labour would do well to heed President Clinton's line that those who benefited most from the Bush years must now expect to contribute most. It's a simple principle — you pay more as you earn more; part of the privilege of being in well-paid work, when many are in none at all.

But a fairer tax system must also be one which is cleaned up. We must close the tax loopholes that have allowed billions to be siphoned out of the economy through accounting fiddles.

My second proposition is equally simple — we can no longer afford mass unemployment.

The cost of crime, ill health, lost production, squandered talent and actual benefit costs is a massive betrayal of our prospects for tomorrow. Someone must stake a claim to a return to full employment and a non-negotiable commitment to an abandoned generation of young people.

FINALLY, I want to make an offering about a new jobs programme. It should begin from what we make, not what we consume, from skills that we build, not people that we cheapen.

We must give local councils the freedom to buy and build houses, to employ the jobless, to house the homeless. We must let the railways borrow against their vast assets — to electrify lines, lay new tracks, buy new coaches — but only if they use British steel and turn to our own engineering and manufacturing industry.

The freedom to borrow must lie tied to the responsibility to buy in to our own tomorrow. It is only when we reclaim the sense of each other's worth that we will discover our worth as individuals. That is the message that I hope John Smith will begin to spell out. And, in terms of where we are now, that would be new.