

## THE TEN YEAR HITCH

It is Tony Blair's anniversary. Ten years ago he took over as leader of the Labour Party. Shortly afterwards he and I set off on a round Britain tour. He was championing the case for 'modernising' the Labour Party by abandoning its commitments to common ownership.

I was arguing the opposite; that what we held in common would turn out to be infinitely more important to our survival, in the coming century, than anything we thought we owned privately.

As I recall, the only piece of campaign propaganda I took round with me was an enormous pair of men's 'Y-front' underpants, bought from Army Surplus stores. A popular cartoon caricature of the time depicted John Major, then Prime Minister, wearing such pants over his trousers. In mock Superman style, these were presented as 'the pants

of power'.

Apart from the humour value, the purpose of this theatrical prop was to make the point that both Major and Blair were offering the illusions of power, not power itself. The policies each relied on were acts of public deception, privatisation, the means-testing of personal welfare, corporate inducements (the new welfare state) and an unflappable belief in unfettered free-trade. On every count, civil society would lose out as corporate giants began to call all the shots.

Anyone with half an eye on climate change knew that such obsessions were not the pants of power. They were, as my kids regularly reminded me, just 'pants'. Sooner, rather than later, we would all pay a heavy price for the selling off of future security in favour of present consumption. Ten years on, it isn't that Tony Blair has run out of steam, but his policies of marketising life itself have done.

The whole country knows we were led into war on a lie. For New Labour, however, the greatest damage has been the death of trust that went with the war. The country may be richer but people's lives feel poorer. We have lost the sense of security, a belief in each other, a confidence in the future. As a merchandising exercise, New Labour now faces critical scrutiny where once it found acceptance.

The whole package of Enron economics has begun to unravel. Rail privatisation has had to be supported by three times the level of public subsidies that British Rail used to receive. For this, dividends rather than trains are the only things that continue to arrive on time. So too with all the other PFI/PPP schemes. Public investment that appeared 'for free' has left a millstone of debt to be paid for by generations that follow. The undoubted winners are the financial services, most of which are comfortably off-shore (at least for tax-purposes).

Technically, Britain is a richer country than we have ever been. Our GDP has risen by 30% since 1993. Yet we cannot afford to pay a decent state pension. In the same period, consumer debt has increased by 483%. Excluding mortgage repayments, the average British household now carries £5,530 of credit debt.

At one stage in our past, most debt was public debt; debt that we took on collectively (in government bonds) to invest in services that would support us collectively. Now, debt is private, personal and consumption focused. Means-testing ensures there is no real point in saving. Instead we consume our way into a crisis in the hope we can consume our way out of it.

Even those too poor to over-consume can still feel part of the growth economy. Since 1993, prescriptions for anti-depressants have gone up by 125%. You don't have to be cash poor, though, to be caught in this gloom and boom part of the economy. Competitive consumption is driving society along paths that no longer connect with a scene of well-being or worth. We need some different indicators against which to measure our lives and the sort of markets in which we can find principles as well as products.

In the neanderthal days when I was young, Ernst Schumaker wrote a book that made me realise why I wanted to be a different type of economist. He described economics as the relationship between a person and their own creativity, between the person and others, and between the person and the space they exist in.

It's not a bad place to begin from in asking where we go from here. Today's scientists and environmentalists would describe this approach to economics as the 'ecological footprint' we leave on the planet. It isn't a view that disparages markets, but urgently seeks to humanise them.

Light-touch regulation has nothing to offer in the most urgent challenges we face in reducing carbon emissions to meet and exceed the Kyoto targets. Making these reductions is non-negotiable in our survival. It will not avoid the energy, water and food crises we will face, but it is the way we might manage our way through them.

How do we do this? The average family in Blair's Britain today is responsible for 4 tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions per year from the way we travel. Another 4.2 tonnes of carbon comes from their home, and 8 tonnes comes from the production, packaging, processing and distribution of food the family consumes.

The saddest part of all this is that much of today's food trade amounts to 'food swaps'. In 1997 Britain imported 126 million litres of milk and exported 270 million litres. It isn't rocket science to come up with an alternative that offers much lower environmental impact.

In their study of food trade in Europe alone, Caroline Lucas (the Green MEP) and Sustain (the food justice campaign group) detailed how extensive such food swaps are. Their report 'Eating Oil' accurately summed up the real consumption that is taking place in this sort of crazy obsession with open markets. Road freight movements between Britain and Europe increased by 90% throughout the 1990s. In the same period UK air freight doubled.

So when Tony Blair talks of putting climate change and sustainability at the centre piece of his next agenda, he needs a different starting point...and he needs to tell the Chancellor. There already exists a different 'coalition of the willing' he could join in putting sustainability first.

In the developing world, civil society and national governments are coming together in demanding the

right to produce to meet their own needs before they are required to feed ours. They also want the right to stop rich corporations (and nations) dumping products on their economies at prices that destroy their domestic industries and infrastructures. In Europe, we have networks of towns, cities and regions that are already seeking to give preference to local markets rather than global ones.

In energy, we have all paid lip service to renewable sources of supply, but done little about it. We need tough new obligations that require all new developments to generate a proportion of the energy they consume, and to reduce and recycle the water supplies they rely on.

Talk to our major energy suppliers today and you will not find one that has a company plan that seeks to persuade people to consume less. Yet if we had a market that sold 'home warmth packages', rather than energy consumption, the emphasis would dramatically shift to energy conservation and renewable inputs. It is the nature of today's market rules, rather than markets themselves, that drives us into consuming ourselves to death.

Go down the path of renewables and sustainability and you also discover a different jobs agenda. A million homes heated by solar energy would generate far more jobs than a million homes on the national grid alone. Producing goods that last also generates work that maintains products rather than discards them.

Britain dumps over a million computers a year. We discard some 360 million tonnes of household waste products each year – in part because it is cheaper to replace than repair. We encourage recycling but, on current trends, UK domestic waste will double (to 60 million tonnes) by 2020.

The Prime Minister will not find himself short of enormous challenges for the decade ahead. Many will demand that we clear up the mess from the last decade of deregulation, privatisation, individualism and globalisation.

The planet cannot survive the patterns of the past. If Tony is looking for a path that will survive and inspire the future, he is in for an interesting surprise. Any path that heads towards genuinely sustainable and environmental goals will have woven into it 'the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.'

May he survive long enough to understand this.