

If the politics of conviction were the mark of the 1980s, the symbol of politics in the 1990s will be Euro-pragmatism. Politics in the 1980s unleashed passion, imagination and ideas, mainly from the Right, to change society. In the 1990s politics will be about technocratic, gradual, unambitious adjustments to circumstances. Party politics in the 1980s was organised around Thatcherism's ideological dominance of the political agenda. In the 1990s it will be much more closely fought between two more equally matched, managerial parties.

The dominant Tory politics of the 1980s was of a resurgent British spirit, the Falklands and the rediscovery of great Victorian virtues. The spirit of the 1990s will be of Britain dependent upon others in Europe, pooling sovereignty and reluctantly acknowledging that economically it trails in Germany's wake.

British politics is in the midst of a slow evolution. Beneath the battle in the polls, with Labour resurgent and the Tories fighting back, a more subtle but no less important shift is taking place. Regardless of who happens to be leading in the polls, the terms of political debate, the parameters of political possibility are changing. Politics has become progressively less ideological and less ambitious, more pragmatic and careful, with the only excitement provided by spectacle and scandal rather than ideas and imagination.

The television evening news on Friday October 5 was emblematic of this quiet transformation. From Blackpool we had the Labour Party rounding off a successful – that is to say tame and energy-less – conference with a song foisted upon it by its marketing advisers. It capped a week of controlled, neatly-dressed, spectacle: something to window shop rather than feel stirred by. But just as Peter Mandelson was packing away his mannequins for the last time, so the Tories were planning to upstage him.

With exquisite timing at 4.00pm that afternoon, John Major, the chancellor, announced Britain would be entering the exchange rate mechanism of the European Monetary System. There was just enough time for the financial markets to rally and for tv news producers to elbow Labour into the dying minutes of the bulletins.

As a political gesture the ERM announcement could not be faulted and not surprisingly most attention has focused on its short-term political ramifications. After months of division, defensiveness and evasion over Europe and the ERM the Tories are back in the driving seat. They may yet crash. But they are back on the move again after the intense self-doubt of the spring. Major's move has given the Tories the same sense of momentum they got from their 1986 conference, when a battery of ministers rolled out the agenda for the next few years.

It has pulled at least part of the rug from beneath the Labour Party. It

struck at the heart of Labour's economic policy. For months Labour had benefited from Tory division over Europe, Thatcher's distaste for European integration, and proclaimed its economic policy distinctive because it revolved around ERM membership. By 4.05pm that day much of what had sustained Labour's attack on the Tories had been repossessed by the bailiffs.

Most significantly, Britain's entry sounded the starting gun for the race for the next general election, with a great deal riding on how the economy responds to the discipline of ERM membership and developments in the Gulf. ERM entry could allow a sustained cut in interest rates. Combined with falling inflation and give-aways with electricity privatisation, the electorate could take Major to its heart after letting him replenish their pockets. Labour's poll lead could erode rapidly.

But the decision to go into the ERM is not just significant for its effect on the parties' standing in the polls. The ERM mini-series will tell us something very important about how the character of British politics has changed since the mid-1980s. It could also be a defining moment, laying the foundations for what politics could be about, how it could be conducted, for the next decade. The character of British politics is evolving. ERM entry will be central to its evolution.

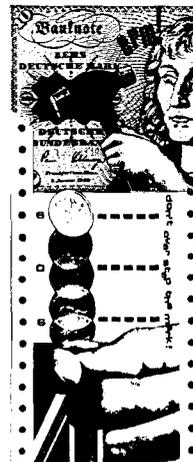
In assessing the significance of the ERM decision it is worth recalling the political changes which were unleashed by the economic upheaval of the recession a decade ago. How politics changed in that period will help us piece together how the character of British politics is likely to develop in the early 1990s. For the recession of 1979-81 was just such a defining moment, when a savage economic downturn combined with an abrupt change in economic policy and a new set of political priorities. Those years laid the foundations for much of the politics

## After ERM

# Pragmatism Rules, OK?

Entry into the ERM could just deliver a fourth term for the Tories. But **Charlie Leadbeater** anticipates more profound changes

**'Entry into ERM marks the end of the experiment with monetarism in one country'**



in the remainder of the decade.

First, it was the political equivalent of the Torrey Canyon disaster for social democratic politics. The badly holed, political super tanker was finally pushed onto the rocks to break up. Social democracy plunged into the waves. It has only surfaced in the last couple of years. Second, the break with the past changed the terms of what was politically possible in dealing with the British malaise. The economic and political shock of the early 1980s was the breach through which flowed trade-union reform and privatisation. It ushered in a deeply ideological period of politics dominated by the Tories. Could ERM entry, combined with the mini-recession which will probably come next year, provide just such a catalyst to transform politics into the 1990s? In a way it will, but it will be far less dramatic than the early 1980s.

**A** decade has made an enormous difference to politics. The recession of 1979-81 was marked by an intense ideological debate between monetarists and Keynesians. It was because the recession was accompanied by this debate that the political and economic consequences in later years were so radical. Thatcherism emerged as the driving force around which the rest of British politics had to reorganise.

In contrast the downturn of 1990 and the abrupt shift in economic policy with ERM entry, has been accompanied by hardly any grand economic debate at all. There has been great drama with the row over Professor Walters and the Lawson resignation. There has been a slanging match over whether and when Britain was going to enter the ERM. But no great debate about why the economy is in a mess, the alternative cures and the aims of economic policy.

The debate which accompanied the recession of 1979-81 was a grand clash of economic ideologies. The debate of

the last year has been point scoring. As a result, by definition, there will be no great ideological breach through which one or other of the parties will rush to stamp their mark on the decade. There is little to choose between Labour and Tory ideas on economic management, save for Labour's vague ideas of credit controls and its embryonic ideas on industrial policy. This does not signal a return to consensus politics. But it may well mean that the 1980s could stand out as an aberration when British politics was dominated by high ideology rather than pragmatic calculation. Rather than attempting to shape the world, from now on politics will be very much about adjusting to it.

This reversion from ideology back to pragmatism in the course of the decade is evident in what the ERM decision says about the state of Tory politics. Just as the recession of 1979-81 vanquished much of postwar social democracy, so entry into the ERM also knocks the immediate past on the head. In seeking to secure the next election, John Major has surely marked the end of Thatcherism as we have known it. It is an acceptance that after 10 years of drastic remedies Britain cannot cure its inflation problem alone. More, it is an admission that the mixture of widening home-ownership, financial deregulation to promote personal borrowing and a more decentralised process of pay bargaining, has created a potent inflationary cocktail.

Entry into a semi-fixed system of exchange rates, which set a managed framework for the market, marks the end of the experiment with monetarism in one country, and possibly of neo-liberalism in one country as well. Far from neo-liberalism creating a British economic miracle and the resurgence of Anglo-Saxon capitalism as a model for the rest of the world, we are supplicants to Europe to help us cure our inflation. The Treasury and the Bank of England have been joined as managers of the British economy by the Bundesbank. We are tied to German capitalism, which is regulated and corporatist where Thatcher has deregulated and let free markets flourish.

If the Tories win the next election it will have nothing to do with the sweep of Thatcher's vision, and everything to do with Major's careful counting of the pennies. The third term has turned into a disaster. Electricity privatisation has been a fiasco of mismanagement, the poll tax a hated imposition and the social agenda to transform health, welfare and education has got nowhere. Thatcherism is ideologically exhausted and politically bankrupt.

Thatcherism is increasingly hemmed in, both by Labour's renewal and by leading Tories such as Patten, Hurd and Major who recognise the need for a different style and touch. Yet despite this, politics has not broken out on to new ground. It is as if Thatcherism is becoming no more than a shell for British politics, but the new politics is not

strong enough to break out.

There are several reasons why there is little prospect of either party creating a set of new ideas and values around which political debate will turn. Thatcherism's achievements should not be underestimated. Some of the most important, such as trade union reform and privatisation, will not be undone for a long time. Much of what was once controversial now goes uncontested.

Labour's renewal is largely devoid of striking new ideas. There are plenty of reasonable, sensible policies. There are suggestions of themes, about the role of citizenship and the state, which could be developed. But it has been a policy revolution born of adjustment to political circumstance rather than one inspired by imaginative thinking. It is worth recalling the sense of depression which swept through the Labour leadership after the 1987 election. Labour's renewal is still recent and fragile.

**B**ecause it is not setting out radical ideas, Labour's hopes of coming to power rest on the Tories' exhaustion and mismanagement of the economy. Its only chance of winning office rests on it inheriting an economy in a mess. Aware of this, John Smith and Gordon Brown are in no position to make promises about the bounty which would lie in store. A Labour victory won thanks to Tory economic calamity is not an appealing prospect.

The Tories are in just as difficult a position. A trawl of ideas from right-wing think-tanks has only yielded more suggestions for privatisation and a downgrading of the monarchy. There are few new radical ideas on offer. Hurd and Major are preoccupied with managing Thatcherism's decline to make sure it damages the Tories as little as possible while it crumbles. They are not in the business of setting any new radical agendas.

But the new pragmatism does not just reflect a change in party politics. It is also a result of a change in the subject-matter of politics in the last few years. This change in the content of politics has predisposed the parties towards pragmatism rather than conviction. The first and most powerful is the European trajectory of British politics. Over the last 15 years Europe has steadily become an increasingly insistent focus for British politics. Entry into the ERM is the most significant step in that process of integration since membership of the European Community in the early 1970s. ERM membership is not just a vague ideal or an arcane directive, but a tangible, painful economic discipline which will not work unless we accept our dependence on our partners. As Europe becomes more central, we have to accept a pooling of sovereignty, that we cannot go it alone. That predisposes politics more towards negotiation with partners. The closer we draw to Europe the more we have to accept both our dependence on others, and also their right to be different from us. Our gra-

dual acclimatisation to Europe promotes an acceptance of limited pluralism.

Both parties are engaging in a pragmatic adjustment to Europeanisation, gradually dropping their different objections to integration. Everyone knows politics has only one direction to go in, towards Europe. Yet the amazing thing is that neither party is able to grasp the moment and the mood, with the strategic vision which would make Britain a really central player in European politics.

Their tentativeness is only partly a reflection of a much wider uncertainty in British society about our position in Europe. Society is moving faster towards Europe, from the packed commuter flights to the continent each day to the environmental standards we expect, than the politicians. Thatcherism rose to power by grasping an historic turning point, the collapse of the post-war settlement. It is still up for grabs: which, if either, of the parties is capable of grasping the political potential of Europeanisation?

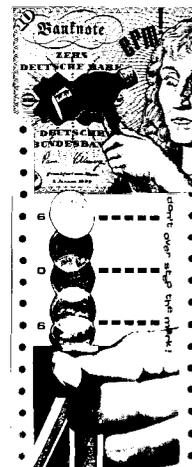
The second factor is that politics is much more complex than it was a decade ago. The recession of 1979-81 defined the terms for politics in the succeeding years because the state of the British economy was such an overriding preoccupation, which crystallised a wide set of concerns about how the country was governed. The economic malaise could also be credibly addressed by a rather simple, related set of remedies, monetary restraint and public spending cuts, privatisation and union reform.

Now political preoccupations are much wider, more complex and less susceptible to apparently simple solutions. The state of the economy is not so urgent nor so uncontestedly central to politics. It has been joined by Europe, concern over the environment and the emerging shape of the new international order, as the political issues which will dominate the 1990s. Environmental despoliation and the reshaping of international relations may provoke strong passions, but it is difficult to persuade people they can be dealt with by simple remedies first learnt in a grocer's shop.

Whether or not Labour wins the next election the character of politics is in the midst of quite a change. Instead of the 'great moving right show' which heralded Thatcherism's radical reforms, we have 'the great moving carefully show' which heralds the rise of the managerial class of politicians of the 1990s. The days when people could sit in front of the television growing enraged by Tory radicalism or Labour dogma have gone. Instead of throwing our slippers at the likes of Norman Tebbit or Eric Heffer, we will be forced to wonder at the respectable, trustworthy, cautious, grey bunch who will be gracing our screens, seeking our votes and sending us to sleep. ●

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**'The spirit of the 1990s will be of Britain dependent upon others in Europe'**



# Seen But Not Heard

The Rochdale and Nottingham cases have revealed widespread sexual abuse of children based on satanic practices. Yet the children are still not believed. **Beatrix Campbell**, presenter of the recent *Dispatches* programme on the Nottingham case, explains why

**T**he politics of childhood denotes party, political, class and cultural categories like no other cause could. The phenomenon of children as an endangered species has simultaneously animated and immobilised all political tendencies. The politics of childhood has oscillated between the Right and Left. The genesis of the Hell's Granny, the law and order freak who stalks the corridors of Conservative power with a hankie and a noose, lies in her ferocious resistance, *on behalf of children*, to liberal law reform. The hanger and flogger has lived in the child molester's shadow. A politics of punishment is produced here as a response to the failure to protect.

For liberals and socialists, for whom revenge and the culture of legitimate brutality is part of the problem not the solution, the abuse of children has often seemed adrift. It is precariously anchored either in a politics of class and poverty (when it comes to economics, children are *always* innocent) or in the fact that childhood is the paradigm of the problem of power, children are literally powerless.

But these political traditions carry their rhetoric before them – it does not fall to them actually to take care of children, and so their interventions are framed by ideology rather than practice. Which often means they don't know what they're talking about.

Not surprisingly, and sometimes despite their ideology, voluntary agencies, together with state specialists, pioneer new consciousness about children's oppression because it is they who do the work, they are the *public parents* of children at risk.

Feminist politics has always linked the empowerment of women with the empowerment of children. But there's a flaky, nay rather fundamentalist feminism around, which has found it as hard as everyone else to cope with the latest discoveries about the oppression of children. To defend the discovery that the biggest single category of child abuser is the child's father within the family, they and others deny the significance of new evidence which locates child abuse not only within the family but without. Their alibi: it's all a diversion from the real culprits, the father and the family. This complaint is ideological and unencumbered by empirical engagement, and thus it encourages the dread that child abuse will once again be allocated to the weird and the wacky, to the random, the inexplicable and the unpredictable. This defence hasn't been hearing what children have been trying to tell.

Workers responsible for children have had to turn themselves inside out to assimilate the phenomenon of child battering, and then that of widespread sexual abuse within the family. Once the appropriate structures of care were in place, they uncovered evidence of *organised* abuse of children, like sex rings which depend on children 'recruiting'

each other for perpetrators whose protection is not so much family as the community. And now they have to contemplate the latest horror story, ritualised sexual abuse, a culture of sexual terrorism, power and sacrifice.

I well recall when someone said to me a couple of years ago, 'you know what'll be next? Satanism and witchcraft.' 'Oh no,' I thought, 'that's for the *News Of The World*'. I didn't know anything about it, and didn't want to, because like many, I'm aware of a tendency to only ask questions for which there's an answer to hand. But ritual abuse of children pushes the boundaries of all our beliefs. It is a real measure of the balance of power in society, not only between adults and children, but between the institutions and the children's advocates. It puts to the test our promises to protect children. What has been arresting about the last few months and the Rochdale row has been that it has once again become respectable to call children liars.

Organised and ritualised abuse of children depends, if not on the family, then on the community. We have come to share a sentimental view of the *community* as a social structure somehow immune from the problem of power and oppression. We see the community as an open secret. Like the family, it becomes an icon of collective hearth and home. Unlike the family, we seem to think it can be called to account because it is a public, rather than a private place. But what the expansion of our knowledge about child abuse reveals is that the community is complicit, that the community, like the family, is where child abuse lives. Bizarre and bloody things happen there. So the problem is not, as some suggest, that the stranger in the park is being resurrected in a new moral panic. The problem is that unless and until some equivalent communal resistance is mobilised on the side of children and their advocates then their disclosures will always be disavowed.

**A growing archive of children's evidence** is telling us something complex about the geography as well as the demography of child abuse. But we are also now having to learn something new about the *culture* of child abuse. 'Satanic rituals' in a secular culture like ours simply aren't taken seriously, and anyone who respects children's accounts of 'satanic' or ritualised abuse aren't taken seriously either.

It has seemed easy enough for newspapers like the *Independent On Sunday* to target evangelical Christians as the creators of a new witch-hunt. That's what has happened in the Nottingham controversy. A rumour that the foster parents are evangelical Christians has powered a new myth that reports of 'satanic' rituals have been induced from the mouths of babes by the foster parents themselves. Without ever asking them their beliefs, the media, professors and the police casually dismiss the children's advo-