Tony Blair's Mental Problems

Empowerment and the need for democracy in Britain

Fred Harrison

TONY BLAIR was thrust back into No. 10 Downing Street on June 7 by a second landslide victory. He is now the architect of his political fate, for New Labour has no opposition – either in Parliament or the media – to challenge it. The government has been given a blank cheque by the British electorate, and a sober Blair acknowledges that the time had come to deliver on his promises.

But while the media focuses on the tax-and-spend issues relating to public services, Tony Blair is haunted by serious mental problems. He has committed himself to animating the mental development of a deprived section of the population. Can he deliver?

To achieve his ambition, claims **Fred Harrison**, he will first have to break out of the ideological mind-set that confined the 20th century. That mind-set was moulded by a philosophy that was intended to serve the interests of the class that established the rules of the parliamentary game – the aristocracy. That ideology was intended to impoverish people's expectations, and it has succeeded for nearly 100 years.

In defining his obligation to empower people to achieve their fullest human potential, Blair will have to drive himself in the direction of the most radical revision of politics in a century. Ironically, that means stepping back in time to the period of political history with which he empathises – the one that was dominated by a radical Liberal Party in the years 1905-1910.

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IN HIS ADOPTION SPEECH on May 13 as New Labour's candidate for the Sedgefield constituency, Tony Blair offered his vision of the challenge to politicians. He said:

> There is much talk in politics of the need for a big idea. New Labour's big idea is the development of human potential, the belief that there is talent and ability and caring in each individual that often lies un-nurtured or discouraged. Our ideology is the *development of the human mind to its fullest natural extent*, building national strength and prosperity by tapping the potential of all the people (emphasis added).

The vision is grand and the ambition honourable, but the means available to New Labour during its formative period in the 1990s were not capable of delivering this outcome. Blair talked of "empowering all our people", and of adopting "a genuine enterprise and entrepreneurial culture". But his analogy, which places a large question mark over his comprehension of the nature of the problem that now confronts him, was the USA. He claimed that he was seeking "to marry together a well-run economy and a just and fair society where life's chances are given to all, not a few". But the US model fails to deliver this outcome, so why would a Blair Britain be more successful?

The test which Blair sets, that of the eradication of child poverty, is one that Welfare State Britain and the so-called *laisser faire* US have consistently failed to achieve in the 20th century, despite strenuous efforts to that end. There was nothing in New Labour's 21st century kit bag that would make the slightest difference to the millions who are locked in institutionalised poverty, their mental development retarded by obstacles that are not ordained by nature.

Stumbling blindly into the future

THE CONCERN for the mental horizons of a part of the British population threatens to lead the Prime Minister down avenues that have not yet been charted for him. To achieve his ambitions, he first needs to confront issues that include the following:

- If a significant number of people are disempowered, their condition must be explained in terms of a systemic prejudice that will not be overcome by the traditional Welfare State policies to which the Blair government remains committed.
- Political philosophy must be able to identify the forces that have constrained the ambitions of generations of law-makers. Is Tony Blair free of the limitations that confined the mindset of his predecessors in Downing Street?
- Identify the institutions/values/processes that had the power to limit mental welfare, which – because the appropriate remedies were ostracised from political discourse in the so-called Age of Democracy – continued to run riot over people's lives.

Tony Blair is a creature of the postwar Welfare State, whose values and institutions shaped his outlook on life. But somewhere along the course of his personal development he acquired the intuitive knowledge that the political choices in Britain were unnecessarily narrow. That is why, when the postwar political duality (Conservatism v Socialism) was declared bankrupt, he struck. New Labour was born, and a new strategy – the Third Way – was invented.

The Third Way illusions

BLAIR and his coterie of former socialists realised that the old-style Labour Party was unelectable even during the roughest period of the Thatcher era. He set about abandoning their commitment to the nationalisation of the means of production, and came to terms with the realities of the market economy.

During the first four years in power, the New Labour government did nothing to dispel the suspicion that Blair was more a covert Liberal than a moderate Socialist. This, however, created tensions in the Welfare State: specifically, an under-funded public sector and a devotion to Treasury orthodoxies.

Now that he has a further five years in Downing Street, and is in debt to no-one, what might Tony Blair do if he decided to follow his instincts?

Critics of the Third Way failed to identify the interim nature of this notion. It can be made to serve the purpose of a philosophical bridge, which Blair needs if he is to leap the chasm between the demise of Thatcherism and the comprehensive alternative. The critics enjoyed tearing the concept to pieces. Polly Toynbee, a commentator in *The Guardian*, wrote on February 28:

> The third way is an escape from self-definition – a butterfly always on the wing. No wonder every politician everywhere reaches for it: the third way temptingly offers the best of all possible worlds. It means never having to choose, all the old lions and lambs happily snuggling down together. Successful business goes hand in hand with caring social objectives, dynamic markets embrace strong social communities. With felicitously crafted language, all goals can become mutually dependent, never competing. So the values of Europe, "fairness, solidarity" can combine with "the economic dynamism traditionally associated with the US". (No mention of the stark choice these societies make in tax rates, with concomitant very different results). Toughness on crime never works without tackling its causes, he says – punishment and pity side by side. (No contradiction between tabloid-pleasing and what works.) Decentralising power can cohabit with uniform standards. (No tug-of-war between local choice and national benchmark.) Reversing national decline and improving productivity can be done with green sustainable development. Yes, the third way offers all this, with no awkward choices.

This agenda reflects a good-hearted politician seeking an inclusive society. That has to be the starting point for a radical reform that

balances the realities of the world with a sense of justice. But to accomplish the transformation, New Labour needed a mechanism that was capable of mobilising the power that would turn the vision into reality. That mechanism was absent, which is why, on the basis of past experience, we have to write off Blair's promise to abolish poverty in 20 years, or to terminate premature adult deaths in the poorest parts of England. These problems persisted despite the Welfare State's massive redistribution of income.[1] Socialist tax policies were driven by the belief that life chances could be equalised through the intervention of a paternalist state. That, we now know, was not a doctrine that could deliver equality.

The Third Way may be written off as a philosophical *cul-de-sac*. Alternatively, however, it could be viewed as a holding operation, buying Blair the time to work out exactly what he wanted and how he could achieve it. All he knew, during the 1997 election, was that he needed at least 10 years in power to achieve desirable changes. To get his foot in the door of No. 10, he had to commit his first administration to a continuation of the Tory policies that he would inherit. He had to promise not to break new ground, but that would enable him to consolidate his power base. Now, with a new mandate, he has the opportunity to lay the political foundations for a new course. But how does he overcome his own mental limitations?

Learning the lessons of history

TONY BLAIR'S favourite political period is the zenith of Liberal Party fortunes at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the three decades spanning 1900, the Liberals had articulated a radical politics which included a critique of imperialism; defined the need for Irish Home Rule, with similar proposals for Scotland and Wales; acknowledged the need to protect the unemployed and the aged, and the obligation to legitimise the right of workers to form themselves into unions – countervailing power centres to balance corporate power. The backcloth to these concrete ideas was the emerging understanding that the law on property rights had seriously distorted society and would need to be revised – the theme most forcefully articulated by the young Winston S. Churchill, who had moved across from the Conservatives to become one of the champions of Liberal democracy.[2]

As he toured the Old Labour branches around the country in the mid-1990s, cajoling the party faithful into amending their constitution, Blair repeatedly insisted that Liberal luminaries like Beveridge and Lloyd George would be comfortable in the New Labour firmament. A perceptive political commentator, David Marquand, the principal of Mansfield College, Oxford – a former Labour politician and a founder member of the ill-fated Social Democratic Party – noted: "He picked up the mantle of

constitutional reform and political decentralisation where the Asquith government had dropped it in 1914".[3]

A tungsten thread ran through this period (say, from 1905-1914) which might be extrapolated for Blair from 2002 to the next general election in 2005. That thread was a fiscal policy that would integrate public revenue with human rights and economic efficiency in a way that would resolve the major tensions in society and empower people to achieve their private aspirations within a caring community.

Beyond the Thatcher wastelands

TONY BLAIR knows that the main focus of political action needs to be the recovery of society from the desolate wastelands into which it finally collapsed during the Thatcher years.

The socialist and neo-Keynesian critics of his first administration challenged him for failing to outspend previous Tory administrations under Margaret Thatcher and John Major. Except for one year, the previous 18 years of Conservative rule saw public expenditure exceed the levels achieved during Tony Blair's first administration. Data from the Treasury and the Office for National Statistics reveal that New Labour's investment in schools, hospital, roads and the rest of the UK's infrastructure never reached the £4.7 billion spent in the final year of the Major administration.

During the 1992 – 1997 Tory era, spending on health amounted to 5.5% of GDP, but in the four years of Blairite power it fell back to 5.4%. And despite Blair's manifesto invocation in 1997 – Education, Education, Education – the amount of the nation's income spent on education fell from 5% of GDP to 4.6% in the last four years.

New Labour went into the June election with a budget surplus of £21.2 billion. Chancellor Gordon Brown's idea of "prudence" appeared to have more to do with Scrooge than the protestant ethic.

Blair knew that the public was confused by this record. He wrote: "Of course there will be frustrations and disappointments. Not enough resources" – he said of the people who work in Britain's public sector. "I also know how too often these same public servants feel under-valued and taken for granted."

But Blair intuitively felt that success was not measured by the amount of money devoted to the public sector. Something far more radical was required, but what? His advisors were not able to identify a strategy that would redefine the relationships between the public and private sectors, because they, too, had minds that were confined by obsolete paradigms.

The soulless society

BRITAIN IS becoming a soulless society. Researchers have found that people are leading increasingly isolated lives, in which they concentrate on self-serving activities and express pessimism about

the future of society. In terms of the political implications, the major loser is the Labour Party; traditional Labour voters are disappearing. The Thatcher project appears to have triumphed: Mrs. Thatcher denied the existence of society, which was the logical outcome of the cult of the individual.[4] One result was the apathy at the General Election on June 7, in which a record number of people stayed away from the polling booths.

The findings of two researchers echo the conclusions for American society as reported in Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone*.

> Leisure time revolves around visits to the pub or solitary activities such as going to the gym. Over half of respondents [55%] are not members of any club or society.[5]

Left wing commentators regard this as evidence that civic society has been corroded by the free market, but they are rebutted by Tories who complain that the erosion of community can be traced back to Labour's collectivist policies that pre-dated 1979.

The felt need is for a philosophy of community, but the contemporary discourse on this theme is too narrowly constructed to lift political analysis above the dog-eared hypotheses. It fails to include an assessment of the way in which the public sector has contributed to the erosion of civic society under the administrations of both the Left and the Right, and of how the nostrums of free market–speak (such as: *private enterprise is best at allocating resources*) are superficial. We need new assessments of the nature of the market economy, and of the significance of what Margaret Thatcher liked to call Victorian values.

Some of the successful Victorian entrepreneurs did devote considerable parts of their fortunes to constructing public buildings for use as libraries and swimming baths for the benefit of the working class. But this was not evidence of capitalists wanting to protect the community "from the encroaching imperialism of the market realm", as David Marquand put it. Nevertheless, while private patronage of public service was to be welcomed, it did not alter the structure of power in society, as the Liberal Party discovered between 1905 and 1910.

One lesson for Blair, therefore, is that the philosophy of public services has to be reassessed. His insistence that the private sector should be admitted as administrators of the public sector is too insubstantial to make a difference.

The new liberal agenda

WHAT WOULD a new Blair programme look like, if its origins were to be located in the period with which he expresses the closest affinity? Developing a historical perspective on what he might now do provides the realistic backdrop to the search for a Third Way between 19th century Toryism and 20th century Socialism. To understand

the politics of the two decades leading up to 1914, we have to reach back deep into the politics of the pre-Victorian era; in fact, the story goes back to the 17th century and the Whig Revolution of 1688, which is when the foundations of Liberalism took root.

John Locke supplied the political doctrines which inspired the Revolution in England. The Whigs stressed Locke's theory of social contract in which "the chief end of men ... putting themselves under government, is the preservation of property". But they failed to elaborate Locke's theory about public property, which had to be sought in the realms of things that were not in the legitimate ownership of individuals. Locke's philosophy stressed that private value inhered in those things which were the product of human labour. That necessarily excludes the private ownership of community-created value, which was captured by whoever held power over land and nature's resources.

The Whigs were landlords, and their leaders included the great magnates who had the confidence to challenge kings. Their Tory opponents were also landlords. It was too much to expect that out of this would emerge a coherent political doctrine that divided property on a rational basis between the public and private realms. This was a project that would have to be carried over into the future. For Whig governments made use of the Tory Act of 1672 which exempted the owners of land from feudal dues, the result of which was the systematic transfer of the burden of taxation on to the products of labour. Thus did the first experiment in Liberalism finally terminate without delivering qualitative change to British society.

The free trade project

LIBERALISM FOUND its first serious expression in the 19th century in the form of the campaign for free trade. The Radicals, without a sufficient base in Parliament, appealed to the population at large. They demanded economic liberty, explaining that protectionism penalised the urban workforce through higher food prices.

Richard Cobden flew the free trade banner. But his attack on the landlords who wished to hold up the price of corn by excluding imports led Cobden to realise that his mission had to reach beyond free trade. In the last of his speeches (1864) he said:

> If I were five-and-twenty or thirty ... I would take Adam Smith in hand ... and I would have a League for free trade in land just as we had a league for free trade in corn ... and if it were taken up on the politico-economical grounds, the agitation would be certain to succeed.

Cobden had good cause to note the connection: with free trade, speculators surfaced to buy land near the sea ports and the great industrial

centres. On his deathbed, he drew attention to the fact that economic liberty was not possible without a solution to the land question.

Without realising it, Cobden and his colleagues laid the foundations for the Liberal Party. Their attack on the Corn Laws politicised and educated the urban working men.

Several decades later, the leaders of the free trade movement, the Peelites, the Radicals and the Whigs coalesced around Gladstone. This alliance was to become the Liberal Party. Between 1868 and 1874, Gladstone was able to reduce taxes, pay off debt and launch several reforms. But something was missing – an inspirational policy that would mobilise the masses. Gladstone confessed that he needed a Big Idea related to the financial system "to lift the Party in the public view". He could not conceive of a policy that matched his aspiration.[6] The Liberal government fell in 1874, and Gladstone retired. The Liberals would now spend 30 years out of office. Their return to power would depend on their finding the policy that would animate the popular imagination.

That idea was to come from a most unlikely source. In the United States, journalist Henry George wrote an inspirational book called *Progress and Poverty* (1879). He visited England in 1884 and was immediately engulfed in public controversy, denounced by the aristocratic landlords as a dangerous trouble-maker. He explained that free land for all could be achieved only if users were left in secure possession of the land, but the rent of their holdings shared equally among all citizens through the public exchequer.

The 14th general meeting of the National Liberal Federation, in October 1891, adopted the "Newcastle Programme". It was this celebrated declaration that was to mark the beginnings of the revival of Liberalism as a serious political force. One resolution, moved by Sir Wilfred Lawson, demanded "the just taxation of land values and ground rents". The meeting also demanded "the mending or ending of the House of Lords".

Looking back, we can see that both of these projects were not achieved. The land policy was discredited by association with socialist variations in the decades after the Second World War. The second demand was to remain effectively unfulfilled until Tony Blair arrived in power in 1997 with a determination to unseat the majority of inherited peerage from the House of Lords. But the liberal project did leave its mark on history.

Liberals back in power

THE TURNING point for the party came with the election as leader of Sir Henry Campbell Bannerman. His mission was the destruction of privilege. The Conservative Party's hold on power was broken in December 1905, when the Liberals took office with a majority of 170 over all other parties combined.

There was no doubt what was on the political agenda. In the four years

preceding the 1905 election, a number of Bills were introduced by Liberals that were designed to shift the property tax on to land values. The demand for this reform was fostered at the grass roots. Municipalities in Scotland led the way.

The fiscal reform was not given an easy passage. The House of Lords obstructed legislation. The crisis came to a head with the Finance Bill (1909). The Commons presumed that their Lordships would not dare to obstruct the Bill that would raise revenue to ensure the continued functioning of the state. They were wrong. A constitutional crisis ensued, and the Liberals appealed to the country in an election. They won. The result was the Finance (1909-10) Act, 1910.

A Land Values Group within Parliament, composed of Liberal and Labour Members, applied pressure on the government to implement the following:

- complete the valuation of land;
- empower local governments to levy rates on land values alone; and
- levy a Budget tax on all land values, together with the removal of duties on imported food.

The Liberals succeeded in their political mission. They had written on to the statute book a law that enshrined the right of the British state to collect rent for the benefit of all citizens. But the government made one serious mistake that was to prove fatal. It had defined five different types of values related to land and natural resources. This enabled the Conservative opposition to run a rear-guard action to thwart the democratic will. This made it necessary to introduce a Revenue Bill in 1914, to offer an accurate definition of site value. But the window of political opportunity was slammed shut by the onset of the First World War. All reform on the home front was arrested and the new mood of a generation that was half decimated in the trenches of continental Europe was to shift the centre of political gravity away from Liberalism and towards the statist doctrines favoured by what was to become the Conservative-Socialist philosophical alliance.

Voices from the wilderness

AFTER THE War, the Liberals continued to assert their commitment to a distinctive fiscal philosophy. In 1920 they appointed an Industrial Policy Committee. Among its recommendations was that the 1910 Act should be amended and "a uniform national tax should be imposed on the capital site value of the whole country". This was to be endorsed at subsequent annual conferences.

In 1923 Asquith reaffirmed the one concrete policy that was at the heart of Liberalism:

> It is time for us once more to reassert that we recognise for the purpose of taxation, whether Imperial or local a distinct difference between two kinds of value – the value created by the energy and enterprise of individuals, and the value which is not so created, but which arises from the progress and general development of the community at large. Upon that fundamental distinction we have always taken our stand ... local and national taxes which are necessary for public purposes should fall on the publicly-created value ... the land would come more readily and cheaply into the best use for which it is fitted.[7]

Too late. Bismarck's Germanic statism was now permeating the thinking of Conservatism-Socialism, in which state-sponsored paternalism was invoked as the alternative to the freedoms of the people of Britain based on an ethic of free enterprise and the communal sharing of the rents of the land of the nation. True enough, a Socialist chancellor sought to resurrect the concept of land taxation in the Finance Act of 1931 – with no better results. A further attempt, on behalf of the London County Council, was made in 1939 by Herbert Morrison (grandfather of Peter Mandelson MP, one of Tony Blair's confidants) – again, to no avail. And the postwar attempts to rescue the principle of rent-sharing was as disgracefully served by the Socialists, in the way they formulated their laws, as it was by the Liberals with their tortuous definitions of land value in 1910.

The Liberal project remains incomplete. The honest politicians of the 19th century who flew the Liberal banner were defeated in their attempt to establish a free society by a technicality – they made heavy going of the task of defining the taxable capacity of the land and natural resources of Britain. They failed to learn the lessons from the colonies (*see Box 1*). The Liberal prospectus, however, remains as valid today as it was in the time of John Locke. A new social contract is required, one that would affirm the right of every person to an equal share in the land that gives us life. This is political philosophy at its most principled level. It is a programme in search of a champion.

Poverty: the political legacy

RADICAL Liberals at the beginning of the 20th century knew that poverty was a structural feature. This could be removed by a system of public finance that altered the balance of political power and the distribution of property, and which enhanced the income-generating capacity of everyone in Britain. So the Liberals felt confident when they announced the intention to abolish poverty within 20 years. That promise was not fulfilled, but that is because the means – the key fiscal reform – were thwarted by the Conservatives who championed the interests of the landlords.

The best that quasi-socialist Britain of the 20th century could achieve was to ameliorate some of the worst public displays of poverty. But as we

Box 1
Land Valuations around the world

THE LIBERAL government of 1905-9 botched its definition of the income from land for revenue purposes. Contemporary experience demonstrated the ease with which the flow of rent could be measured for fiscal purposes. The evidence was reviewed by a Select Committee of the House of Commons, which had been charged with assessing the Land Values Taxation (Scotland) Bill, 1906.

- **New York City:** in 1903 a law was passed which directed the valuation of land: "The sum for which, in the judgment of the officer making the valuation, each separately assessed parcel of real estate under ordinary circumstances would sell if it were wholly unimproved".
- **South Australia:** since 1885, unimproved land had been valued and taxed on the basis of "the actual value of the land less the value of all improvements, if any, on such land".
- **New Zealand:** since 1893, the value of land, excluding improvements, was the standard for a state tax. In 1896, municipalities were empowered to adopt this standard for local rating, if a majority of the rate payers at a poll favoured its adoption. The electoral popularity of this policy was demonstrated when, out of 75 polls, 63 favoured the reform.

*According to the Commons Select Committee, referring to New Zealand: "In no instance where the system of rating on unimproved value has been carried have the rate payers ever reverted to the former system". And according to the Commissioner of Taxes, "the exemption of all improvements in fixing the rating standard has to a large extent contributed to the solid prosperity of the Colony".**

* *Report of the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Land Values Taxation (Scotland) Bill*, 1906, London: HMSO, 1906.

see from Table 1, poverty in Britain continues to increase. That increase continued during the first four years of the first Blair administration, despite the Prime Minister's declaration that his government would abolish poverty in 20 years.

Despite government appropriation of an increasing share of the nation's annual output, re-distributive tax policies failed to reverse the long-term trend in the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor. Inequality did stop growing in the early 1990s, but this was the effect of a recession rather than a restructuring of the rules that govern the distribution of income: it was a levelling down through unemployment rather than a levelling up through prosperity. The long-term trend then resumed itself during the Blair years.

In the June election, Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown sought and received a mandate to halve child poverty by 2010. This would not even return Britain to the 1979 level. Ruth Lister, Professor of Social Policy at Loughborough University, pointed out the flaw in the government's thinking:

Table 1
People in poverty, Britain

	Total pop. (million)	No. in poverty (million)	% in poverty
Adults			
1979	54	5.0	9
1994-95	58.8	13.3	24
1998-99	56.6	14.3	25
Children			
1979	13.8	1.4	10
1994-95	12.7	4.0	31
1998-99	12.8	4.5	35

Source: Child Poverty Action Group; cited by Ruth Lister, "Social cost of the Middle Britain ethos", *The Guardian*, May 25, 2001

> The heavy emphasis on the responsibilities of those in poverty risks sending out the message that it is they who are responsible for their poverty. Taxation continues to be cast as a burden, rather than as an expression of citizenship responsibility.[8]

But government policy also exposes a flaw in its paradigm. It believes that humanitarianism must be linked to harassment of people back into work, as if people were voluntarily unemployed and needed to be pressurised into earning their living.

And now – the paradigm shift?

THE GRIEVOUS unfairness of contemporary political philosophy was highlighted when Tony Blair impugned, by implication, the people who in the Thatcher era were called "spongers". He announced "the end of the something-for-nothing Welfare State". That was an attack on the involuntarily unemployed who sat at home and received transfers from the incomes of other people.

There was no evidence during Blair's first four years that he understood what had become apparent to his Liberal heroes of a century ago: that even before the Welfare State, the landlords were living off a something-for-nothing system, that they were voluntarily unemployed. But unlike today's involuntarily unemployed, they were not content to sit at home and mind their own business. They sat in Parliamentary seats and minded the business of everyone else.

Blair is correct to want to change the something-for-nothing culture, but this shift in attitude and policy cannot be selectively aimed at just one section of society. In all fairness, it has to embrace all beneficiaries, and must be employed to correct historical anomalies. Unavoidably, this entails a radical restructuring of the tax system, which is the primary

obstacle to full employment. Fiscal reform is also an imperative if he wishes to deliver an efficient entrepreneurial system.

To his credit, he was setting the highest possible goal when he committed himself to "the development of the human mind to its fullest natural extent". But to deliver on this promise to the people of Sedgefield, he will have to understand that the full psychological development of a personality depends not just on access to a share of the nation's taxable surplus; but also the manner in which people access that surplus resource. In other words, he has to find a way to democratise the system for raising revenue. That provides him with a historic opportunity – to complete the radical agenda defined by the Liberals of 1905-10.

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