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UKANIA UNDER BLAIR

CONSTITUTIONAL ALTERATIONS normally require an alteration of the communal will: that is, a national or nationalist identity motion of some kind, whether of resentment, ascendancy, defeat or rebirth. Such a will might be stimulated and led 'from above'; this entails, however, the existence of a dissentient ruling elite which thinks in constitutional terms, and puts state reform resolutely ahead of social reform and economic policy. But such an order of priorities is quite alien to the modern United Kingdom ruling class—indeed nothing has been more alien to it. Constitutionalism had been familiar enough to its early-modern predecessors of the period 1640–1707. But the state constructed at that time was then reconfigured primarily through contests *against* what appeared as the more aggressive modernity shown in the revolutions of 1776 and 1789—that is, the modern constitutionalism out of which today's nation-state world has mainly arisen. In those contests the pioneer itself had become tradition-minded and custom-bound—'empirical' in its philosophy and pragmatic in its political attitudes. British parliamentarism grew perfectly inseparable from such attitudes and Blair's New Labour victory of 1997 was still far more an expression of them than a repudiation.

Without that more decisive break—a rupture on the level of grammar, as it were, rather than rhetoric—New Labour's political renaissance could only be undertaken 'the wrong way round'. It was fated by its own history to move periphery-first. Authority had to be conceded outwards without the prior establishment of a new central framework capable of encompassing all the new energies and demands. When General de Gaulle decided it was time that France 'married its own century', he set up a new republican constitution to consummate the wedding. In Germany and Italy, new federal or regional patterns of government were imposed

after Fascism, in order to modulate and confine the unitary state. In Spain the post-Franco democracy designed and enabled the Catalan, Basque, and other autonomous governments, by first of all erecting a radically novel political and juridical mainframe.

But in the United Kingdom the mainframe itself has remained sacrosanct. Behind a firework-display of fizzling rhetoric about change and modernization, it has simply been carried forward, and trusted to go on 'evolving'. Trust it, and therefore us: things will settle down and generally sort themselves out, while in the meantime (which could mean a lifetime) things can go on in the comfortable, circular kind of way people (i.e. England's people) are used to, albeit with some changes round the edges. In France and Spain new state constitutions were seen as the necessary condition of a political break with the past. But after Thatcher, only a new *politics* was demanded, not a new framework for political living—and that in order to redeem and continue the past, not to break with it. Recent episodes of UK history may have come to be despised and rejected; but not the longer perspective of Britishness, within which success and world leadership had been for so long celebrated. Only on the periphery had 'radical' changes become unavoidable, in the more European sense of ruptures or definite new departures. For 'Middle England' itself, these were reckoned to be superfluous—or at least indefinitely postponable.

There were in fact interesting poll and survey indications in the later 1990s that English opinion may have been a lot more open to new departures than party political leaders assumed. Unfortunately, it was the assumptions of the latter which counted. They continued to believe that dramatic departures of style and communication accompanied by minimal, adaptive changes to the constitution were most in accord with the subjacent mood. Hence some departures from the stick-insect rigidity of Thatcherism were in order—but not of such a kind as to frighten the horses. Socialism had been exorcised in accordance with the same supposed mood. After which, it would have seemed damnably un-British to start imposing a Hispanic-style revolution up top: surely some modernization-touches would do instead? Enhanced (only cynics would say 'disguised') by brilliant new ideas? Might not some thoroughly intelligent *bricolage*, plus a strong dose of accelerationism, technicism (etc.) restore the basis of Anglo-British statehood for long enough? And keep the restorers in governmental business for long enough, too?

Vectors of archaism

The past does not simply ‘survive’. To be reproduced effectively within modernity it requires vehicles, social devices and intentions. Through these what would otherwise be fossils become allied to new interests and passions, acquiring the style (even the fashionability) demanded by what the Situationists originally called *la société du spectacle*. One of the key vectors for this is economics. It is still a common error to believe that the Habsburg Empire so wonderfully captured in Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* was economically hopeless or doomed. In fact it did fairly well until killed off by war and defeat. David Good and other historians have shown how notably it was advancing by 1914, after a period in which Austria–Hungary had indeed lagged behind industrially. Society there may have been unviable, and particularly the contradiction-riven state—but this was not for reasons rooted in economic development alone. Like other deplorable truisms of the time to come, ‘It’s the economy, stupid!’ was quite familiar in Vienna.

‘Was the Habsburg Empire an economic failure in the sense that it could not engineer modern economic growth prior to its collapse?’ asks Good. His answer is ‘an unequivocal “no”.’ The Empire grew at a significantly faster rate than the United Kingdom over the period between 1570 and 1914, and its GNP per capita was by then equivalent to that of France. Of course it straddled the ancient socio-economic gap between West and East, and hence contained within its own borders a steep ‘development gradient’. Yet the latter, Good points out, was less steep than the one between the North and the South of the United States. The latter’s ‘impeccable credentials’ as a model of successful capitalist evolution have been largely the result of backward projection from post-1945. Although it had not caught up with Belgium, the English Midlands or the Ruhr, Franz-Joseph’s Empire stood comparison with Mediterranean and peripheral Western Europe (which meant, with most of it). The implication is plain, if disagreeable to economics-worshippers: there was no straightforward relationship between development and political success or stability. ‘Modernization’ never fails to create contradictions and stir things up. It provided Vienna (today, London) with greater resources to buy off opposition, dangle bribes and be terribly broad-minded; but at the same time, it made the unbribable, the resentful and the contrary far more aware of their unequal, left-behind status. Not everyone can be bought off equally. Any measure of success—like the arrival of a

railway, the opening of the first supermarket, sudden access to college education—generates an irascible appetite for more, and more quickly. The broad-minded (blueprint in hand) perceive this as unreasonable: impatient narrowness, egotism, jumping the queue. Thus a grander, encompassing, controlling sort of identity comes to oppose more particular, self-assertive, ‘I’m-as-good-as-you’ identities. The sharper the impact of socio-economic change, the more this clash turns towards nationalism—the sense that life-or-death may be at stake here, unless control of development is made to lie where it should (with us, not them).

Success in statistical tables and growth-leagues does not automatically favour a grateful, conserving philosophy of evensong, egotism and familial values. The British Conservatives discovered this in the late 1980s, not long before they fell helplessly through the floor. Neither does stagnation and the sense of retreat or confinement encourage either revolution or nationalism (except among tiny minorities who know in the abstract that what people tolerate is actually ‘intolerable’, and inform them of this). There may have been some formative periods of industrialization when such combinations were possible—times when modernity existed only in pockets, as the privileged accident of one nation or another. But its generalization has swept this away. Along with the debris has gone what Emmanuel Todd has recently baptized as *L’illusion économique*—the notion that economic development itself is the sufficient condition of any specific political or state pattern, or of the triumph of any particular ideology. The universal necessary condition of all advance ceases to be the special explanation of any one forward movement.

Modernity required—and in its later evolution goes on requiring—certain new economic and social circumstances. It does not follow that these circumstances determine modernity in the concrete sense of its lived and acculturized evolution. However one-sided, the socio-economic renaissance of Thatcherism had more strongly undermined the class basis of a traditionalist state than anything before it. Its deregulation and attacks on corporatism corroded the familial sense of a societal order which—like that of the Habsburgs—had evolved over time an arm’s length rapprochement with an earlier phase of capitalism. After the demolition of this structure, nation and state no longer retained their long-established fit. Yet at the same time Thatcherism worshipped and propped up the state. On that level it was utterly philistine. Exaggerated

loyalism and hysteria over timelessness became a kind of compensation for the regime's self-conscious economic radicalism—as if only endorsement of monarchic and other rituals, and of the state's untouchable unity, could prevent *everything* that was solid from melting into the air.

Much did melt, of course. But by no means everything. It was probably the successful—or half-successful—side of Conservative economic regeneration which helped to carry forward the archaisms of Britishness into a new age. Although at a heavy cost, that aspect of it furnished a comparative advantage and stability which the 1997 change of political regime then inherited and exploited. In striking contrast to all previous Labour governments, Blair was able to undertake his devolutionary measures against the background of an over-strong currency and significant business support. His pro-European stance and agreement (albeit mainly 'in principle') to the common currency ensured a new level of City and big-business tolerance—or even approval—reflected in the climate of a famously Moosbruggerish British press.

Yet that same good fortune was bound also to rehabilitate some of the anachronism carried forward with it. A half-revolution must constantly insure itself against whatever has not been destroyed—against the past still there and in arms, as it were, against an identity discountenanced, even humiliated, yet not really broken up and cast into the tail-race of history. Huge New Labour efforts had gone into presenting this insurance policy between 1995 and 1997. It seemed the only way to win the kind of electoral victory which the British system prescribed. Over-adaptation to the economics of Thatcherism and deregulated liberalism, extreme caniness over all matters fiscal and financial, and a convert-like disavowal of Socialist money-throwing antics: these now became the surprising preconditions of renewal and change. Yet it would obviously be quite hard to avoid a general or blatant conservatism from arising around foundations like these. Hence the absolute necessity for an ostentatious, perfectly sincere and fireproof form of 'radicalism' to balance that tendency. The Tories had counterposed a mummified statism against their radical economic upheavals. The Labourites now had to offset their mummified economics with an ostentatious display of verbosely political radicalism. We have seen something of what this meant—'youthism', high-technicism, millennial and style-mania, and the accumulation of think tanks and divining rods in appropriate official, quasi-official and entirely spontaneous polyhedrons.

Rather than from plutocratic plotting and self-interest, it is important to observe how this arose out of an objective dilemma. It derives from the structural fate of a decrepit multinational polity whose inherited nature renders it incapable of either solving its problems or dissolving them. It can only pretend to do both, with a kind of mounting insouciance and *braggadocio*. Ultra-prudent and custodial economics could not help favouring an equivalent conservation of the state—and so the prolongation of 1688–1707 anachronism. But at the same time, real changes of state had become unavoidable on the periphery, as had a distinctly unconservative style of ideas and public policy. Thus the Scots were given back their Parliament, the Welsh were awarded a political voice, and the Northern Irish were reconciled to a new and only half-British Protectorate—all amid a clamorous fanfare of radicalism suggesting that these were but early installments of a gathering revolution.

At the centre of affairs, however, the ‘revolution’ was meant from the start to be far more decorous, indeed not revolutionary at all. Some changes to Europe’s most grotesque political relic, the House of Lords; a mild form of proportional representation (if approved by referendum); a half-Freedom of Information Act; an upgraded style of monarchy, affected (but not carried away) by Princess Diana’s example; a proper place at Europe’s heart (when economics permit, again via referendum)—all these decorous shifts were to occur within a comfortably indeterminate time frame, implying further long cadences of stable British existence. From its first day in office, Blairism has planned to last longer than Thatcherism did. Thus what counts most in the ‘gathering revolution’ is clearly the gathering part; execution will come later, as and when opportunity allows (or quite possibly, fails to allow). And what if it gathers only to clear away again, or to be politely refused in referenda? Well, the deep assumption remains that Britain and ‘Middle England’—the imaginary repository of the national life-force, nowadays usually assigned to southern suburbia—will survive that. Deeper down, in the central processing unit (or as would once have been said, the controlling instinct) of Britishness, this continuity is what matters most. Survival: in whatever grandeur remains possible.

A prophecy of end-time

About the contradictions of Blairism one thing will never be said: ‘they could not have known’. In fact the *responsables* of the New Order were

told, and it is already revealing to see how clearly they were told, that this time survival, continuity and grandeur would no longer be enough, however ably modulated and publicized. Political revolution was required. Only six months after Blair's electoral triumph, a study appeared with precisely that title: Anthony Barnett's *This Time: Our Constitutional Revolution*.¹ It had a cover picture showing the Union Jack at half mast over Buckingham Palace, in a nostalgic September light. This was appropriate, for the book's story is like Musil's, only much more amazing: the foundering of a crown-state recounted day by day, sometimes word by word, in contrast to the long ironic retrospect of *The Man Without Qualities*.

The British flag had only been raised over the royal London residence by popular demand. Previously the royal standard had only ever flown there when the monarch was physically present, a demonstration that regality was of greater importance than mere nationality. Kingdom was the important half of 'United Kingdom', even if Parliament had made inroads on the rest of it. However, the bare flagpole now looked offensive to the huge crowds mourning the death of the Princess of Wales. Its indifferent nakedness seemed to accuse their grief, and their caring—as if Queen Elizabeth and her household (then on their annual holiday at Balmoral) were also indifferent. Did they not care—or might they even be pleased—about the loss of their outcast daughter? In death the latter had acquired a title: 'the People's Princess'. Prime Minister Blair confirmed this after the fatal crash in Paris, in what was immediately seen as a stroke of public-relations genius. It was as if he scented from extremely far off the odour of a revolution from below.

There was a lot of goeey sentiment and romanticism mixed up with the resentment, of course, as both left- and right-wing critics of the mood insisted. But what did they expect? A century and a half of patient effort had gone into the formation of romantic-popular monarchism. It was a broader elite project pursued by governments of both left and right, which had long since cast national identity into this specific mould. That mould had been a form of control. Yet now, briefly, the same force was out of control and in the streets, as a mass idolization of somebody both 'inappropriate' and dead. Yet there were both Socialists and Reactionaries who found nothing to say but: 'This is a bit much!' In

¹ Vintage Books, December 1997.

truth nothing could have indicated more clearly the malaise of the electorate which had voted so resoundingly for radical change four months previously. Barnett was surely right to devote so much space to analysing the incident. It showed the availability of public opinion for a sort of change previously unthinkable. For all its sentimentality, he observes, the Diana cult none the less 'expressed a form of the contemporary that connects to the landslide of May 1st', and implied the possible 'normalization' of British political life. Under Thatcherism society had in an almost literal sense become 'divorced' from the old state, including its petrified monarchy. In the September Days of 1997 the divorce had been spontaneously completed, in 'a vast movement of people who by their very existence demonstrated that the premise of the 300-year-old British Constitution had been swept away. The people are now independent-minded and capable . . . The question now is whether the political elite will allow the constitutional transformation to proceed.'

His argument is of course that the renovated elite must not just allow but compel it to proceed: 'this time' is the only time likely to be available for a widely popular reconstruction of the state, a genuine revolution from above. Hence the urgency of tone in the book, and its sometimes hectoring manner. Behind it lies the sense (also the fear) of there being no other time coming. Even if launched from above, a revolution can only be 'genuine' when it meets and is modified by some positive response from below. The moments when such conjunction is possible are rare. To let one go would be folly.

There was only one way of realizing that moment—the route described in some detail over a number of years by Charter 88, the vigorous reform group which Barnett helped to found in the 1980s, and for some time led in the 1990s. It is not as if *This Time* were a lonely or eccentric cry from somewhere beneath the stones. The message came right out of the most significant non-party campaign of the 1990s, and many Labour Party leaders had professed warm sympathy with its aims. Since the somewhat miserable 300th anniversary commemorations of 1688's original revolutionary imposition, the Charter had pleaded passionately that enough was enough—even a standard UNO-issue off-the-shelf constitution would (some now thought) be better than William and Mary's quaint palimpsest of cod-feudal shards, early-modern scratchings and bipartisan 'traditions' reinvented so often that no one had the slightest idea what purpose they originally served. And surely, with some imagi-

nation and national pride, wouldn't the unthinkable become possible? A new British Constitution meriting its capital letter, inspired by the approaching century rather than the one before the one before last?

Barnett's indictment of the *ancien régime* takes up all the first part of his book ('The Meaning of 1997') and overflows constantly into the second ('Voicing the Constitution'). The reader is left by it in a kind of trance, like the suspension of belief that used to attack Ethiopian intellectuals of the 1970s when they returned home from studying abroad to confront the court of Lion-King Haile Selassie: *How is all this still possible? At the end of the twentieth century? With the democratization of the globe in full spate, and Nelson Mandela running South Africa? How dare it endure one day longer on earth?*

The least that could be expected after May 1997 was surely a statement of some exit plans, and a sketch of the replacement. This need not be a *pronunciamento* accompanied by a detailed blueprint: instead, what the author recommended was something like Anthony Giddens's 'Utopian realism'. What this meant was 'articulating clear, principled goals and then setting about them with practical measures that are given the space necessary to be assessed in a context of consent.'² On the other hand, such a programme does have to be uttered. With all the respect due to Karl Popper and George Soros (both suitably endorsed in *This Time*) even a pragmatic, anti-grand-theory prospectus must at least be adumbrated, since without that 'the country has no clear idea what "the greatest constitutional change for a century" means and where it is supposed to lead'.

By the end of the year Blair took office, however, there was still no such idea in place. As Barnett worriedly pointed out in December 1997, the statement had been promised before the election, and then simply never delivered. Now the democratic revival which had been so strongly in the air of both 1 May and early September needed its momentum to be kept going. The practical measures undertaken (like devolution) demanded 'a sense of larger purpose . . . In terms of the constitution, a clear statement of principles and purpose. The sooner the better.'

² *This Time*, p. 273

Methodone kingdom

Alas, 'the sooner the better' implies the later the worse. As winter turned into spring, the government's first anniversary was celebrated, and Mr Blair's first Cabinet 'reshuffle' of July 1998 ensconced New Labour's authority more firmly, it became steadily clearer that the first installment might well be the last. The maximal and daring might already have collapsed into the minimal and safeguarding. No statement of grand constitutional renewal was ever to come. Instead, there would be another long-lived 'regime' of decline-management—a generational reign, as it were, comparable to that of Mrs Thatcher in 1979–97. Once more, 'radicalism' would boil down to staying afloat, albeit in an interestingly different way.

As with the early concessions to Scotland, Wales and Ireland, some constitutional changes were still needed to secure that way. One was a form of proportionality in political elections, to qualify the desperate lurches and 'landslide' turnarounds of the past. The second was some change to Great Britain's revising chamber. Alongside the 'modernized monarchy' rendered critical by the Diana affair, a more 'acceptable' House of Lords was also needed. These vectors of continuity had themselves to be upgraded, simply to pursue the time-honoured role assigned them. They certainly represented overdue episodes of modernization. But in the hardening context of Blair's 2000 regime they could also be stability-reforms. Thus the 'radical' would be a realignment of the archaic, rather than the straightforward replacement which Charter 88 and *This Time* pleaded for. Electoral change was the more important of the two. The fantastic lurches of 1979 and 1997 had become too dangerous for an antique creaking across the threshold of the Third Millennium. In a Europe and (soon) an archipelago regulated by proportional electoralism, the boxing-ring pantomime of 'first-past-the-post' was no longer easily sustainable. True, Blair's party had benefited from the old mechanisms in May 1997, but only in the wake of prolonged adversity, during which both the Left and the Centre of UK politics had been under-represented for nearly two decades. If the system was left intact, nothing could be surer than an eventual surge in the other direction. The instinct of Labourism (even the New sort) was that in Britain, and particularly in England, this reversal action would happen sooner rather than later, and was more liable to affect the Left than the Right.

The ancient theory had been that knock-outs ensured 'strong government'. This might have been all very well when the British Empire possessed a fundamentally strong ruling class—the old patriciate, culturally at one although ruling via different parties. But things had altered fundamentally. The combination of decline and Mrs Thatcher had ruined that elite. She started off her reign with a Cabinet of grandees and great acreage, and ended with one of journalists, estate-agents and sleaze-merchants. These put her out of business in 1990, then revealed themselves as incapable of setting up on their own account. So 'the system' now came to mean nothing but inebriate parliamentary majorities based on a minority of the votes cast, generating machismo-power, think-tank mania, mediaeval staggering fits like the Poll Tax, unrestrained petty bourgeois opportunism, and Sovereignty-delusions which the rest of the world now sniggered at.

New Labour was second-born into this post-patrician world. Which meant that its 1997 majority bore the wounds of four successive KOs, and the scars from a prolonged agony of internal modernization. Was it not due some compensation? That meant not just obtaining but staying in office. On his first day in power, Tony Blair launched an electoral campaign for the post-millennium ballots of 2002 and 2007. What was most 'new' about reformed Labourism was this hardened and re-oriented will—the determination to construct not merely a stand-in government, but a different and more stably based British elite order.

Rapid assemblage of new ruling class

This meant in turn that New Labourism, unlike the Thatcherites, was directly confronting what one must call the sociological problem of Great Britain *in extremis*. That is, how to replace the former ruling class by a plausible substitute. 'Britain', the empire's rump-state, can only be kept going by some new regulating and stabilizing cadre, one really capable of taking over from the gentlemen. Hostile critics claimed from the outset that Blairite 'radicalism' is mere conservatism; but actually it is more like *conservationism*. One should not judge it solely in terms of the former Left-Right spectrum. Seen rather in terms of curatorship, as a form of state survival-kit, it becomes more comprehensible. The Conservative first-born ('natural party of government', etc.) had been smashed into pitiful wreckage by the farce of Thatcher's last days and the May 1997 landslide. It would be in a life-raft for years to come. To the second-in-

line now fell the spoils, but also the onerous duty, of preserving and renewing one of history's outstanding polities—the oldest existing state in the world with any claim to modernity.

From 1997 onwards, much effort would be expended around a single question. Just what *is* Tony Blair's project?—asked many sceptical minds, particularly on the Left. The replies have been curiously sparse and unconvincing. But that may be because these inquirers have generally been searching for a socialism-substitute—some novel formula for social-policy redemption and advance. Accompanying this quest went a perfectly logical idea: the new government may as yet be professing no such formula, but at least some Cabinet craniums (preferably those in charge) must surely have one? Surely they must know what they're doing, if only they would tell us (and meanwhile, listen to our advice, engage in dialogue, etc.).

However, what if the logic itself were erroneous, in the sense of misdirected? What if, that is, there is neither a 'project' of that kind, nor the smallest chance of one being concealed in private ruminations anywhere round the Cabinet table? Would it not then follow that the only effective 'project' of end-Britain is *diminuendo* survival—transition from the management of decline into the management of disintegration, leading eventually to a suitable testament and funeral arrangements? Both countering economic decline ('Thatcherism') and re-engineering the political control-system ('Blairism') have naturally presented their aims as 'radical modernization'. But both these words have become terms of bluster, especially 'radical'. After the eighteen years of Mrs Thatcher and Blair's 1997 election campaign, it has come to signify little more than 'Have a nice day!' in the United States.

The problems addressed may indeed be 'radical' (basic, through-and-through, fundamental, etc.) but the available or short-term answers are really of a theme-park nature. There is no conceivable radical solution, in the sense so much bruited about by Mr Blair's thinkies and cultural gossellers. The unwritten goal of 'youthism' is death, even though—as in Mexican ritual commemorations—its processions and exhibitions may be filled with exuberant, even hysterical, life. The stage-management and scripting of the interval can (naturally) only be the work of the party in power. But the existential dilemma structuring its parade means that the party must be (or anyway try to be) the Party. That is, it must be a

class-substitute—a permanent-seeming elite which makes the end-time bearable. New Labour had to justify its ‘-ism’ by both being and showing that it was much more than a ‘movement’ in Tony Benn’s or Michael Foot’s sense—an ethical crusade occasionally permitted into office. It had now mutated into a replacement patriciate, the armature of a farther phase of British statehood, indelibly Great in both name and nature. While manoeuvring towards election-worthiness in the years 1994–97 it had been in reality transforming itself into such a cadre—an elite-surrogate. So, state-worthiness turned out to be the winged creature inside the dull chrysalis of Old Labour, still so fatally encrusted by Clause Four and the Socialist old-stagers of the historic Left.

As it showed at once, even before the liberation of 1 May, this creature flies by different rules from the mouldy night-moth of the 1970s and 1980s. Having lost its officer-class, the drifting multinational ship of state needed a new discipline and direction. The administration of these demanded an equivalent discipline and brio from the replacements. Their movement was assuming nothing less than the task of being Britain. Promotion to long-range heritage-governance was sustainable only via ostentatious rigidity and uniformity—through ‘discipline’ in an enhanced and visibly enforced mode, much greater than that usually associated with political parties (except in the former Communist countries). The result was that ‘totalitarianism’ of public relations and the predominance of censors and message-watchers which has been so much satirized by critics. Sometimes such Blairite symptoms have been explained in terms of malevolence, or the sheer egotism of a new Machiavellian Prince. But to some extent, surely, they can be seen as arising from quite objective constraints. Are they not also a response to the prolonged withdrawal symptoms of collapsing Britishness?

It is simply not possible to grow a new political elite overnight, or even in a few years. Revolution alone could accomplish that. Blairism is not revolutionary, and not even a revolution from above. It is the cautious avoidance of revolution-from-above by a whipped-on evolution-from-above (interspersed, of course, with colourful appeals to the populace). Under the conditions of Ukanian decay, evolutionary stability and sang-froid are demanded even of the undertakers. ‘Trust us!’ remains the law of surrogacy as it was that of empire—in some ways possibly even more so than during the preceding history of the British elite.

New ruling class considers options

The simulation of caste-power is a miserable affair, whose hollowness can only be concealed by a lordly affectation of utter unity and inflexible will. For some years Mrs Thatcher had provided a personal version of this, until it became insupportable to both her own party and the system. She had demonstrated both the force and the limitations of personal charisma as a compensation for decline. Hence a more systemic approach was now needed, which the corporate traditions of Labourism naturally strove to furnish (once Socialism had been purged). The traditional corpus of Labour offered a more collective ethos and organization to build on, in conjunction with the personal *rayonnement* of Blair.

However, that combination needed ideological reinforcement of the developing cadre-structure—‘discipline’, daily ideal methodone, unremitting morale-boosting—plus a minimal political plan for permanence. On this side, Thatcher had banked simply on prayer-book endorsement of the old Ukanian apparatus. Blair’s intuition saw the folly of this, above all in the light of New Labour’s inescapable commitments to the periphery. The sole advance-route possible was one of ‘adaptation’ to the new-old dilemma, through minimal remodelling of the Westminster machinery. In the House of Commons, this implied a coalition policy—the replacement (or modification) of simple-majority aberrancy via the construction of a more sustainable centre ground. The material was present, in the shape of the traditional centre-ground movement, the Liberal Democrats. The latter had been a permanent minority since the 1920s, but one with strong regional foundations as well as a powerful historical presence going back to the 1688 foundation of Britain. Traumatized like the Labour Party by the Thatcher–Major decades, the Liberal Democrats were also now more aligned with post-Socialist Labourism in ideological terms. This provided the conditions for a more enduring power-alliance—but only if the electoral system was reformed to give the Liberal Democrats a more reasonable representation in the Commons. For half a century they had been protesting against the unfairness of two partyism, a system which had condemned them to representative limbo.

Thus an empirical way forward presented itself to New Labour: minimal changes to the unwritten constitution which would simultaneously avoid the perils of Charter 88’s projected shake-up and confirm them

in power as a long-term elite of redemption. Would they not eventually seem 'the natural party of government', the conservatives of a century to come? In the first year of Blair a Commission was set up to recommend the new election system, headed by former Labour Minister Roy Jenkins (now a Liberal Democrat, as well as a Lord). There was little doubt from the day of its inception that his committee's recommendation would be for a minimally proportional voting system. Nor that the New Labour majority would, after the humphing and haaa-ing time demanded by abandonment of any tri-secular ritual, endorse the changes. Then the public relations bravura associated with Blairism would surely win a referendum on the proposal?

Or would it? In the summer of 1998 some doubt must have developed over even these modest proposals. Lord Jenkins's suggestions would certainly be reasonable. But would they be Project-worthy, and safe? How else may one understand the strange affair of 'The Constitutional Declaration', and its even stranger aftermath? Dated 11 June, the full title of this statement was: 'Constitutional Declaration Agreed by the Government and the Liberal Democrat Party at a Meeting of the Joint Consultative Committee'. That committee was founded before the 1997 election, to discuss and coordinate Labour and Liberal Democratic policy on reforming government. After an age of total immobility on this plane, it had been felt that the main opposition parties should combine on a broader platform, and help win popular support (probably by referendum) for changes to the sacred device. But its fifth meeting was to be more than simple reaffirmation of previous joint-party aims. It was a declaration, presumably to the people, and presumably intended to affect them in some way. Also it was 'launched', not just put out: 'Blair and Ashdown Launch Constitutional Declaration'. As it happened, I was at around that time called on to present evidence to a House of Commons Select Committee, the one on Scottish Affairs. It was investigating future relations between Westminster and the new Edinburgh Parliament, and the new pronouncement seemed likely to have some bearing on its deliberations. I tried to get a copy.

This sounds simple. And so it should, surely, for the citizens to whom (in Declaration-speak) power is being brought day by day closer, and whose rights to Information (etc.) are now so regularly endorsed. In the week after 11 June 1998 I made three calls to the No. 10 Downing Street Press Office. The first surprise was how difficult it proved to

identify just which Declaration/Appeal/Statement was being requested. On each occasion the assumption at the other end was that callers would want copies of Chancellor Gordon Brown's announcement about privatization—'launched' at the same moment. 'Constitutional declaration? Ah . . . just a minute please' was each time followed by a pause, and on one occasion by: 'Oh . . . you mean the *Party* declaration . . . got you, right!' There followed the standard name-and-address ritual, plus assurance it would be in the post. But a week later, nothing had come in the post.

In one of the few press comments on the Constitutional Declaration, Matthew D'Ancona suggested in the *Sunday Telegraph* on 14 June that its timing was no accident: 'On an ordinary day the long-planned Blair–Ashdown statement—a poorly-written pledge to 'put power closer to the people'—would have been subjected to much sterner scrutiny. In practice, it was all but forgotten in the excitement surrounding the Chancellor's auction of state assets.' 'The last thing we want at the moment is a big debate about the constitution', one Minister had told him. The Declaration was in truth a consoling gesture towards the Liberal Democrats, who had begun to suffer from growing suspicion about the government's reforming intentions. It was the sort of thing which would once have crept out of 'smoke-filled rooms', rather than been launched—a party stand-off, as it were, curiously disguised as a ringing *pronunciamento* to the farthest corners of the land.

Still, D'Ancona's comments made me yet more anxious to see the document. I phoned again, carefully repressing any hint of outraged citizenship. The Select Committee was meeting the next day, so time was short. Would it not be possible for Downing Street to deliver a copy of the Declaration to the Houses of Parliament, where I could pick it up by hand? 'Ah, well, I suppose so . . .' came the answer, 'but I don't think that's a good idea. No. Things just tend to get lost down there. Wait a minute . . .' Out-of-earshot confabulation followed, and then: 'Tell you what. Just go to the police box at the Downing Street gates tomorrow morning on your way to the Commons. We'll make sure it's waiting for you.' And so it came about that on a fine June morning, strolling down Whitehall to my seat of government, I turned into Downing Street for guidance. Two iconic policemen were indeed there, in shirtsleeves, and carefully inscribed the request in a large notebook. But they had no Declaration. 'Just hang on there, Sir!' said one of

the officers, picking up the phone. Ten minutes went by. And then at last a lady secretary emerged out of the famous glossy black door carrying a large brown envelope. She hastened up to the police cabin. The Constitutional Declaration was mine. Ten minutes remained to read it before the Committee was due to convene.

They were more than enough. Even allowing for the five-minute walk to Parliament Square, seconds sufficed for a three-page document of such nerve-stunning banality. D'Ancona had been exaggerating: the pledge was not 'written' at all, but ground out of a word-processor programmed entirely with exhumed clichés and rubber-stamp exhortations. At the end came the 'Declaration': 'We ask for the support of the British people in putting power where it belongs, in their hands'. But what the Declaration meant was something like this: the gladsome torrent of constitutional modernization has subsided into a stagnant puddle in which, none the less, appearances have to be kept up.

Options have to be kept open; but only just. Lord Jenkins's Report was always likely to be 'accepted'; but once accepted, it was also at once perceived as likely to benefit from some farther years of contemplation and reconsideration. 'Years'—or even parliamentary sessions? Two months later it was repeatedly rumoured that the changes, and the referendum, would be put off until after the next General Election. By September, we find Matthew D'Ancona noting how opposition has mounted to the reform within Blair's own party, while the experience of power has simultaneously diminished the enthusiasm of its modernizers. Hence the most probable compromise may 'postpone the changes until, at the earliest, the election after next' (that is, until 2006 or 2007). He may have been exaggerating again. The likely timetables cited after publication of the Jenkins document were that it might be realizable *in eight years or so*. On the other hand, one never knew. All things considered (Boundary Commission changes, elections) eleven years might be a more realistic prospect. Thus old-fashioned reform had been triumphantly replaced by virtual reform, a mantle for inertia and will-lessness. Robert Musil would have been delighted by such ingenious procrastination, the gymnastics of sincere deceit. He never invented anything half as Byzantine.

Another of the truisms in the 11 June Declaration does admit: 'Constitutional change requires the widest possible consensus, and that

will take time to deliver in full . . .’ But more significant (especially for Liberal Democrats) was the fact that it was not *against* anything. It was not (for instance) opposed to time-wasting, unnecessary delay, or futile postponement in the hope that the issue itself would somehow vanish from human ken. No, for collaborators of the new regime the only real enemy loitering out there is separatism. As Peter MacMahon pointed out in *The Scotsman*, one finds the document’s solitary tooth on page one. It turns out to be sunk into Plaid Cymru and the SNP—those wreckers, out to destroy the old thing, even before it has a chance to get itself modernized. Years or even decades are fine for reforming (or perhaps after all, not reforming) things British. But what counts now is to stop the separatist scoundrels in their tracks. Among all the other bromides, a faint whiff of Third Way chloroform also arises from this test: ‘This is the new politics: between an old-fashioned centralized state and disintegration . . .’

The fate of Lordship

Secondly there is the problem of aristocracy. Reform of the UK’s second chamber was needed to underwrite the new class’s tenser and more focused authority. When Blair came into office he and his nation were still confronting a genuinely astonishing possibility: that the globe’s ‘oldest democracy’, ‘Mother of Parliaments’ (etc.) might soon be embarking upon the Third Millennium AD with a still-functioning hereditary system. In the nineteenth century Radicals had sometimes made tactical pacts with the nobility, usually against what are now called ‘market forces’. But in the twenty-first century? Reborn as ‘youthism’, could House of Commons ‘radicalism’ really cut some unprecedented deal with bloodline voting and genetic entitlement? Under Thatcher’s economic version of the radical credo, Lordship had counted for little. Her political philistinism occluded the anomaly, assisted by the crude bloodline fact that most Lords were Conservatives, and did whatever the government told them between 1979 and 1997.

Clearly this would change. But there was also the question of status and ideal appearance—much more significant for a regime forced forward on to a terrain of political salience and constitutional adjustments. It would simply be ridiculous for any new-style hegemony to try and coexist with the world’s outstanding reliquary of feudalism. The national theme-park implications would be intolerable. However—as with the electoral

reform quandary—certain features of the ancient regime’s prodigious accumulation of bric-à-brac helped in the formulation of a ‘compromise’. In the course of the previous half-century pseudo-Lordship had been added on to the real bedline product. Each Honours List (New Year and Midsummer) now announced a number of ‘Life Peers’—non-hereditary baronages granted solely for the individual’s lifespan. These are like non-elective Senatorships, terminable only by decease. Nomination is via a committee system concerned both with ‘proper’ party representation (mostly rewarding veteran MPs) and with supposed civic or social merit—‘outstanding achievement’, preferably in some politically harmless arena. Life Peerages carry the same voting rights as those inherited from the Norman Conquest, but are still far fewer in number. The rise in sinecure and patronage since Harold Wilson’s (subsequently Lord Wilson’s) period of office has not sufficiently outpaced the breeding power of lineage.

The House of Lords is these days restricted to censure and recommendations on the legislation passed by the ‘Lower Chamber’ (as it is still called). Since the latter has now appropriated United Kingdom sovereignty, or crown-power, a convention had since World War One ensured that the Upper Chamber would never finally refuse to pass Commons laws. However, they could still delay legislation as well as query it, and sometimes spoke of disregarding the gentleman’s convention and reverting to earlier practice. One such episode had left a particularly deep mark on the consciousness of both the Labour Party and the general public. In 1988 the Life Peers who mostly attend to the business of today’s House of Lords had become alarmed by Mrs Thatcher’s Poll Tax. Even time-serving has-beens could sense the likelihood of mutiny over this. Thus an alliance of pseudo-feudal off-scourings with popular resentment was briefly threatened, which might have rejected the infamous law. It was to prevent this that the true-Brit Peerage was called forth from its hinterlands to ensure passage of the measure.

What ensued was unforgettable. Even a Man quite Without Qualities could not have failed to be impressed. It was a fully Ethiopian spectacle worthy of some Benjamin Disraeli novel. Bentleys and ambulances laden with Thatcher-worshippers converged upon St Stephen’s Palace from every decayed estate in the kingdom, so that the undead might vote through the century’s most unspeakably stupid legislation. A kind of hole was burned into the climate of opinion by the event, which still left

strong traces a decade later. That episode alone (one might have thought) should have been enough to guarantee straightforward and instant abolition of this institution by any government with the faintest claim to being ‘radical’ in any older and more honourable sense.

Not, however, by a government whose pretensions were to virtual radicalism alone. Or (more precisely) to virtuality fused with profound caution and a mounting sense of stately duty. The Blairites decided to abolish hereditary-right voting, while retaining the institution. Instead of moving over to an elected Senate in the classical pattern, the life-peer principle was to be evolved farther. These Lords-for-a-day would become, in effect, like a working extension of the monarchy—a ceremonial political guard-room, permitted to tut-tut about legislation and counsel to their heart’s content, but without even vestigial powers of interference.

Governments would in this way retain the valuable authority of seniority-reward and status-endowment, plus that sense of stable continuity which even grotesque traditions are keen to foster—the feeling of social life going on, unanxious and ‘time-honoured’. ‘Time-honoured’ is an important concept—not on any account to be confused with ‘time-worn’, ‘exhausted’ or ‘as-good-as-dead’. Nor should the uniforms, furniture and wigs be overlooked. While absurd in themselves, they have never functioned ‘in themselves’: they exist invariably in an intimate alliance with quite interesting and gossip-worthy matters—like who gets what, why, in recompense for which favour or in compensation for which injury or failure? This sort of thing is less awesome than descent from Normans and Plantagenets, but also more interesting and more appropriate to a pot-noodle regime seeking (against obvious odds) to evolve a new courtly style of its own.

In late July 1998, one of the most ‘sparkling’ representatives of Labour Newness was appointed to superintend Lords reform: Baroness Jay. I cite the term ‘sparkling’ simply because it was employed in all newspaper accounts of the event. The *Independent on Sunday* of 2 August 1998 (for example) described her promotion under the headline: ‘How Labour aristocrat Jay walked effortlessly to the top’. Margaret Jay happens to be the daughter of ex-Premier James (now Lord) Callaghan, and was formerly married to journalist and one-time diplomat Peter Jay, son of another Labour Ministerial eminence, Douglas Jay. The Baroness had ‘perfect credentials for the job’, and was ‘known for her formidable talent

for networking . . . as a key member of the Prime Minister's trusted inner circle'. Another Baroness is quoted as declaring: 'Margaret Jay is the ideal person to quell any discord in the House of Lords over Labour reform . . . She is a discreet gossip, and not in the least bit pompous.' Much of the rest of the article is devoted to amplifying this point. As was invariably said in the past of all genuine blue-bloods (including Queen Elizabeth II) Mrs Jay turns out to be full of human warmth, has a sense of humour, and will have time left over to cook for you even when terribly busy. The new life-peer ruling class is surprisingly like the old.

I merely quote this account without elaboration, lest any reader should think that elements of misplaced irony may have intruded upon some of my earlier arguments. The *Independent on Sunday* story was accompanied, incidentally, by a preposterous diagram of the new elite 'network' around Mrs Jay, which apparently extends from Cherie Blair to Meryl Streep, via the BBC's John Birt, Rabbi Julia Neuberger, the Seventh Duke of Marlborough, Barry Humphries, Anna Ford and Sir Stephen Spender—'Poet, now deceased'. In the contemplation of Blairism, no irony can be misplaced and satire grows daily more redundant. A Musil of today's United Kingdom would have to pit himself against a self-satire now routinely built into the system, and unavoidably replicated in even the most straightforward or pedestrian accounts of it.

Following abolition of the shameful body, a further logical move might have been to replace Lordship with regional or national representation—that is, with a second chamber on German or Spanish lines, in which the different populations and territories of the UK could voice distinct opinions and interests. After devolution one might have thought in fact the case for such a body was stronger. The very existence of assemblies in Wales, Scotland and Ulster will in any case generate demand for some new representation at the centre. Would it not be better to give such voices formal status within the renewed framework of state?

But of course this cannot be, for reasons already noted. Such logic would still be suicidal for Britain, and no smooth talk of federalism, or even of asymmetrical pseudo- or semi-federalism, will make any difference to this fact. The English would have to find representation in such a body, surely. And there is no obvious way that could happen without their being automatically over-represented. The potential conflicts of a non-unitary state, unregulated by a new constitution, could not really be

arranged by a crypto-lordly surrogate for such a statute and law. Far safer, therefore, to stick to pseudo-nobility and Mrs Jay's 'networking'. The termination of mere Inheritance is now required in order to safeguard and rebuild Heritage. It is time bloodline gave way to focus group. Fibreglass Lords and Ladies (suitably extended in terms of recruitment) will provide a stronger buttress for the still-crystallizing new elite. The latter's interests now require that Middle England be appeased and comforted on this important level of the old imagined community—not stirred up and worried by new and quite needless challenges.³

A prophet ignored

Barnett's *This Time* had the misfortune to be proposing the non-available answer: revolution. Its whole tone was damnably and deliberately un-British, even though—as the author patiently explains a number of times—he is actually trying to save Britain in a more serious sense, by acting pre-emptively against threats of secessionist or exclusionary nationalism. Such a noble wish still leaves out something indispensable. To be recast in twenty-first century constitutional mode, Britain must first be saved from the British. Unfortunately, Blairism is at bottom last-ditch Britishness, and this turning was rapidly defining itself during the very months when Barnett's clarion call was making its way through the presses. By the time it was published, the current of renovation had already clearly gone into contraflow.

During the decades of the Right, when Charter 88 got going, radicalizing Britain had seemed to mean saving Ukania from demented economists, fake Americanizers and astrological misreadings of Adam Smith. After May 1997, its sense abruptly shifted: Britain had now to be saved by the Left. But no longer by the stalwart old Left, still vaguely comparable to the Austrian Social Democrats—patrician to the heart, liberal-impe-

³ The worst fears of critics were to be boundlessly exceeded by what surfaced in early 2000: an A5 'summary' of the Royal Commission's report ('A House for the Future', 99-5271/0001/D160; CD-ROM attached). As if in deliberate mimicry of the contents, the cover shows ghostly images of the Britannic landmass fading away into an ochreous middle distance. The proposal is for an appointee body selected by other appointees, plus an unspeakably bathetic 'regional' component elected through some 'model' yet to be decided. The spirit of the whole collapsed soufflé is best conveyed by Recommendation 128 (Chapter 18, p. 27): 'The question of the name of the second chamber and the titles of its members should be left to evolve . . .'

rial, Protestant, morality-encrusted. Such had been the party of Attlee, Stafford Cripps, Lord Callaghan and (ultimately) of John Smith. But that lay now in the grave alongside these gentlemen.

In its place there stood general disorientation in search of legitimacy. The new Blairite 'Left' remained so by historic descent and affiliation, and yet had cast aside almost everything related to previous British left-wing ideology, in order to gain power. There was no successor ideology to 'British Socialism'. No one could have accomplished such a feat in the short time following John Smith's death in 1994—least of all in a world where State Socialism was still in accelerating and general retreat. Thus the idea-free inheritor could only be a vanguard of hungry but somewhat empty 'modernizers' . . . still in search of their own blueprint of modernity. It stood condemned to compose such 'modernity' on the hoof. Many of its policies were simply appropriated from the earlier, popular phase of Thatcherism—lessons wisely if ungratefully learnt, and accompanied by the firm intention of never returning to Old-Left corporatism and dependency. But this alone would never a New Age make. A stronger display-identity was needed: hence the 'virtual revolution', and the cacophony of polyhedrons and postmodern circus-acts—the unconscious mimicry of Britain's great Central European predecessor.

Even in decline, however, a social and state fabric remains far stronger than those who would change it by incantation. It is likely to reimpose itself, or most of itself. This is exactly what Anthony Barnett sensed might happen, if the will faltered, and what he was publishing his eloquent sermon against. The one guarantee against such underlying continuity (he maintained) was a new state, based upon a new constitution; which entailed, for a time, an absolute priority of constitutional over other issues; which implied a government that would assert this priority over the economic and social-policy questions customarily central to British politics; which demanded that reform be made the sort of popular-national cause that Charter 88 had fought for.

These imperatives hang together. But if they failed to hang together, he could see they might all be defeated separately. And in such a defeat, even the positive piecemeal reforms applauded in the pages of *This Time*—devolution, Ireland, electoral reform, the opening to Europe, the Lords—would end up as survival-rafts rather than new departures. The British 'constitutional revolution' had to cohere; the trouble is that the

ancien régime coheres as well, even after the battering it took during the 1980s, even so close to its quietus.

The collapse of party-political Conservatism in 1997 meant there was little for it to cling to but the new raw would-be elite. Which meant that in a quite novel sense (as we have seen) the way was open for New Labourism to at least temporarily become ‘Britain’—that is, a replacement for the ruling class broken and demoralized by the grim abrasion and failures of the two decades since the late seventies. Much in the regimentation and rigidity of New Labour may have from the start responded to this challenge. Was its famous mobilization of the post-1994 period just to win an election? Or was it (as I have argued) about power in a much profounder, more salvationist sense—the stiffening of a now struggling collective instinct to keep the British polity going? Would ‘modernization’ come to mean basic survival, rather than the creative choice of futures which so much future-oriented rhetoric suggests?

The subsequent fate of Barnett’s polemic surely supports a gloomier interpretation of events. His book fell straight into a black hole of indifference bordering on hostility. Its assumption had been a continuing, even a rising, tide of support for planned central change—for constitutionalism as the coherent and determined *raison d’être* of the new power. But what the book’s reception showed was the almost total absence of such a tide. Far from captaining the onward momentum, Charter 88 was marginalized into a vaguely supporting role, a gadfly to the Left. Critics on the conventional Left denounced the government’s failure or capitulation on social or economic matters, and particularly on welfare. But their emphasis was already the contrary of Barnett’s. Governmental faltering over constitutional issues came to be perceived as secondary—even forgivable. What was a written constitution, after all, compared to the past achievements of Liberal-Left Britain or the grim necessities of welfare shrinkage and an underclass being attacked from above?

Thus in the early-Blairite cultural atmosphere there was a deadly mixture of toxic influences, all already hostile to plain Painite radicalism. On one hand a wing of nostalgics, voicing elegiac regret for past Socialist achievement, which they considered betrayed by the new administration. But their factional answer was self-evidently useless: resuscitation of the world now lost, or else invention of a new-model doctrine which could hardly help smelling and feeling awfully like the old one. Or,

on the other hand, there was public-relations postmodernism: smart devices and conceptual ways around 'outmoded' problems or attitudes. The latter could, all too easily, be made to include dreary old nation-state constitutionalism. If everything solid is melting into the air in that sense, why bother trying to pin it down again into an old-fangled constitution?

The prophetic admonition of *This Time* fell exactly between these current streams of thought. It clearly despised the tomb-cults of nostalgic Leftism, yet insisted that real novelty depended upon pushing through a few plain-talking, 'old-fashioned' reforms—the sort eschewed historically by the Britishness of both Left and Right. As if by slide-rule design, therefore, Barnett managed to utter what almost nobody at that moment of time wanted to hear. The most significant political diagnosis of Ukania's *fin de siècle* passed practically unnoticed amid the court gossip, the hand-wringing of defunct Socialism, and the deranged séance-mentality of William Hague's refugee Toryism.

One gets the sense from reading *This Time* that it will be small consolation to the author to have his prophecies fulfilled. While exhorting a new regime to get it right, he could not help cataloguing the ways it could go wrong. As he was writing, those ways piled up around him. By December 1997, when the book appeared, they loomed over him: the spectre of a less-than-half revolution, already contracting into its own compromises and conceits. Thatcher also had brought about a less-than-half redemption, which had ruined both her and her party. But this was even more serious. If, as I have argued, 'Blairism' is really a last-ditch attempt at maintaining the United Kingdom by the formation of a pot-noodle ruling class, then nothing much can be visible beyond it. In different ways the nations of the old composite state are likely to end by throwing it off; and afterwards, they will evolve into differing selves—the identities for so long occluded by the superimposition of Britishness. The fall from such an apotheosis can only be into depths as yet unplumbed. Whether or not the great renewal prospected in *This Time* was possible, its failure must leave us 'after Britain', in a genuinely post-imperial condition.

'Corporate populism'

In the summer of 1998 Blair's government submitted an *Annual Report* to the people. The business-style title was deliberate. It began with a 'ten-point contract', and a full-page portrait of the Leader in his boardroom (the Cabinet Room at 10 Downing Street). 'Changing a government is like sweeping away the entire senior management of a company,' he announced. In spite of critics saying 'this Government is more concerned with style than substance', he insisted it had made a good start. To underline boardroom confidence the *Annual Report* was full of full-colour illustrations of customers, with improbable messages scrawled over them—for example, a girl sitting in front of the Bank of England saying: 'I am pleased with changes that have been made and am looking forward to the improvements in the transport system.'

Barnett followed up *This Time* with an incisive account of the *Report's* assumptions. Unable to implement a new conception of the state, Blairism had defaulted to the model of a business company. Great Britain had in all earnest become what journalists had so often dubbed it in the past—Great Britain plc, 'the image of agency provided by big companies'. So socialism had lapsed finally into 'corporate populism'. This is neither ancient subjecthood nor modern constitutional citizenship. It is more like a weak identity-hybrid, at a curious tangent to both. Voters are seen as customers (like the girl at the Bank of England), while the Party Executive 'manages party, cabinet and civil service as if they were parts of a single giant company whose aim is to persuade voters that they are happy customers who want to return Labour to office.'

This is certainly better than mere deference. After all, customers are expected to object and criticize a bit (even if most don't, most of the time). But then, by taking their protests into account, the management normally expects to reinforce its own market share. It is 'the modernization of subjecthood', rather than a replacement for it. The sovereign crown gives way to the Managing Director and his unanimous executive board, devoted at once to profitability and (again in the *Annual Report* language) to Britain 'regaining its pride and ambition, at home and abroad' and telling the right story at all times: 'we are a great nation, filled with creative, innovative, compassionate people.' A great nation, but much more emphatically a capitalist one. Where the Poll Tax had failed, an *Annual Report* now appeared to be signalling success.

So here was the economic vector of archaism, seriously at work. Mrs Thatcher's 'economic revolution' was still advancing, and no longer beneath the level of the state. Thanks to the English economy's traditional strength—the global force of the City of London and finance capital—economic modernization was still possible, and still comparatively effective. Manufacturing modernization was far less attainable, and in fact had been largely abandoned under Thatcher. But the remainder was capable of taking over the ideological garb of statehood at least for a time—a 'business' nation if no longer an industrial one, appealing to a business-minded folk. Cost-effective-conscious to the core, New-Labour Britishers no longer needed *un plébiscite de tous les jours*, Ernest Renan's formula for civic nationalism—daily reaffirmation of the French, American or other dream through moments of pride and aspiration. Now a daily visit to the supermarket would do just as well, coupled with reminders of sterling's strength and the foreign conquests of our 'world-class' business. Blair was right: style is substance, it sells things in the global supermarket and guarantees cybernetic prosperity. This is also why the Millennium Dome is identified with the national interest.

'Corporate populism' is absolute philistinism. Another reason for the business class to support New Labour, of course, but one which seems inseparable from a frightful risk. Its apparatus of consumers and 'stakeholders' mimics democracy, substituting brand loyalty and ordinariness for hope and glory. This can seem possible, even attractive, *while things go well* in the narrowly economic terms to which the creed awards priority. Even then there may be a resentful underclass that has no stake, and public sector or non-commercial enterprises which fall behind; but rapid growth for the majority cushions and conceals these downsides. When the growth momentum ceases, however, such compensatory effects are likely to vanish totally.

People will then have to fall back on the non-corporate, less than cost-effective nation—on a national community and state as Renan (and so many others) have perceived them. That is, on communal faith and justice, the extended family of egalitarian dreams. Everyone knows that a corporation will not 'support' customers in any comparable sense, beyond the limits of profitability; but everyone feels that is exactly what a nation should do. Brand-loyalty is precisely *not* 'belonging' in the more visceral sense associated with national identity. Indeed it easily becomes the opposite of belonging: sell-out, Devil take the hindmost, moving on

(or out) to maintain profitability. Since the national factor cannot really be costed, it is easily caricatured as a question of soulful romanticism or delusion. However, such commonsense is itself philistine. It fails to recognize something crucial. When Marks and Spencer betrays its customers the result is an annoyance; for a nation-state to let its citizens down can be a question of life or death, and not in wartime alone.

Peoples have not 'imagined' such communities by chance, or out of irrational impulsions from the soul. 'Identities' are not aesthetic choices but ways of existing, or of trying to exist better. This is the 'nation' which has counted in modern, nationalist times, and it is not very like the portraits in Blair's *Annual Report*. The national-popular has generally been not-so-great, hard done by, struggling, threatened, at war, filled with not always 'creative' and sometimes angry people who think they can't afford so much compassion, and look around for redemptive leadership. They turn to the nation of war memorials, oaths, poetry, sacrifice and mythic blood. It is the coiner of the phrase 'imagined community', Benedict Anderson, who has himself underlined the contrast between these two worlds in a recent essay, 'The Goodness of Nations'. Democracies must feel themselves more than the data of annual reports, even euphoric ones. He uses an odd selection of things to make the point—the war memorial at New Haven, Connecticut; an episode of *The Simpsons*; the North Indian 'celibacy movement'—but since he wrote, post-1997 Britain may already have supplied a more telling one.

It lay in the contrast mentioned earlier, between the popular reaction to the death of the Princess of Wales and New Labour's response—the reaction typified, about a year later, by this *Annual Report*. In late August to September 1997 the living (in Anderson's terminology) were in the streets and trying, however sentimentally and confusedly, to 'secure the Rightness of the country' and reorient it away from the shame of a rotten decade. A year later, they had become ridiculous illustrations in a kind of annual sales report. Populism had been recuperated and rendered respectable, and also given this small-minded and neo-liberal cast. Somehow business as usual had resumed, and normalcy been enhanced as never before, carrying forward much of Mrs Thatcher's *Geist* but with the added panache and excitement of a new sales drive. 'Britain' was buzzing once more, but the sound was a reassuring one: safety-first *redressement* rather than the unsettling music of republican constitutionalism.

'England-and- . . .'

Just how safe the *Annual Report* country is meant to become was convincingly shown in early 1999. Although Scotland is the biggest problem for Blairland, Wales remains its closest neighbour. As well as the physical intimacy of a long north–south marchland, the two countries were historically united by early conquest and absorption. In the modern era that union of unequals has normally been awarded a strange name of its own, which appears in all legal documents where it is necessary to treat Scotland, Northern Ireland or other dependencies separately: 'England-and-Wales'. The term conveys a bare modicum of recognition with an associated stress on functional unity. Whatever gestures may be needed elsewhere, here we have two who are truly as one.

The post-imperial return of Wales has therefore been very distinct from that of Scotland. It has resembled much more closely the typical ethno-linguistic trajectory of repressed nationhood—cultural mobilization directed towards nation-building and the eventual formation of a state. After Blair's electoral victory of 1997 a first Welsh Parliament was part of the pay-off. This was conceived quite differently from the Edinburgh one—as a 'first-installment', non-legislative body with executive control over the existing Welsh Office budget but otherwise limited to debating and offering advice. When it came to power, the Cardiff 'National Assembly' members were to be consumers indeed. In the Year 2000 *Annual Report* they will no doubt have their own colour-spread and appropriate pseudo-critique, most likely along the lines of—'So far so good in Wales, but give us more . . .' (something or other . . . roads; language facilities; Life Peers).

But six months before the National Assembly met, the New England-and-Wales was already in trouble. The Assembly was conceived as a voice. But the trouble with allowing a national voice to speak up is that it may say something. Alas, speech can indeed be a form of action. It may even say (do) something disagreeable or (as in this case) something vexingly Welsh. Blair's reading of the old Austro-Marxist runes made cultural Welshness a blessing, naturally. But only provided it did not impinge upon the deeper peace signalled by the 'and' of England-and-Wales, whereby England will go on conducting the orchestra to which choir and harp would continue to make their traditional contribution.

In 1997 and early 1998 the Welsh Assembly plan was guided by the Welsh Secretary of State (and leader of the Welsh Labour Party) Ron Davies. He led the successful cross-party campaign for a 'Yes' vote which reversed the decision of a previous referendum in 1979. Critics commented on the narrowness of the victory, compared to Scotland, but usually overlooked the huge shift in opinion it represented. Mr Davies himself never made this mistake. He frequently emphasized the continuing trend, as distinct from the arrangements of any one moment. 'Devolution is a process, not an event,' was his way of putting this. Such an attitude might in time have boded ill for London but we shall never know, for Davies was prematurely struck down in the summer of 1998. It was not a London omnibus or a fatal illness that did for him, but scandal. The after-effects of an ill-understood fracas on Clapham Common forced his resignation as government minister, party leader—and almost certainly first Prime Minister of the new Assembly in 1999. A successor had unexpectedly to be elected. And this accident of history cast a revealing light on how devolution was now regarded at Westminster.

For Blair and his Cabinet, devolution is emphatically an event, not a process. Nothing could have been done about Ron Davies. He came with the territory and had been responsible for the referendum success. But after his disgrace they were determined no other process-merchant would take his place: only the safest and most pliable of leaders would do—preferably someone impeccably British, and 'not too keen' on the whole autonomy project. They had already had to change the British Constitution in Northern Ireland for the sake of a peace 'process', and were extremely disinclined to do so again to placate a new form of local government in England's oldest internal colony. A line had now to be drawn.

Once more, the actual phenomenon of Blairism at work preempts any conceivable satire. Suppose a hostile Tory commentator had written something like this, for example: 'Power-freak Blair, like the tinpot dictator he actually is, has chosen the most notoriously supine, cardboard figure in the Welsh Party to do his bidding, using every rotten trick in the old Party rulebook to get his own way while continuing to rant about reform and third-way democracy—just the way Eastern Europe used to be!' He would, alas, only have been saying in tabloid-speak what every other journalist was then to write in his or her own fashion. In *The Times* William Rees-Mogg put it this way:

Wales has been insulted . . . by the way in which the choice of Leader for the Assembly has been manipulated. When Tony Blair was chosen as Leader of the Labour Party, the trade union section of the electoral college operated 'one man, one vote'. When Alun Michael was chosen Labour Leader for Wales, the majority of the trade unions returned to the old block vote principle. Three trade union leaders were sufficient to cast the votes which gave Alun Michael his victory.

Thus in the end a resounding majority of actual Welsh members voted for Rhodri Morgan, a well-educated dissident with trouble written all over him; and Mr Michael was wheeled on to centre stage by traditional Old Corruption, amid a tropical downpour of Radical and New-Life protestations. As Rees-Mogg concluded, a great number of those whose vote was scorned in this way were likely to think 'devolution to Wales is a sham, a cover for the maintenance of English supremacy, enforced by the Blairite rigging of the leadership election', and turn to Plaid Cymru. Six months later, at the first elections, they did so turn.

It was not as if the government's attitude was confined to Wales. Although less crassly, analogous pressures were being applied in Scotland as well, and also in London, around the selection of Labour's candidate for the new Mayor. At the same time, a BBC *Panorama* documentary was broadcast on just this wider theme, and gave a convincing picture of a regime backpedalling furiously to undo, or at least restrain, some of the awkward political consequences of devolution. A general counter-revolution was under way designed to preserve 'England-and-. . .' everywhere else too, in approximately their traditional roles within the mystery play of Britishness. Too many voters had been taken in, concluded Rees-Mogg. They had thought the rhetoric was authentic and 'believed that the three 'D' words—Devolution, Diversity and Democracy—meant something, were more than mere slogans . . . Neither in Wales, Scotland nor in London does that now appear to be true.' Peter Preston arrived at a similar verdict in the same day's *Guardian*: 'The troubles that begin to flow in irksome abundance—resurgent Scots Nationalists, roaring Rhodri, taunting Ken—are not, it is becoming clear, isolated events. They are part of a structure. They won't go away.'

England's England

The 'structure' Preston complains of is 'Britain' or, more accurately, England's Britain. Unshed save in emptily radical terms, this armature of fate was bound to reassert itself after the shocks of 1997. The core of the problem is that behind England's Britain there lies England's England, the country which has not merely 'not spoken yet' but, in effect, refrained from speaking because a British-imperial class and ethos have been in possession for so long of its vocal cords. A class has spoken for it. This is the evident sense in which England has been *even more* affected and deformed by imperial globalization than other parts of the archipelago.

What might come 'after England'? In Julian Barnes's fantasy novel *England, England* the whole sclerotic culture is transplanted in theme-park form to the Isle of Wight. Sir Jack Pitman, a business and media tycoon reminiscent of Robert Maxwell, 'reconstructs' Englishness on the island, complete with a downsized Westminster, Windsor, Manchester United, White Cliffs, Imperialism, Harrods, whingeing, etc. Invented tradition is everywhere, like 'the old English custom of downing a pint of Old Skullsplitter with a twiglet up each nostril'. 'We are not talking heritage centre,' he rumbles, 'we are offering *the thing itself*.' This project is disastrously successful, and declares independence as a microstate of truly corporate populism. Meanwhile, the real 'real England', a mainland thus deprived of its essence, sinks slowly backwards into time. 'Anglia' takes over from Britain. 'Quaintness, diminution, failure' create a different landscape, possessed by a new-old innocence and goodness:

Chemicals drained from the land, the colours grew gentler, and the light untainted; the moon, with less competition, now rose more dominantly. In the enlarged countryside, wildlife bred freely. Hares multiplied; deer and boar were released into the woods from game farms; the urban fox returned to a healthier diet of bloodied, pulsing flesh. Common land was re-established; fields and farms grew smaller; hedgerows were replanted.

Martha Cochrane, who has abandoned Isle-of-Wight England for this arcadia, asks herself 'if a nation could reverse its course and its habits', but of course the answer is her own life in this country isolated from Europe and the world, in which items are again 'sold by the hundred-weight, stone and pound for amounts expressed in pounds, shillings

and pence', where 'four-lane motorways peter out into woodland, with a gypsy caravan titupping over the lurched, volcanic tarmac', and thunder has regained its divinity.

In *This Time* Anthony Barnett acknowledged the necessity of English reaffirmation as part of the new constitutional process. It has to be more than the rebranding advocated by Mark Leonard's Demos pamphlet *BritainTM* (1997), which would amount to acquiescing in Jack Pitman's futurescape. Such modernization of the theme park won't do, even given the *rayonnement* of the Millennium Dome. Nor is 'mongrelization' a solution—that is, a self-conscious embracing of multicultural diversity in preference to ethnic majority nativism. That was argued for in Philip Dodd's *The Battle Over Britain* (1996), where ethnic minorities and regional identities capture the dissolved essence of the nation and remanifest it as an inherently variegated democracy. But such a 'preference' has to be expressed. How can it be shown, without a constitutional mode of expression, and a prior redefinition of sovereignty? Democracy is not popular instinct or the simple prevalence of a majority: it is a constitution, or nothing. If this is not put first, then it will come last—and quite possibly too late.

In *The Times* of 12 February 1998 (coinciding with the devolutionary debacle in Wales) Political Editor Philip Webster announced something else. It was like a cloud the size of man's hand, in a diminutive box on page ten. But behind lies a great storm, gathering below the horizon: 'Beckett to give England a Voice'. Mrs Beckett's ministerial plan is to 'give England a distinct voice in Parliament after Scottish and Welsh devolution' by setting up a committee of English MPs. Although humbly named the 'Standing Committee on Regional Affairs', there is no one in Scotland, Wales or Ireland who will be deceived for a second by this: it would be the *de facto* English Parliament, convened on its own for the first time since 1546 (when Wales was formally incorporated). Since no provision was made for the majority in Blair's radical project, it will be forced to make its own, erupting bit by bit, using disguise and alias, proceeding through an obstacle course of tactical accidents and afterthoughts. The Government's 'Modernization Select Committee' was supposed to agree Mrs Beckett's scheme and (the report concluded) 'will almost certainly back the idea'.

Whether it does or not, evolution in that sense is unavoidable. On that plane, Tam Dalyell's old 'West Lothian Question' was certainly not mistaken, even if he himself drew so many mistaken conclusions from it. The impact of Scottish and Welsh self-government upon the former constitution of the United Kingdom is bound to be significant. The Parliamentary elite will be disrupted in its business, even if the majority of voters remains indifferent. A disruption of the establishment will be translated into a concern, even a scandal, for the masses. All issues will be seen as aggravated, if not provoked, by ill-considered changes on the periphery. Since these cannot be undone, the centre itself will have to act, and affirm its own rights. The Standing Committee of English Members will be called upon to speak, and not in a hushed Select-Committee monotone. It will speak for England, the people and nation, and its very informality—its air of having arisen from the regional ranks—may bestow upon the body a spontaneous, even revolutionary appearance: 'It's time someone spoke out!'— and stopped 'them' having things all their own way.

Populism like this finds its own way to nationalism, and there is nothing new or inherently harmful in that. However, it would have been better to plan for it, by putting a coherent, overall constitutional change first, rather than leaving it in this way to the uncertain and possibly uncontrollable last. An intelligible *Grundgesetz* would at least have paved part of the way towards equality of representation and treatment. In Austria-Hungary the Germans may not have wanted such equality, but at least they had the choice: nobody pretended they were not there, or 'took them for granted' in that curious sense which has dogged Englishness throughout the long decline of Britain. It is from this occlusion that the dominant scenarios of English futurity seem to have come. On one hand, the idea of reversion to an irrecoverable rurality—the natural wilderness or village condition of a post-British culture. On the other, the more advanced (but also more negative) longing for a virtual dissolution of identity into multiculturalism or 'Europe'—meaning here a broader identity-format within which nations somehow disperse or painlessly cease to matter.

There is no available formula for a post-British England: the issue has simply been avoided in these ways. It would have been better tackled straightforwardly, as Charter 88 demanded—and yet this was impossible, because of the very nature of the old system to which the Charterites

were forced to appeal. Hence it can only be done in a crabwise, half-avowed and belated fashion. Blair's 'project' makes it likely that England will return on the street corner, rather than via a maternity room with appropriate care and facilities. Croaking tabloids, saloon-bar resentment and backbench populism are likely to attend the birth and to have their say. Democracy is constitutional or nothing. Without a systematic form, its ugly cousins will be tempted to move in and demand their rights—*their* nation, the one always sat upon and then at last betrayed by an elite of faint-hearts, half-breeds and alien interests.