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Britain

Three main parties agree to savage the working class

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The party conference season in Britain this year had a bizarre “Alice in Wonderland” feel about it. The pitch of all three main parties was not the usual one about what they would do for us if they were elected and how good things would be under them. It was the complete reverse. It was about what they will take away from us and just how painful it will be.

There was complete unity between the three parties on this central point - the working class must pay the price for the crisis - despite the obvious fact that the crisis was created by the bankers and the debt is largely owed to the bankers.

Vote Lib Dem, said Nick Clegg, and we will make savage cuts in public spending.

Vote for us, said New Labour, and we will impose four years of austerity to repay the debt - though we won't start until 2011!

Vote Tory, said George Osborne, and we will launch a massive onslaught on you (ie the working class) from the moment we come to office.

Osborne went on to spell out an initial Â£7 billion of cuts the Tories would make immediately if they had the chance out of the Â£100 billion they say will be necessary if they win the election. Vote for us, he said, and we will freeze the pay and cut jobs of public sector workers and make you wait longer for your pensions. If you are out of work vote for us and we will cut your benefits - if we don't stop them altogether.

It was like asking for turkeys to vote for Christmas.

â€˜Toryism with a human face'

At the Tory Party conference this was a part of a wider shift to the right after several years of bogus â€˜Toryism with a human face'.

Cameron's speech was a sustained attack on regulation and collective solutions, in the tradition of Thatcher and Reagan - when it is patently clear that it has been the deregulations of the market championed by them which created the crisis in the first place. It echoed Reagan's mantra that "governments are not the solution but the problem".

This fits in well with the right-wing populist and anti-semitic allies the Tories have chosen in the European Parliament having found the main centre-right grouping too moderate.

Making such openly provocative statements of this kind also reflects a high degree of confidence on the part of the ruling class as to the response to the crisis from the workers movement. Only time will tell whether such confidence is justified.

However, the real problem was never one of too much government but of too little government - alongside the

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bankrupt policies that successive governments chose to pursue. In fact it is patently clear that it is only governments, and the resources they control, which can address the crisis.

Despite all-party unity on making the working class pay for the crisis, there are now significant differences between Labour and the Tories. Tory policy has opened up the first significant ideological divide between the Tories and New Labour since the latter was founded.

Labour has adopted a neo-Keynesian policy of monetary and fiscal stimuli to bolster the economy which has been emulated by most governments across the world. The Tories, on the other hand, along with the US Republican right, have argued for leaving it all to market forces.

Had the Tories been in office now and applied this policy the result would have been a collapse of the banking system, a much deeper recession and unemployment twice or three times its current rate.

Not that new Labour policy has been adequate, far from it. But their failure was the failure to spend enough money to stimulate the economy not too much. And they have failed to spend it on the right things. What they needed was a crash programme to change the economy over to renewable energy, tackle climate change, and create jobs - something they have consistently resisted.

They rightly nationalised many of the banks but it was out of practical necessity not political conviction. As a result, having pumped money into them, they have refused to exercise even minimal governmental control over them (let alone popular or workers control) and they intend to hand them back to the private sector as soon as possible.

The remarkable thing about the Tories and their policy of massive and immediate cuts is that they have emerged from the conference season with their big lead in the opinion polls intact, and still look by far the most likely winner in the general election next year.

Apparently they calculated that they were able to announce their real intentions because promising a series of very unpopular measures would make them look like an honest and serious party in the wake of the MPs expenses scandal and would get them votes!

That such a proposition could even be contemplated is testimony to the disastrous trivialisation of politics that has taken place under New Labour. We have seen the removal of the ideological divide as all three main parties moved to occupy the same conservative political ground. The result has been the growth of personality politics and a right-wing political discourse dominating the 24-hour media.

This has been compounded by the decline of the unions at both industrial and political level and the failure of the unions to be a significant factor as the impact of the crisis has hit home.

All this has meant that although the Labour response to the crisis was better than that of the Tories, this has been obscured by a slick Tory media operation, gross media bias, and an astonishing inability of Brown and new Labour ministers to put their own case across. As a result the emergence of the new ideological divide has not been understood by most of the electorate.

The adoption of neo-Keynesian measures by new Labour does not mean that they have retreated from the social liberalism of the last fifteen years. What we have seen has been the adoption, out of practical necessity, of Keynesian financial measures by a neo-liberal party and neo-liberal politicians. It does not signify a shift to the left.

Labour's lack of answer

This is why Brown and Co have no answer to a resurgent Tory Party. They rule out as a first principle any radical policies which would re-energise their base. Big sections of the electorate would be galvanized by policies such as much higher levels of spending to save jobs, taxing the rich at much higher levels, a green energy revolution, making the bankers and the rich pay for the crisis, banning huge bonuses for bankers, or nationalising bankrupt industries on a permanent basis under democratic control.

In fact the only policy they have come up with since the conference is to sell off more public assets, from the Tote to the Dartford river crossing.

Brown's conference speech evaded major electoral reform for Westminster, something which would be a big vote-winner in itself. The best he could come up with was the so-called Alternative Vote system for Westminster, which would not, crucially, produce a proportional Parliament and would leave the corrupt two party system in place.

Brown's biggest problem, however, is the crisis. His policy is based on the assumption that by the time of the election the economy will be on the way up, fiscal stimulus can be discontinued and he can start to claw back the debt. If this does not happen, and all the signs are that it is very unlikely, it will be back to the drawing board.

The advantage Cameron has is that the media now want a Tory government at all costs and are relentlessly in pursuing this aim. The Sun claims to have switched to the Tories but they have been rabidly pro-Tory for several years. The BBC now comes across increasingly as more sympathetic to the Tory party.

But what does New Labour expect? Their big mistake was to have made reliance on the media a point of principle in the first place. They decided that it was not active members that they needed to win elections but media support and media-based election campaigns. Now they are paying the price.

This was clear during the MPs expenses scandal, which has done serious damage to an already ailing political system. Whilst MPs of all three main parties were involved in scandals and corruption the media made sure that Labour paid the highest price. It was not just because they were the governing party, it was because the media had a project to make it happen.

This was evident in recent developments around the Legg Report which dominated Parliament from its very first day back. Of course MPs deserve all they get for the expenses scandal, but the controversy reflects far deeper problems of democracy and accountability in the functioning of Parliament and the political system. The decision of Sir Thomas Legg to make his main target cleaning and gardening bills - by retrospective caps - is completely incomprehensible.

It had the advantage for the media, however, of putting Brown in the spotlight since the one issue which had come up with him was cleaning and gardening expenses. The duck houses and the moats, the house flipping, the bogus mortgage claims and capital gains tax evasion - far more serious issues but ones which effect Cameron and Osborne - went off the radar.

All this more than wiped out the feeble effects of the Labour Party conference at a stroke.

Of course one can rightly ask why Brown has to claim extra for his cleaning bills and not pay them from his normal salary. But the idea that submitting a cleaning bill rates the same as evading capital gains tax on profit from a house which had been paid for and improved at public expense is ridiculous.

All this creates an incredibly volatile run-up to the general election and an election in which almost anything could happen. It certainly creates an open general election, with large numbers of votes deflecting from the main parties to be won. It is this situation which makes a united left challenge so important - though it is hard to be optimistic that the left collectively will rise to this occasion.

BNP threat

It is a dangerous situation since if the left does not fill this space there are those on the far right, in the form of the BNP and UKIP, who will be more than willing to do so.

Nick Griffin may have performed badly on Question Time and looked like the lumpen fascist that he is but that does not mean that his appearance will not in the end benefit the far right. He was still able to tap into a seam of racism to which the other parties on the panel had no answer. In fact their only answer was to boast about how many people they are keeping out and how many they are sending back.

The appearance of Griffin has given the BNP massive publicity and a degree of respectability on which it can build. It is time for a step-change in anti-fascist activity along the lines of the tactics recently deployed against the English Defense League in Harrow and in Birmingham. We should be for mass mobilisations against the fascists, against state bans and for no platform in the media. We should stand in solidarity with all those who seek to mobilise on the streets against racism and fascism.

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