

new *lefts*

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Must Labour Win?

David Marquand

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The Fabian Society

The Fabian Society is Britain's senior think tank. Concerned since its foundation with evolutionary political and economic reform and progressive social change, the Fabian Society has played a central role for more than a century in the development of political ideas and public policy on the left-of-centre. The Society is affiliated to the Labour Party but is editorially and organisationally independent. In recent years the Society's work on the modernisation of the Labour Party's constitution and its analysis of changing political attitudes have played a significant part in the renewal of the party's public appeal.

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New Lefts

The General Election of 1997 marked the end of a long period in which the ideology of the New Right dominated public life. Not just in the UK but throughout the world the intellectual credibility and popular appeal of neo-liberal conservatism have been undermined by economic and social failure.

But at the same time the left of centre has had to undergo a process of reinvention. The enduring commitments to social justice and to ideas of community, and the conviction that uncontrolled free markets cannot sustain the common good, hold fast. But changing social and economic circumstances force open new arguments and new visions. On the verge of a new century, as throughout its history, the Fabian Society seeks to engender debate on the future of the Left.

Must Labour Win?

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Professor David Marquand is Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford. After eleven years as a Labour MP he became Chief Advisor in the Secretariat General of the European Commission. He was a member of the Independent Commission on Social Justice and of the Commission on Wealth Creation and Social Cohesion (the Dahrendorf Commission). His books include *Ramsay MacDonald*, *The Unprincipled Society*, *Progressive Dilemma* and *The New Reckoning*.

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I. Fantasy Politics?

I begin with a thought-experiment.

It is 2023. The seventy-year old Prime Minister, Tony Blair, is on his way to Buckingham Palace to hand in his resignation. He is still fit and vigorous, but after more than twenty years in Downing Street he thinks it is time to hand over to a younger colleague. Stephen Twigg, whose victory over Michael Portillo in the far-off 1990s was one of the first swallows of the long New Labour summer, will make an admirable successor. As his limousine glides along the Mall, Blair looks back, with just a soupçon of nostalgia, on his years in office. He is an honest man, and privately, at least, he is willing to admit that he hasn't done all that he hoped to do. But in one achievement he takes unmitigated pride. He has broken the almost umbilical link between the British Conservative Party and the British state which was one of the fixtures of the twentieth century. Conservatives still exist, of course; and there is a rather forlorn Conservative Party in the House of Commons. Indeed, a handful of dissident Conservatives once took part in an uneasy and short-lived coalition with the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and the breakaway Democratic Socialists. But the Conservative Party as such is about as remote from power as the Tories under the first two Georges.

A fantasy, of course. I do not suggest that it will happen, or even that it is likely to happen. Despite my title, I shall make no predictions. My answer to the question it poses is the classic cop-out, 'it all depends'. I chose it to recall a once-famous Penguin Special, *Must Labour Lose?*, published in 1960, just after Labour's third successive election defeat. At the time, that seemed a good question. Yet in the immediately following election Labour won a small majority, which paved the way for a big majority eighteen months later. The future is as indeterminate now as it was then. At this moment, it is hard to imagine an early Conservative recovery. But the combination of an economic downturn and a substantial SNP advance in Scotland might transform the electoral odds. As always, contingency rules - whether OK or not.

That said, I think my fantasy was worthwhile. In Britain, the twentieth century has been a Conservative century. Conservative or Conservative-dominated governments have been in office for 66 years of the 98

years since 1900, and for 59 of the eighty years since Britain acquired a democratic suffrage in 1918. The composition and assumptions of British élites, the shape of the political and moral economy and the texture of civil society all bear the impress of a customary Conservative predominance. We cannot know if that predominance has ended. But, as my thought-experiment was intended to suggest, there is at least a chance that it has, and there is even a chance that it will be replaced by a Labour predominance.

The questions raised by these chances cry out for exploration. They have to do with the fundamentals of British democracy, the British state, British capitalism and Britain's relationship with the European mainland, as well as with the ambiguities of the British progressive tradition. I shall try to explore them in that perspective. I shall ask what light past history throws on the present Government's long-term prospects. I shall try to describe the crises that destroyed the previous regime and the questions that face the new one. I shall argue that it cannot answer them without resolving the unacknowledged paradoxes at the heart of its so-called 'Project'. I shall end by suggesting that the best way to resolve them is to abandon the whole mentality of victory and defeat.

I begin with the legacy of the extraordinary Spring night when Conservative fortress after Conservative fortress fell to the Labour and Liberal Democrat onslaughts. Even now, it is hard to grasp the *scale* of the electoral earthquake played out on our television screens. The biggest swing from Conservatives to Labour since 1945. No Conservative MPs from Scotland or Wales. The lowest Conservative share of the vote since 1832. The biggest Labour majority in the party's history. The biggest parliamentary majority won by any party since 1935. The biggest centre-left majority since 1906. The geography of the result was as portentous as the arithmetic. As Anthony King puts it, some of the seats that fell to Labour 'bear names so redolent of Tory England that, until 1 May 1997, it was almost impossible to imagine their ever being won by a Labour candidate: names that conjure up images of shady oaks, mock Tudor villas, well-watered lawns, and a Jaguar (or at least one of the larger Fords) in every drive.' For the moment, at least, Labour Britain embraces Crosby as well as Caerphilly, Edgbaston as well as Easington, West Harrow as well as East Hull, Hove as well as Hemsworth, St. Albans as well as Sedgefield.

Like Mrs Thatcher before him, in short, Tony Blair managed to assemble a new electoral coalition, only on an even more capacious scale than

hers. For the first time since Gladstone's Liberal Party split over Irish home rule, the Conservatives are no longer self evidently the party of big business. For the moment, at least, the New Labour coalition extends right across the social spectrum, from the dispossessed of the inner cities to the corporate élite, from Diane Abbott to David Sainsbury. Its leaders have stood Mrs Thatcher's achievement on its head. In 1987, the Conservatives were the largest working-class party in the south of England. In 1997, Labour won more votes than the Conservatives from the middle class and from home owners for the first time in its history.

II. Coalitions: Past, Present and Future

This is a remarkable achievement.

But it is one thing to assemble a winning coalition, another to ensure that it survives. Harold Wilson assembled a similar, though narrower, coalition in 1966, only to see it fall apart a few years later. The same thing happened to the Attlee Coalition that triumphed in 1945. We cannot know whether the Blair coalition will survive, and there is not much point in asking. So I shall ask a different set of questions: What conditions would have to be satisfied for it to survive? What will its leaders have to do if it is to be more than another brilliant flash in the pan? What, if anything, can it learn from past history?

The first two questions are best approached by way of the third. The last 120 years have seen at least three examples of comparable new coalitions which *did* survive. The first was the Unionist coalition assembled by Lord Salisbury and Joseph Chamberlain after Gladstone's conversion to Irish home rule. This dominated electoral politics for twenty years and metamorphosed into the Conservative Party that dominated the interwar period. The second was the Old Labour coalition - the fissiparous yet tenacious coalition between the radical intelligentsia, the progressive middle class and the Labour Interest - which Ramsay MacDonald assembled after the first world war and which Herbert Morrison and Hugh Dalton were chiefly responsible for fortifying during the second. Though the Old Labour Coalition came to full fruition only in 1945, it displaced the Liberals as the main anti-Conservative force in British politics between 1922 and 1929. The third was the Thatcher Coalition between aspirant Essex Man and Woman, a fierce new intelligentsia of the radical right and the pre-existing Conservative Party that dominated the 1980s and came to grief in the 1990s.

Each coalition was the product of particular circumstances at a particular time. Yet certain common features stand out. In each case, the opportunity to construct a new electoral coalition was precipitated by crisis - by the Liberals' home rule split in the case of the Salisbury-Chamberlain Coalition; by the deeper and more complex crisis that overwhelmed British Liberalism during and after the first world war in the case of the MacDonald Coalition; by the crisis of revisionist social democracy that split Callaghan's Labour Party in the case of the Thatcher

Coalition. In each case, daring, skilful and creative political leadership ensured that the opportunity was seized. In each case, the new coalition was subsequently cemented by a mixture of ideology and myth - a myth of nation, empire and property for the Salisbury-Chamberlain coalition; a myth of modernity, justice and solidarity for MacDonal'd's; a myth of national renewal, market freedom and individual opportunity for Mrs Thatcher's.

In each case, the ideology and myth had great emotional and moral force. They all had a touch of nobility about them. They summoned their adherents to historic tasks. In doing so, they made it possible for the leaders of a diverse coalition of interests and experience to invent a common identity for it. And in each case, the ideology and myth were embodied in an appropriate *statecraft* - by strategies for winning and using power that rooted the identities they fostered in experience. In the case of the Salisbury and Thatcher Coalitions, these strategies were largely executed in government. Initially, the MacDonal'd Coalition had to do so in opposition. But Old Labour invented itself in the pursuit of power as effectively as did Old Unionism and New Conservatism in its exercise.

What does this imply for the new Blair Coalition? It is not difficult to identify a precipitating crisis, or rather crises. The most obvious was the Conservative civil war over Britain's relationship with a federalising Europe. Europe was to John Major what Ireland was to Gladstone; what the first world war and the upheavals of the 1920s were to Asquith and Lloyd George; and what sterling's collapse in 1976 was to Callaghan. It drove a wedge through the Conservative Party and destroyed its reputation for competence. It also made large sections of it appear eccentric, obsessional and, from the point of view of internationally oriented big business, potentially dangerous. In doing so, it helped to engender a strange new class of what might be called 'Blair capitalists' - New Labour fellow travellers or converts from the corporate sector, whose very existence gave their new allies a priceless aura of vicarious economic rectitude.

The European crisis was exacerbated by a deeper crisis of identity and purpose. Thatcherism was, above all, an anti-socialist crusade. Socialism was its 'other', the hydra-headed enemy which it was duty-bound to extirpate. But in the 1980s and early-1990s, socialism, in any sense which earlier socialists would have recognised, disobligingly lay down and died. The Thatcherites found themselves in the undignified posi-

tion of a contestant in a tug-of-war whose rival suddenly lets go of the rope. They fell flat on their backs. They needed enemies, and they no longer had an enemy worthy of their steel. They did their best with Europe, but in the Richter scale of dangers, the infinite tedium of European integration hardly ranks with the Red Peril. More disconcertingly still, the demise of socialism changed the terms of politico-economic debate. The historic contest between socialism and capitalism was over. More subtle questions arrived on the agenda: 'What kind of capitalism?' 'How can the dynamism of the capitalist free market be combined with social cohesion and mutual trust?' And to these questions, the bleak certainties of Thatcherite neo-liberalism offered no answers. As the implications of its silence sank in, the erstwhile heroes of the Thatcher Revolution looked less and less like the shock troops of the Free Market Militant and more and more like an ideological Dad's Army.

Compounding the crises over Europe and over ideology was a deeper crisis of the Constitution and the state. It was a complicated affair, this constitutional crisis; and it is difficult to capture in a few sentences. Its manifestations included the Scottish Claim of Right; the swelling popular demand for a Scottish Parliament that followed; the lesser echo of that demand in Wales; the introduction and withdrawal of the poll tax; the abolition of the metropolitan counties and the steady erosion of local government's spending powers; the proliferation of quangos; the rising tide of indignation over 'sleaze'; and the steep decline in poll-measured support for the political system. The items in this catalogue did not all spring from an identical source. Yet a common theme sounded through them all. The Thatcher governments stood for a combination of market freedom and state power - with the second as the vehicle for the first. To attain the idealised free market of their dreams, they had to hobble, crush or uproot the non-market institutions and values that stood in its way. To do that, they had to make the maximum possible use of the panoply of power which the ancient British doctrine of absolute parliamentary sovereignty confers on the central executive. That, in turn, obliged them to sweep away the web of understandings and practices which had constrained the central executive in the past.

Two consequences followed. The juggernaut of parliamentary absolutism was no longer under wraps. It stood forth untrammelled, in all its gross antiquity. Before Thatcher, the British tradition of autonomous executive power had gone hand in hand with a more subtle tradition of executive restraint. Custom, precedent, unwritten codes and gentleman's agreements had nurtured a range of informal defences against a poten-

tially overmighty central state. Now these defences had crumbled. The result was outrage in many quarters and unease in more.

The second consequence was more subtle. The Thatcher governments hoped to procure a *bourgeois* revolution with a monarchical state: to pour the new wine of choice, opportunity and enterprise from the old bottles of Britain's *ancien regime*. Their achievements were remarkable, but also self-undermining. Old élites were humbled and new attitudes inculcated. But the new attitudes were more subversive than their proponents realised. The Thatcherites' economic values - opportunity, efficiency, value for money - were at war with the moral and political values - deference to authority, respect for tradition, adherence to custom - that sustained the *ancien regime* on which they depended. The more successful they were in dismantling the barriers to their economic values, the more they eroded the moral and cultural presuppositions of the Constitution through which they did so. The restive, raucous, undeferential, *bourgeois* Britain of which they were the midwives could be governed successfully only through a *bourgeois* state.

This triple crisis was Blair's opportunity. He seized it with at least as much daring, skill and creativity as the great coalition builders of the past. Now he has to cope with its legacy. But at that point the parallel between the Blair Coalition and my three past Coalitions comes to an end. New Labour has been the beneficiary of a crisis of the old order. It has enjoyed the right kind of leadership. But it has not yet constructed a cementing ideology or myth, while its statecraft is enmeshed in paradox.

III. From New Labour to Pre-Labour

In place of an ideology or myth New Labour has a rhetoric - an a-historical (not to say anti-historical) rhetoric of youth, novelty and a curiously abstract Future.

The very label, 'New Labour', is part of that rhetoric. So was the now-forgotten language of the 'Young Country', and so is the much-trumpeted 'Third Way'. The cry of 'New, new, new: everything is new' with which Tony Blair astonished a meeting of European socialists shortly after his victory might be seen as its epitome. Its attractions are obvious. It enables New Labour to airbrush its past. It implies that there is no rational alternative to the policies it currently favours. But it is unlikely to serve the wider purposes I have been discussing. It lacks emotional and moral resonance. There is nothing noble about it, nothing to create a sense of common endeavour in a glorious cause. Despite its energetic tone, the underlying message is curiously apologetic. The world is changing, we are told; and we have to change with it. We may not like the changes; we may think them harmful or even wicked, but we can't stop them. All we can do is to adapt to them - weasel words if ever there were any - as gracefully as possible. It is the rhetoric of a management consultant, advising a company to re-design its products, not of a political leader, mobilising his followers for a rendezvous with destiny.

It is also a misleading rhetoric. The most interesting thing about New Labour is that it is not new. Nor are the issues it confronts. As I shall try to show in a moment, the traditions on which it draws go back, in one case for more than a century, and in another for more than three centuries. As for issues, the most striking feature of the three grand questions it has inherited from the old regime - how should Britain relate to a federalising Europe? how can the creative destruction of market capitalism be reconciled with social cohesion? what is the solution to the creeping crisis of the Constitution and the state? - is their obstinate longevity. The European question has been part of the stuff of British politics since the 1950s. The grander questions about capitalism and about the state are older still. In one form or another, they dominated the political agenda during the long Indian summer of British Liberalism that ended in 1914. And that, it seems to me, is the true meaning of New Labour. The notion that it has advanced into astounding new

territory, never before glimpsed by a political thinker's eye, is glib and superficial. The real point is that, after an 80-year detour, the British left has had to pick up where Asquith and Lloyd George left off.

Then why not say so? Why pretend to be new when you are in fact old? The answer, I suspect, lies in a double paradox, which has been central to New Labour from the beginning. It is, in the first place, a paradox of composition. The central fault line in modern post-industrial society is that between the winners and the losers in the global market-place. The lion's share of the extraordinary productivity gains associated with the current capitalist renaissance has gone to the owners of capital, to a new techno-managerial élite and to a handful of stars in the global entertainment industries. These are the winners: the new lords of creation. They want to hang on to their winnings. Most of all, they want to maintain a global economic system in which they can win even more. Confronting them are the losers, the casualties of that same global system: the anxious middle classes, threatened by proletarianisation; the increasingly casualised working class; and the burgeoning under-class. That fault line runs through the New Labour coalition. A-historical managerialism cannot bridge it, but it does - at least for a while - disguise it.

It also disguises a deeper paradox of purpose and method. Ever since its triumphant arrival on the political stage, New Labour has been torn between two alternative statecrafts, each a legacy from the party's past, and each manifest in current Government policy. In deference to Sidney Webb, who used the term himself, the first might be called 'democratic collectivist'. It is essentially top-down and *dirigiste*. It is based on the premise that elected governments both can and should change social behaviour for the better by regulation and manipulation from the centre. Its exponents take it for granted that the democratic state has the legitimacy, the knowledge and the capacity to engage successfully in this sort of social engineering. They also take it for granted that democratic politics rightly consists of a struggle between disciplined, hegemony-seeking mass parties trying to monopolise the power of the state. The notion that a free society depends on a vibrant civil society - on a network of autonomous bodies standing between the state and the individual - is alien to it. Such bodies, its exponents are apt to think, are nests of obscurantism at best and bastions of privilege at worst.

It was epitomised in Aneurin Bevan's decision to nationalise the local authority hospitals in the name of efficiency and uniformity, and in

Tony Crosland's promise to abolish 'every fucking grammar school' in the name of an abstract theory of social equality. It achieved a kind of apotheosis under the great Attlee Government. The Wilson governments of 1964-70 practised it with markedly less success. It came miserably to grief under the Wilson-Callaghan governments of 1974-79. Pace New Labour's rubbishing of Old Labour, it has had a strange rebirth under the present Government. It is strongly entrenched in the Department for Employment and Education. It is the lodestar of Gordon Brown's Treasury. It helps to justify the Prussian discipline which New Labour's leaders have imposed on their own followers. Above all, it provides the rationale for the project of a workfare state, in which vast and complex changes of attitude and behaviour are to be engineered from Whitehall, which lies behind the Government's approach to social policy.

Yet New Labour is not only the heir of the Webbs. It is also the heir of a quite different tradition which might be called civic activist or perhaps civic pluralist. This is the tradition of what Quentin Skinner calls 'Roman liberty': a tradition for which freedom is above all about self-government, about active engagement in the public sphere. It goes back to John Milton and James Harrington in the seventeenth century; to the Country Party in the eighteenth; and to the Chartists in the early-nineteenth. It had a powerful influence on the young Harold Laski and the young G.D.H. Cole, as well as on the mature R.H. Tawney. It was embodied in the practices of those great recruiting grounds of the Labour movement, the dissenting churches and the trade unions.

For the purposes of this pamphlet, however, its contemporary implications matter more than its lineage. Two implications stand out. The first is summed up in the old adage that power, like muck, is no use unless it be spread: to make a reality of self-government power must be diffused as widely as possible. The second implication is that there must be checks and balances to ensure that power is not concentrated in an overmighty central state: that the ideal of self government also entails a politics of pluralism, power-sharing and negotiation. And, in however confused a fashion, these principles now animate most, if not all, of New Labour's constitutional programme.

To be sure, we don't yet know how far the programme will go. The outlook for freedom of information is obscure. House of Lords reform may, at least initially, produce an entirely nominated second chamber - a step away from, rather than towards, the civic ideal. Electoral re-

form depends on the hazards of a referendum, and, even if it comes to pass, it is not clear how proportional or pluralistic the new system will be. Yet, when all the caveats have been made, there is no doubt that a profound transformation of the British state and the British political system is in prospect. Come a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly, there will be two alternative power-centres in Great Britain, challenging the orthodoxies of the metropolis and speaking for nations with political cultures and moral economies that diverge quite sharply from those of the English South-East. Elected mayors worthy of their salt will be more assertive and enjoy more authority than local government has done for decades. The domestication of the Human Rights Convention will strengthen the judiciary at the expense of the executive.

More important still, reform seems bound to develop a momentum of its own. Little by little, a range of pluralistic checks and balances will force the old dogs of Westminster and Whitehall to learn new tricks. They will find it harder to overawe opposition with the big sticks of parliamentary sovereignty and party discipline. To some degree, at least, they will have to practise a politics of negotiation, power-sharing and consensus-building. This is, of course, the kind of politics that Tony Blair has practised with brilliance and daring in Northern Ireland. But it is a politics for which top-down, Old Fabian *dirigisme* has no logical place - and which is likely, at any rate in the long run, to make top-down, Old Fabian *dirigisme* unworkable.

IV. The Pluralist Alternative

Paradox is the stuff of democratic politics.

No doubt, New Labour can live with this paradox for some time to come. But I doubt if it can do so for ever. Sooner or later it will have to decide whether the *dirigiste* or the pluralist strand in its inheritance is to come first. The line of least resistance would be to stick to *dirigisme*. It is congruent with the party's technocratic rhetoric. It fits the mentality of Whitehall. It caters to the well-intentioned optimism which is one of the new regime's most attractive features and chimes with the hegemonic ambitions that New Labour has inherited from Old.

But I can't see how it can answer the great questions - about Europe, about capitalism and about the state - that now clamour for attention. Power-sharing and coalition-building are the essence of European governance. Britain cannot come to terms with EU membership until British governments grasp that truth. And you can't be a pluralist in Europe while sticking to *dirigisme* at home. The search for a new social capitalism can only be conducted consensually and is almost certain to lead to a more pluralistic form of economic governance, balancing stakeholder interests against shareholder rights. And, as New Labour has itself half-realised, the crisis of the state cannot be resolved by trying to re-invent the *ancien regime*. Yet that is what the *dirigiste* option would mean in practice. In any case, *dirigisme* is conceptually flawed. Here, at any rate, Hayek was right. Governments don't and can't know enough to re-make society in accordance with a grand design, since no conceivable grand design can do justice to the complexity and reflexivity of human behaviour. That was why the *dirigiste* experiments of the 1960s and 1970s failed. There is no reason to believe that new experiments in the same mode will do any better now.

The alternative is to run with the grain of the pluralism already immanent in New Labour's constitutional agenda, to diffuse power and responsibility still more and to create further checks and balances in order to do so. Obvious items in such a project would include a local income tax, buttressing local economic development powers; regional assemblies; the democratisation of the quangos inherited from the Conservatives; a fully proportional electoral system; more radical parliamentary reforms; and an elected second chamber, with its own demo-

cratic legitimacy, perhaps representing the institutions of civil society. Much more important than any institutional changes, however, is the change of outlook that the pluralist alternative would entail. It would mean abandoning the dream of a new society, engineered from above by a reforming Government. It would mean the end of the victory-at-all-costs, winner-takes-all mentality which is as fundamental to New Labour as it was to the New Right. Indeed, it would mean the demise of the very notion of winners and losers. There is no guarantee that it would bridge the divisions within the New Labour Coalition, or generate a cementing ideology or myth. I think it could, but I concede that it might not. It might make New Labour the pivot of a new political system, but that too is uncertain. The real point, however, is that such considerations would no longer matter. The fate of previous electoral coalitions would no longer be relevant. Single-party hegemony, of the sort we have known in this country for most of the last century, would no longer be attainable. Majoritarian democracy would have been replaced with consensual.

Pluralism is not a panacea. It means trusting the people, and the people can be wrong. It means stronger localities, and localities can be small-minded. It means negotiation, and too much negotiation can lead to *immobilisme*. Yet, with all its difficulties, the pluralist option seems to me more likely to offer solutions to the real-world problems that face the new Government than is its *dirigiste* alternative. Much more important, I believe that pluralism embodies the values of the Open Society more fully than any other approach to politics. So I end with a new question - no longer, 'Must Labour win?'; instead, 'Can New Labour accept that victory in the old sense is no longer worth having?'

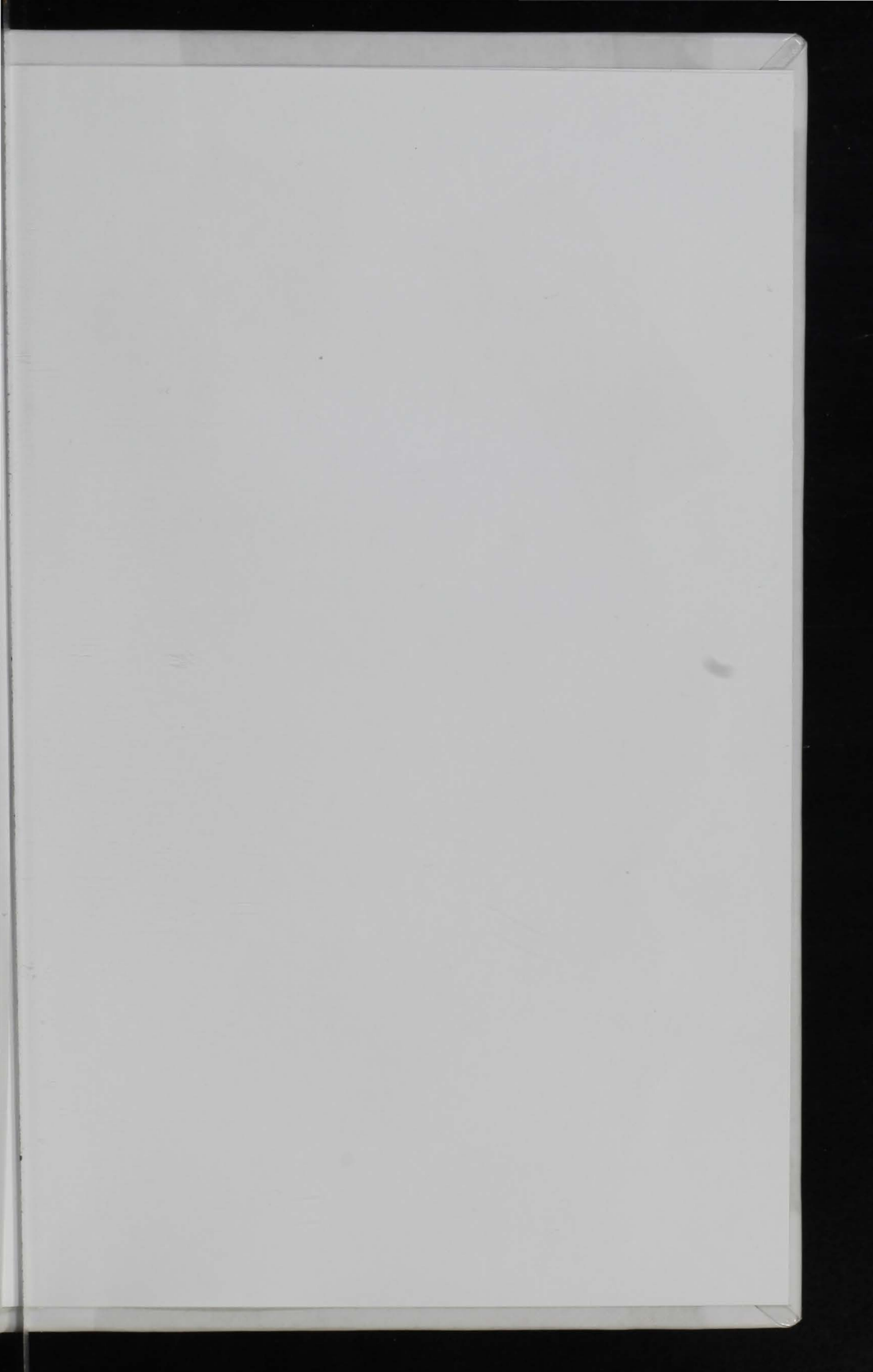
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Must Labour Win?

David Marquand, one of Britain's most celebrated political thinkers, sets out his arresting analysis of Tony Blair's political project.

Drawing on his unique historical perspective he illuminates the political genesis of the new Labour government and considers what lessons the past offers the Labour hierarchy in holding together the impressive electoral coalition that it amassed at the last election.

In making the case for a left of centre politics based upon pluralism rather than centralism, Professor Marquand advocates a rejection of the 'winner takes all mentality' which has pervaded twentieth century British politics. In doing so he poses perhaps the most provocative and difficult question of all for the Labour leadership, "Can New Labour accept that victory in the old sense is no longer worth having?"

Professor David Marquand is Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford.

This paper is part of the Fabian Society's New Lefts programme, which seeks to engender debate on the future of the Left. Previous publications include *The Third Way: New Politics for a New Century* by Tony Blair.

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