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Any Southern Comfort?

PAMPHLET COLLECTION

*by Giles Radice
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Any Southern Comfort?

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Introduction

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"The Conservatives lulled us into a false sense of security and pulled the rug from under our feet".

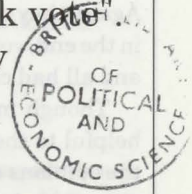
"It will probably be very difficult for our children to get jobs – it's getting worse all the time".

"Politicians are just out for themselves – to line their own pockets".

"We need to rebuild the community spirit".

"The union relationship with the Labour Party is more sensible since the demise of the block vote".

"Blair is not bad but can he turn the party round?".



These are comments made in July and August 1994 by 'floating' voters in the South East and Midlands marginals whose support Labour needs if it is to win the next election. Though they voted Tory in 1992, they feel badly let down and many are prepared to look again at the Labour Party. They think it has changed to some extent and have a good initial impression of its leader, Tony Blair. But so great is their distrust of politicians that many are still reserving judgement. So if there are grounds for cautious optimism, there is still a long way to go and much for Labour to do.

For the past two years the Fabian Society has published pamphlets (*Southern Discomfort* and *More Southern Discomfort*) based on research into voters' attitudes in 5 key Conservative-held marginals: Gravesham, Harlow, Luton South, Slough and Stevenage. Using focus groups of male and female white collar and skilled manual employees (C1s and C2s who considered voting Labour in the 1992 election but in the end voted Conservative), we presented the findings and made a series of recommendations.

In 1992, despite their concerns about the recession, their fears of losing their jobs and home and belief that the NHS and education were both seriously underfunded, these southern 'wavering' voters came down in favour of the Tories because they simply could not trust Labour, fearing that it would mismanage the economy, put up taxes and be in hock to the unions. As a class-based party, they felt that Labour had nothing to offer upwardly mobile families such as their own.

In 1993 the findings were more fluid. The mood was overwhelmingly insecure, with a pervasive fear of the future – both in the short term and for their childrens' generation. Their lack of trust in and fears about Labour were maintained. But where in 1992 they had (if unenthusiastically) voted Conservative and were still willing to give the Tories credit for the good years of the 1980s, by 1993 the recession had hit them hard and they no longer trusted the Conservatives either. Indeed, the most striking finding in 1993 was the contempt felt for politicians as a class.

This summer we have returned to Harlow, Luton and Slough. However, in order to test our theory (put forward in *Southern Discomfort*) that the political attitudes of Labour's 'lost voters' in the South are increasingly shared by similar voters in other parts of the country, we also visited two Midlands marginals – Dudley West and Lincoln. We asked a series of questions about the values and perceptions of 10 groups (5 of men, 5 of women) composed of interviewees drawn from the same white collar and skilled manual occupations as in 1992 and 1993. Again, they were all 'floating' voters who had considered voting Labour but had, in the end, voted Conservative in the 1992 election. All were aged between 25-50 and all had children.

Though most Labour supporters have welcomed these Fabian surveys as helpful to the party, some have criticised them for giving too much weight to the opinions of too few people who are, in any case, Tory voters. They also argue that these findings encourage the party to react rather than to set the agenda.

But as Penny Cooper has pointed out (see *Fabian Review*, December 1993), such criticisms misunderstand the function of qualitative research, which is designed to complement rather than replace quantitative polling by seeking to explore underlying attitudes. Sometimes these deep-seated feelings can prove more valuable in predicting behaviour than conventional polling. The point about the voters interviewed in the Fabian surveys is that they are not 'dyed in the wool' Conservatives but waverers, some of whom relate how they got as far as the polling booth before losing their nerve and voting Tory. Attitude surveys can help Labour to find out how to win their support.

We are not suggesting that the party should slavishly follow the opinions of these voters, nor that such surveys are substitutes for policy making. But listening to what voters are saying, observing how they respond to the way politicians put ideas across and getting a feel for their hopes and aspirations must be pre-requisites for a successful political strategy.

Labour's lost voters

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Some in the Labour Party have attempted to dismiss our findings. First, they argue that the South does not matter to Labour's hopes of electoral success. Secondly, they say that the views which we have analysed are peculiar to 'Essex man' (and woman), a species which they hold to be congenitally hostile to Labour and uniquely to be found in historically unwinnable southern constituencies. Both these arguments are false.

The sheer number of seats in the South gives it great importance to any electoral strategy. In the South East alone there are 109 seats (excluding London) and in the South as a whole there are 261 – of which Labour holds a mere 45 – including London. Outside the capital, Labour won only 10 seats at the last election out of 177 south of a line from the Wash to the Bristol Channel. In the South East, outside London, Labour is even weaker. In 1992, it won only 3 seats out of 109 in the region – and only captured 2 of its target seats.

After the next election Labour has to win as many as possible of its target seats in the South. Even were the party to win all its target seats in other regions, there are not enough extra winnable seats in these areas to guarantee a Labour victory. Labour cannot win without doing better in the South.

Former success

It is only recently that the South has become such a barren area for Labour. In the 'rural and suburban' south, it is true, the party has usually polled badly. But in the 'urban south' of cities and large towns it did well until 1979. In 1974, for example, Labour won 17 seats in the region. Its problem has been its failure to repeat that success. To look to the future, these seats are battles between Labour and the Conservatives, with the Liberals nowhere in sight. A 5% swing would give Labour 17 of these 'urban south' seats, such as Brighton, Dover, Luton South and Plymouth. In any case, Labour's success in the local and especially the European elections has shown clearly that it can win seats in the

South. Few would have imagined, before 9th June 1994, that Bedfordshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent and Surrey would have returned Labour MEPs. Those results alone refute the proposition that the South has always been and will always be hostile to Labour.

The attitudes which the three Fabian surveys have analysed are not confined to Essex. They are shared by the crucial 'swing' voters in the South and elsewhere. In most marginals, these groups not only predominate but, by swinging to one side or the other, decide the outcome. If Labour is to win more southern marginals (as well as those in other regions, including the Midlands seats where this year's Fabian research was conducted), it will have to improve its performance among the white collar and skilled manual groups – in the jargon of the pollsters, the C1s and C2s.

Support

The relative electoral importance of the various socio-economic groups is shown by the breakdown of how they have voted in the last four elections provided by the ITN/Harris Exit Polls (published in full in *More Southern Discomfort*). By 1992 Labour had more than restored its 1979 levels of support among the ABs (professional and managerial groups) and the DEs (unskilled manual workers and those living on benefits). Indeed, the party had a big lead among its core supporters – the unskilled workers. But Labour was still doing badly among C1s and C2s: its 1992 share of both groups was lower than in 1979 – 1% less among the C1s and 3% less among the C2s.

To argue that Labour can afford to ignore these 'middle' groups where Labour has been underperforming and that it should instead concentrate on maximising its support among 'core' supporters is to forget that DEs now amount to less than a third of the electorate and that the C1s and C2s comprise more than half. In any case, Labour's recovery among the DEs (and the ABs) has already happened. Of course it may do even better next time but the fact that it has already mounted a strong recovery amongst these groups is precisely what will make that a harder task. But, even if electoral performance is put to one side, the fact remains that no party claiming to represent the nation either geographically or socially can simply ignore these voters. David Cowling, ITN's political analyst, summed up the priority for Labour: "They are 'middle Britain' and any party which gives them up for lost really ought to think seriously whether they want to be in the game at all".

What they now think

3

In 1992 the 'floating' voters whom we interviewed considered themselves upwardly mobile. We described them as "Britain's aspirants". In 1994 their hopes revolve more around maintaining the status quo. They are far more cautious about their own long-term prospects, giving priority to securing a better future for their children – though they are not sure whether that is achievable.

Typically, the men whom we interviewed were employed as builders, drivers, engineers, salesmen, clerks, junior managers, policemen and civil servants. Most were in work, though several had been made redundant, some up to three times, and often had had to accept significantly lower paid work. Wage rises had been small or non-existent over the last three years; and many claimed that they were working harder for the same, or sometimes less, money. Most of the women had jobs (often part-time) such as shop work, childminding, secretarial/clerical work, and hairdressing. But, whereas in the past having a job had sometimes been pin-money, now it is seen as a vital part of the household income, "to keep our head above water".

Hopes and fears

Last year short-term fears for their own jobs were uppermost in their minds; this year the general feeling is that, having survived so far, things cannot get any worse. They may not get much better, but the fact that their heads are still "just above water" has shown them that they can at least cope, albeit with lesser aspirations. But they have been so dented by the past recession that most do not have much hope of a dramatic improvement: "There will always be some unemployment – it should go down but I suspect it will go up". A major concern is their inability to save for the future – or for a rainy day: "We just can't save any more – all our savings go on bills".

Their life-styles continue to be home and family orientated: "Whatever the children decide are my hobbies". The majority still own their homes, many through 'right to buy' schemes and home ownership remains central to their lives and to their hopes for their children. But it is no longer about making

money: "We used to keep buying and selling houses to move ourselves up – and then we got caught out in the recession". Some were not going away this year, while others were taking holidays in Britain because it is "less expensive".

Considering their position over the last decade, they accept that they are better off than their parents were. But after the boom of the late 1980s and the recession of the early 1990s, their expectations are now lower. Though they are feeling less pressured than a year or two ago, security and stability are high priorities. Their hopes for the future are centered on their children, though they worry about inadequate educational opportunities and poor job prospects.

Assessing values

One of the most revealing aspects of the 1992 survey was the reaction to a number of political statements presented to the interviewees. As well as a general cynicism about the language used by politicians, their response showed a rejection of what they perceived to be some of Labour's core values, particularly those associated with equality of outcome, and support for ideas, such as opportunity and choice, which, over the previous decade, they had come to associate with the Conservatives. The 1994 survey of 'waverers' is more encouraging. There has been a modification in their underlying attitudes, with an awareness of and support for social values. In 1992 most agreed with the statement 'My only responsibility is to my family'. In 1994, few are prepared to accept the idea without considerable qualification. One's family might be the first priority but there is also an obligation to fellow employees, neighbours and society as a whole. There is also a favourable reaction to 'the individual needs a strong community'. It is thought to be a Labour idea, implying mutual respect, neighbourliness and a less self-centered existence. There is, however, less certainty about how to achieve it. Some think it more easily imagined in rural communities, while others liken it to local policing and "making streets safe". However, "community" clearly has resonance as a supporting idea for key policy issues such as crime, health and education.

'Equality for all' continues to be unpopular. In 1992 interviewees thought it was totally impractical, as well as an example of Labour hypocrisy. In 1994 it is again dismissed: "I'd say it was mediocrity for all". There is more support for the statement 'we need a fairer society', provided it is a question of redistributing from people earning big money "such as heads of utility companies, politicians and the mega rich" and does not go to "scroungers". There is also concern that the better off "will just leave the country".

Statements about opportunity, such as 'opportunity for all' and 'encourage talent' are generally favoured. However, in contrast to 1992 it is thought that these could be Labour as well as Tory ideas: "Encourage talent in education and training. Probably Labour – what they would actually do though comes down to money". There is a widely held view that, if the Tories articulated such notions, they would not be believed.

Taxation and employment

This year, as in 1993, we asked interviewees about their views on economic and social questions such as the direction of the economy, taxation, employment, trade unions, welfare, health, education and crime.

On the economy, there is a belief that things must be getting slightly better, even if individual circumstances might not show it. But if the government is not wholly to blame for a world recession, it can take little credit for any improvement: the Tories are perceived as liars, having "lulled us into a false sense of security and then pulled the rug from under our feet"..."the Conservatives haven't done what they said – there's all sorts of hidden taxes".

There is little doubt that the Shadow Treasury campaign on Tory tax increases has had an impact. A number of panellists remarked that, for all that 'Labour's Tax Bombshell' would have hit them hard, at least Labour was honest that it intended to raise taxes; the Tories simply lied about what they'd do and could thus never be trusted again. The scepticism which we noted in *More Southern Discomfort* about whether politicians can be trusted to spend wisely revenue raised by taxation remains as strong as ever, though there is some support for hypothecation (taxes going to specific areas of spending).

Most do not believe that full employment, defined as work for everyone that wants it, is achievable, mainly because of the impact of technology: "Bringing back full employment is a naive statement". They also do not think that the official unemployment figures are credible: "We do not know what the real level of unemployment is. They fiddle the figures"..."They mask unemployment by not counting people who are in training programmes that will not result in a job"..."I think the real level of unemployment is somewhere between 2 and 7 million". But their scepticism about over ambitious promises does not mean that they see no role for government in this. They think that something (although they do not know what) should be done to bring unemployment down, partly because they see it as a major problem for their children.

Employment rights are important ("Equal rights for part time workers would be good – more and more people are taking on part time staff because they have fewer rights – that's wrong") but the main priority is simply to have a job. Despite its prominence in political debate, very few have heard of the Social Chapter. Once explained, although the initial reaction is support – "some bits are probably worth adopting" – there are also misgivings: "It would never work – we'd lose our competitiveness"..."It's got to be paid for somehow. Costs would just go up and we'd have to pay them and before you know it, inflation will just be running away again".

Trade unions

The image of trade unions has improved, partly because they are seen as being less powerful and threatening, a trend that is expected to continue: "The

days when they could call everyone out on strike and hold the country to ransom are over – thankfully". There is support for the John Monks model of trade unionism: "The role of unions will be to look after employees but not in an obstructive or confrontational way".

Crucially for Labour, John Smith's battle over 'One Member, One Vote' has had a positive impact: "Their relationship with the Labour Party is more sensible since the demise of the block vote". Though Labour is still seen as connected with the unions, there is a recognition that they no longer dominate the party.

Social concerns

There continues to be strong support for public services and for the welfare state which is perceived as a Labour strength. But many feel that there are problems, usually associated with benefits going to so-called 'scroungers': "It's too easy – some people will never work and just sit back getting everything paid for". And yet the scrounger is always someone else; a number of panellists had either to draw unemployment benefit or income support and had found that the level was "too little". The system should be a safety net: "The level shouldn't be high enough for you to have a decent standard of living without working for it".

Immigration is thought to be a source of unemployment and a drain on the benefits system: "They come in here and then they bring all their families and we just shell out for them". But the word immigrant is taken to include EU citizens, with free movement of labour held by many to be a ruse for 'foreigners' to take advantage of our "soft" system.

Health and education

The state of the NHS remains one of the biggest issues, with particular emphasis on cuts ("we need less drastic cuts in the health service"), the creation of an unnecessarily large bureaucracy ("there are far too many administrators and managers now") and the concomitant misapplication of scarce resources ("there's an inverted pyramid now in health and education").

The education system is a similar source of concern, as many of the panellists have children at school. 'Cuts' are a major anxiety. But the problems are seen to be more widespread: a loss of discipline, partly due to teachers being seen as scruffy and lacking authority ("you need more respect in school"); unnecessary change ("all the money they spend to change things once and then they just change it back"); the absence of practical subjects which might be of direct use after school and of a proper concentration on the 3Rs; and the lack of sufficient pre-schooling ("there should be more pre-school availability on the state for those who have to go out to work. Many families need two incomes but can't afford childcare"). There are also worries about the costs of higher education, especially the burdens student loans might place on their children.

The concept of 'efficiency' is held to have two distinct meanings. When

associated with the Conservatives it is viewed, dismissively, as a euphemism for cuts: "They're trying to be more efficient but they're doing that by cut-backs at the expense of quality". There is also thought to be too great an emphasis now on management and administration rather than the actual provision of services. As a Labour idea, efficiency is thought to mean better provision but there are still suspicions about waste and funding: "Brilliant idea but it depends if the resources are there to do it".

Moralism

With respect to family issues and policies, there is a clear message from most groups that this is one area which should not become a political football: "They're hardly in a position to moralise, are they?". Similarly, attempts by politicians to portray one model as 'ideal' and another (such as single mothers) as being inadequate are regarded as being "typical of politicians to pick on easy targets that can't defend themselves".

However, although the phrase 'back to basics' is greeted with hoots of derisive laughter because of the government's mishandling of it, the concepts underlying it are popular. There is a thirst for such things as respect, discipline, safety and the 3Rs: "Old fashioned values have all gone out of the window".

Women and the 'gender gap'

We also explored views on women in politics and the 'gender gap'. Nearly all the respondents claim that having a female candidate would not influence their vote. And although most agree that it is more difficult for women to succeed than men, they are universally opposed to quotas by gender (or race). As to the gender gap, the female respondents believe that women are more concerned about social status than men, while men are more likely to become involved in politics through the workplace. Home ownership, which is still regarded as a plus for the Tories (even though there is some feeling that the Conservatives stressed the positive side without making people fully aware of the possible problems of ownership, such as negative equity and the high mortgage repayments of the late 1980s and early 1990s) is a crucial issue for women. The strength of the family revolves around the home base. It is partly a question of habit, but women are instinctively "more conservative", as one of the panellists remarked. The real lesson is that 'women's issues' should not be pigeonholed as a separate area. How Labour talks to women is the key, not so much what it talks to them about.

Crime

There is a widespread fear of crime: "I'm really worried for my children – it's not safe on the streets any more". Light sentences are seen as the rule and as an "inflammatory joke", a result of the judges being "out of touch": "Judges are so old and they've got no idea what's going on"..."Judges are crap"..."That kid

that got sent to Africa – I wish someone would tell me what to do to get a free holiday like that". Part of the problem is viewed as a lack of respect for authority – and of proper powers for those in authority: "It's ridiculous that that policeman nearly got sacked for clipping a kid round the ear – it's not like when I was a child". The disappearance of the 'bobby on the beat' is thought to have contributed to the rise in crime: "You never see local bobbies any longer – when I was a kid they used to know all the kids and be about".

When confronted with the phrase 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime', some thought that this could only have come from a Conservative politician: "Oh yes, that's a direct lift from Michael Howard" but others recognised it as a Tony Blair statement. Although the Conservatives are felt not to be doing anything about being 'tough on the causes of crime' – widely regarded as boredom, drugs and the breakdown of traditional authority – there is still a view that Labour does not give enough support to the police. "I don't see a massive difference between the 3 parties – they'll all say it"... "Labour would identify the causes and then just blame the Tories".

Politics and the parties

In 1993 we were struck by the hostility – contempt, even – for politicians as a group. That feeling is just as profound this year. Politicians are held to be hypocritical, patronising, overpaid and with low moral standards. Although the Conservatives have suffered the majority of mishaps, all parties – indeed, almost all politicians – are thought to have skeletons in their cupboards. Partly this explains the aversion to "preaching" from politicians and a feeling that moral issues are not their concern. The extent of this hostility to the political class can hardly be overstated: "Politicians are just out for themselves – to line their own pockets"... "Most are filthy rich – either inherited or from all their directorships – what do they know about real life?"... "They're all playing away from home"... "They'll say anything to get you to vote for them".

This year we asked respondents for the thoughts that came into their minds when they thought about the main parties. The Conservatives prompted responses such as: looking after the wealthy, efficiency, cuts, taxes, breaking promises, recession and health and education reforms. When asked what was best and worst, they mentioned taxation, enterprise, rewarding effort, interest rates and inflation as good, hypocrisy, splits, health and education, unemployment, poverty, being wedded to the past and out of touch as bad. John Major himself was uniformly held to be weak, ineffective, nice but boring, his 'Spitting Image' puppet made flesh and – perhaps most damaging to his previous image – dishonest: "Little boy lost"... "Weak, boring, does not instill confidence"... "He has made some bad mistakes and people no longer have faith in him".

The Liberals are still seen as something of an unknown: "What are their policies?" is a frequent refrain. They are thought never likely to be in power or significant opposition. The best things about them are thought to be propor-

tional representation and their use as a vehicle for protest votes, with the worst things all variations on the theme of being weak and purposeless.

Labour

Perceptions of the two main parties have changed dramatically since 1992. Where the Tories were trusted in 1992 and the best thing that some could find to say about Labour was that "it is in opposition", it is the Tories in 1994 who are viewed as untrustworthy – and respondents now find good things to say about Labour. The first things that come to mind are the unions, "for the working man", equality, Tony Blair and concern for the less well off. Where in 1992 these first thoughts were all negative, by 1994 they are more balanced. The best things are a belief in the welfare system, Tony Blair, concern for fairness and commitment to all people. The worse things are union involvement, a backwards looking mentality, clobbering the wealthy, past performance and a perceived softness on inflation. Tony Blair himself provides a string of positive responses: hope for the future, young, energetic, likeable and genuine: "He is the best man to lead the party"... "A man of the times"... "He will do well because of being younger and easy to relate to his background". But there is also a worry that he is too young and inexperienced: "Very bland – nowhere near as impressive as John Smith"... "Not enough experience for the job"... "Not bad – but can he turn the party around?". And, although thought by some to be threatening, there are also good words for John Prescott: "He says what he thinks and he's very honest. He will be a good deputy for Tony Blair if Blair will listen to him and his experience".

A number also feel that Labour has changed significantly since the election. There is awareness (mentioned above) that the unions have less influence inside the party. There is a feeling that Labour has learnt some lessons from the 1992 election defeat: "Labour used to be spend, spend, spend but that was the old idea. The party's totally turned around"... "They wouldn't be reckless or frivolous now". Perhaps partly with hindsight, John Smith's leadership and integrity are highly appreciated: "John Smith turned the party around". For what it is worth probably two years before an election, most people feel that Labour will win the next election.

Significantly there are no differences in attitudes and perceptions between wavering voters in the South East and the Midlands. Their aspirations and values are the same and they are concerned about the same policy issues. Their views of politicians and the political parties are also similar. So this strengthens the argument that Labour has to take account of these attitudes and cannot simply dismiss them as being the views of a small, southern minority.

4 Labour on probation

This year's portrait of 'swing' voters in key South East and Midlands marginals is more encouraging for Labour than the two previous surveys. It is clear that the Tories are paying a heavy political price for their economic failures, for their disunity and for what is seen as gross deception over taxes.

More fundamentally, the 'dog eat dog' individualism of the 1980s has lost much of its appeal. Many are now prepared to look again at the Labour Party because they believe that it has at last learnt some lessons from its time in government and its four election defeats – and also because they are attracted by Tony Blair.

But there is no room for complacency. These 'waverers' are highly sceptical about all politicians. Their recent experience of the Tories has bitten deep. And although they are impressed by some changes in Labour's outlook, they are sceptical as to how permanent they are – and whether Tony Blair will live up to his initial promise. Labour, for most of these voters, is still on probation.

Their expectations for themselves are lower than in the 1980s. They want to be able to maintain and, if possible, marginally improve their living standards. More than ever, they understand the importance of decent public services, especially for health and education. Their aspirations are mainly concentrated on improving opportunities for their children. They want security for themselves and a better future for their children – this is the basic message for Labour.

A modern party

The first priority for the new leadership is to consolidate and build on the changes introduced by Neil Kinnock and John Smith. The question which these voters want answered is: "Can Tony Blair carry on where John Smith left off?"

There is a recognition that the constitutional changes introduced in 1993 by John Smith have eroded the domination of the unions. This good impression has been re-inforced by the open and fair conduct of the 1994 leadership election. Tony Blair's promise of 'fairness but no favours' towards the unions accords with their own views.

The emphasis which the new leadership team is placing on recruiting new members into the party is also of more than internal importance. An active, vigorous party, clearly in touch with the voters, is a good ambassador – especially in the South, where Labour most needs to strengthen its appeal. As a Labour candidate told us in the original 1992 survey: "Labour has to become visible again in the South East". For many voters, the visible presence is the local council. The sweeping gains made in recent years have increased the number of councils which are either in Labour hands or 'hung'. The friends for Labour which sensible, progressive local stewardship can make is self-evident.

As with the Labour Party in the early 1980s, disunity in Tory ranks is one of the main causes of their unpopularity. It is, therefore, essential that the excellent example set by the PLP in recent years is maintained. This is not an argument against constructive debate or for what Nye Bevan called "the silence of the graveyard". On the contrary, the more ideas being put forward – at all levels – the better. This pamphlet is, we hope, an example of that. But the mutual respect and tolerance which has now become a welcome and marked feature of Labour Party discussions must continue.

In our two previous pamphlets, we have argued that Clause IV(iv) of the party's constitution (calling for "the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange") ought to be rewritten. Our advice has not been taken on the grounds that few inside the party take Clause IV seriously except as a totem or a part of the furniture, and that it would be foolish to stir up trouble when most voters have never even heard of Clause IV. But this is to miss the point. It would be overwhelmingly in the party's best interests to revise Clause IV. For one thing, is it not absurd for Labour to fight any election, let alone the last one before the twenty first century, with a formula drafted in 1918 in which the party has made clear that it no longer believes. Every other one of our sister Democratic Socialist or Social Democrat parties has had the intellectual self-confidence and plain common sense to spell out positively and in an up-to-date way its principles and objectives. There would also be no better way than a rewritten Clause IV of showing that the party had indeed woken up to the late twentieth century and is now putting forward a credible vision of the future.

The battle for ideas

Throughout his leadership campaign, Tony Blair stressed the need for the Labour Party to win the battle of ideas as a prelude to electoral victory. The Fabian research – perhaps surprisingly – bears this out. 'Wavering' voters are certainly hard headed and sceptical. But like most practical people, they work on certain basic assumptions. In the 1980s, though still strong supporters of public services and welfare, they were over-impressed by the promises of Thatcherite individualism. In the 1990s, they are now well aware of its inadequacies and some are looking for a less self-centred basis for their lives. Values

such as 'respect for others' and 'concern for one's neighbours' have markedly more credibility than before.

Communicating

But when venturing into such problematic territory, politicians have to proceed with caution and a certain humility. Notions of 'fairness' are conceived not in terms of abstract justice but in down-to-earth, even personal terms. 'A fair day's pay for a fair day's work' is perhaps the nearest approximation to the way these voters translate such concepts. 'Community' is also a rather vague term, conjuring up village halls, churches and the bobby on the beat rather than society as a whole. One even has to be careful about such an apparently non-controversial aspiration as 'opportunity for all' because it has been so discredited by the Tories.

It is essential, as Tony Blair says, that Labour communicates with the voters at the level of ideas – but it has to do it in words, images and examples which relate closely to people's everyday experiences and concerns. Otherwise, such efforts will be too readily dismissed as political moralising. To be credible, the basic core of Labour's ideas – community, fairness and opportunity – have to be clearly linked to a few key policies that are illustrative of the party's new approach and central to the lives of the voters whom it seeks to persuade.

Commentators often criticise Labour for not having a 'big idea'. But this is to misunderstand the nature of modern democratic politics. Voters are not concerned with supposed 'big ideas'. What they want to know is what the party will do in the areas which matter to them. It is hardly a revelation that these include crime, education, employment and health.

Competence

Labour must also demonstrate its economic competence. Voters insist on certainty in their own minds that Labour in power will not undermine the economy and threaten their living standards by profligate spending and high taxation. Here, the work of the Shadow Treasury team is clearly beginning to bear fruit. Quite a few of our respondents went out of their way to remark how they had been favourably impressed by Labour's new restrained and disciplined approach. The fact that voters are so sceptical of anything politicians say makes it all the more important that Labour's claims are grounded in realism. In fact, for Labour to promise only what it can clearly demonstrate it can deliver is more than just damage limitation. Promising a little, but accurately, will be a positive vote winner.

Europe

These voters see a clear connection between our membership of the European Union and our economic viability. They may be decidedly unenthusiastic about Brussels or Britain giving up further sovereignty to the Union but, in line

with Labour's position, they think it would be very risky for Britain to be left out of Europe's 'first division'.

Trust

Perhaps still more important at a time when voters are deeply sceptical about politicians, they need to feel that they can trust Labour. Here, John Smith has left the party a priceless legacy. It is clear, judging from both the polls and from our own reserach, that shortly before his death he had personally made a decisive breakthrough with the electorate. They believed him to be unlike most politicians – honest and trustworthy. The glowing tributes, even from political opponents, which followed his death added to that impression. We owe it John Smith's memory – he focused everything on the need for a Labour government – to profit from his example.

Labour must speak in clear and simple language. It must avoid rash promises. It must offer a realistic vision of the future. It must set standards in its own behaviour of mutual toleration and respect. It must show that it remains united and can stand up to pressure, even from its friends. It must offer stability for the present and credible hope for the future.

5 Summary

The message of this year's Fabian survey of swing voters in key South East and Midlands marginals is that Labour is on probation.

After the experience of the last two years, the Tories are deeply distrusted. Attracted by Labour's new leader and impressed by the evidence that it is changing, they are prepared to look afresh at the Labour Party. But such is their distrust of the political class that they remain sceptical. There is still work to do before Labour can be sure of their support.

The main priorities for these voters, whose expectations are much lower than they were two years ago, are security for themselves and a better future for their children. In 1994 they are well aware of the limitations of Thatcherite individualism and more favourably disposed to social values. They are likely therefore to be more receptive to the approach put forward by Tony Blair which emphasises that individuals need the support of a strong community and public services.

To be credible, the basic core of Labour's ideas – community, fairness and opportunity – has to be clearly linked to a few key policies such as crime, education, employment and health. Labour has also to demonstrate its economic competence by continuing to emphasise the need to control public spending and to ensure value for money. The new Labour leadership needs to show that it is building on the reforms introduced by Neil Kinnock and John Smith. A revision of Clause Four would provide a symbol that the Labour Party has really changed and is self confident enough to put forward a vision of the future.

Above all, at a time when voters are deeply sceptical about politicians, the Labour Party must earn their trust.

Recent Fabian Publications

Infertility, feminism and the new technologies. *Sally Keeble.* Pamphlet No 566. £3.50 July 1994. Argues that the traditional feminist stance against the reproductive technologies is misguided and that such treatments should be more widely available on the NHS.

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All for one: the future of the unions. *Philip Bassett and Alan Cave.* Pamphlet No. 559. £3.50 August 1993. Argues that unions must emphasise the individual rather than the collective if they are to survive.

Private Pensions for All: squaring the circle. *Frank Field and Matthew Owen.* Discussion Paper No 16. £10. July 1993. Proposes universal, compulsory private pensions.

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Any Southern Comfort?

In 1992 and 1993 the Fabian Society published research into floating voters' attitudes in the South of England. The results were depressing for the Labour Party, as these crucial 'swing' voters felt Labour to be alien to almost all they had come to believe in.

This pamphlet, based on similar research in the South and – for the first time – the Midlands, presents a more encouraging picture. The voters feel angry at and let down by the Tories and, although Labour is still on probation, they are attracted by Tony Blair and impressed by the evidence that the party is changing. For the first time, they have started to find positive things to say about Labour.

As well as presenting the findings of the research, the authors make a number of recommendations as to how the Labour Party can turn this promising start into fully fledged support. These include:

- Revising 'Clause IV' to provide a credible vision of the future
- Linking 'core' values to key policies such as crime, education, employment and health
- Emphasising control of public spending and value for money
- Earning trust by promising only what is clearly deliverable.

£3.50

The Fabian Society brings together those who wish to relate democratic socialism to practical plans for building a better society in a changing world. It is affiliated to the Labour Party, and anyone who is eligible for membership of the Labour Party can join; others may become associate members. For details of Fabian membership, publications and activities, write to: Simon Crine, General Secretary, Fabian Society, 11 Dartmouth St, London SW1H 9BN.