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6 July 1994

Dear Tony

Last night I posted my ballot paper - one constituency member's votes, to be lost among the millions. Now I am writing to you, my first choice from a sadly limited selection of candidates, because I believe that your campaign for the leadership and for the next, oh-so-distant general election leaves a great deal to be desired.

I hope you will find time at least to scan this letter, which encapsulates a lot of hard thinking on my part and expresses ideas which must be shared by many people. If not, perhaps a colleague might trawl through it and pass on anything useful to you.

You are taking on a terrifying responsibility. I hope you know what you're doing. If you win the leadership election and then fail to win the general election you will be guilty of a gross act of betrayal against the whole population of this country. The decline into which fifteen years of Tory meddling and bungling has tipped our nation may already be irreversible. If they get another five years...well, it just doesn't bear thinking about. Frankly, I'd vote for Atilla the Hun if I thought he had the best chance of ousting them!

So what makes me write to you? First and foremost, your apparent lack of passion. The rational analysis which characterises your political style is fine - as far as it goes. But please give us some righteous anger too. God knows there's plenty to be angry about!

Thatcher's committed assault on the fabric of British society did immense damage, but at least it did something which stirred our anger. Major's mindless, soulless perpetuation of the community without society (or society without community) which she created is infinitely more dangerous. It breeds apathy and depression rather than anger and determination - and alienation rather than solidarity in that section of our population which is suffering most.

I'm a good example. Once a Labour activist who fell 26 votes short of winning a District Council seat in the '70s. Once an NUT activist who gave up holidays to attend conferences and many hours to organise colleagues. Once an enthusiastic advisory teacher who would work late into the night creating resources, preparing courses, producing publications. Now? Fed up, demoralised and demotivated. I pay my party and union dues, even donate some extra. I buy raffle tickets. But I don't leaflet or canvass. I more than fulfil the basic requirements of my job, but more out of habit and conscience than from enthusiasm. A few days after my 50th birthday I tried and failed to get early retirement. Now I plod on from one holiday to the next, gradually losing my self-respect. It has taken a leadership election at a time of real political crisis to get my fingers on the keyboard now.

That's what Thatcher, Major and the failure of the Labour Party to get rid of them have done to me - and I'm one of the lucky ones. I can still pick up over £25,000 a year and can look forward to a decent pension - so decent that I can actually afford to think about retiring early. Think what they've done to those who are less lucky.

I meet an awful lot of good teachers in my job. Like me, most of them are queuing up to get out. I have a colleague of 45 whose constant refrain is 'Christ! I wish I was 50 like you!' Young, talented people who just want to pack it in and live out their lives in peace.

Radical politicians have a sacred duty to expose this government for what it is and for what it has done, to foment genuine anger in the population so as to ensure not only that the Major government is totally rejected at the next general election but that never again is such a government elected.

Every kneejerk statement and response from every complacent minister must be countered with a rapid riposte in which poor reasoning is dissected mercilessly, with sufficient rigour to convince the intelligentsia and with sufficient clarity and anger to communicate effectively to the population at large. We must not keep letting them get away with lies and unsupported assertions, and with phrases like 'market testing', which mean nothing of the kind. Maybe there should be a thinktank devoted purely to formulating responses for the Labour front-bench.

It really is time to take the gloves off. The Tory front bench is not occupied by honourable and right honourable ladies and gentlemen. What was once a great and honourable party, even if it did not share our values, was long-ago hijacked by a gang of spivs and liars who will do anything to hang onto power despite the fact that they have no political vision and therefore no real idea what to do with their power.

They hold the rest of the population in total contempt: we must ensure that the feeling becomes mutual!

We know from experience that the new Conservatives keep their biggest and nastiest lies for general election campaigns. We must ensure that by the time they start trotting them out nobody believes a word they say.

You probably have a better chance than any previous Labour leader of getting the opposition a fair hearing in the media. You must exploit that opportunity to the full with skill, intelligence and passion.

Pragmatic - even tough - policies are essential, but they must be built on a firm foundation of conviction about the sort of society we want - and the sort we don't want and will not tolerate. That must be what distinguishes Labour policies from Conservative ones - the why at least as much as the what.

Crime must be the major concern for the vast majority of our people. As a party, we should be publicly furious that our communities have been allowed to decline as they have. We should be howling mad at the appalling fact that the disaffected youngsters in the most deprived areas don't even take their resentment out on those more fortunate: they have so lost any sense of community that they prey on the old and weak in their own miserable areas - I was going to say 'neighbourhoods', but that's hardly the word, is it?

Tough on crime and on the causes of crime, you have said. A neat phrase which exactly encapsulates my own view (as one who has taught difficult teenage boys in a residential special school). But let's have some meat on the rather meagre bones of

that statement. What are you going to do to deter those who can be deterred, to protect us from those who can't, to move at least some members of the second group into the first and to convince both groups that you're building a society of which they can be proud to be members? The balance between short-term repairs and long-term reconstruction - between effective behaviour-modification and the generation of some sort of spiritual as well as economic revival - is vital. Fail in this and, once again, you will stand convicted of failing the nation in a time of great need. (Unlike you, by the way, I write about spiritual revival as a committed atheist. I don't think organised Christianity or any other corporate religion has much to offer now, though I'm not one of these evangelical secularists who would deny the church a rôle.)

The economy is probably the area in which you have the least room for manoeuvre. Because of real external pressures, what you actually do in this area will probably be more like what the Tories do than in any other, so you need to be very clear about why you're doing them. A dynamic market economy, yes - but as a means rather than an end, and for the benefit of all rather than as a casino for the few. Market forces where they work best, as the engine of wealth-creation, but social forces to ensure that the fruits of that wealth-creation benefit everyone in society.

No, I'm not trying to teach my grandmother to suck eggs. The substance is your business - it's the presentation that concerns me because I don't think you've got it right yet.

The Tories have made the free market into a sacred cow of the worst kind. They have conducted a bizarre and perverted moral crusade to ensure that it - and only it - is the driving and regulating force in every area of human activity. In my own area of education it has done immense damage, as it has in the health service. We must expose the gross lie that this obsession with the market is based on a pragmatic analysis. It is not. Extreme capitalism is just as mindless, just as indefensible - and just as dangerous - as extreme socialism. The belief that there can be a system which will solve all our problems exposes the intellectual poverty of the present Tory leadership as it did that of the old-guard communists in Eastern Europe.

We need a restructured economy in which private enterprise and public service work in partnership, not in opposition, each doing what it does most effectively and efficiently. This needs to be based on rational analysis, not mindless dogma. We need to accept that manufactured goods and services are equally valuable commodities, and that some services are best provided in a commercial market while others can be delivered most effectively in a political market.

There's a thought to toy with! What is the ultimate difference between these two: on the one hand, a commercial deliverer of services, who charges for each specific chunk of service and stands or falls on the value-for-money he or she offers; and, on the other, a government or council which offers what is, in effect, a parcel of subscription services for a single regular fee - and stands or falls in just the same way, but politically rather than commercially? They're both subject to market forces.

The important difference, of course, is that the political market can deliver the right services to the right people at the right price, thanks to progressive taxation. From each according to his ability... But those in charge must still convince enough of their voters that they are offering the best deal if they are to survive. The Tory lies which justify the crude privatisation and commercialisation of public services again reveal the shallowness of modern Conservative thought.

It is the responsibility of government to ensure that we have a sound infrastructure of transport and energy which supports wealth-creation without penalising the ordinary citizen. You only have to drive - or attempt to drive - along any major British motorway to see just how disgracefully this government has failed the nation in this respect. Travelling in Britain is becoming a miserable experience for the ordinary citizen. Transporting goods must be a wasteful nightmare for industry.

Employers and workers need one another, so let's promote a relationship of mutual respect in which money doesn't buy the right to exploit, bully and abuse - a dignified business relationship between those with capital to invest and those with strength, skill or expertise to sell. A contract of employment should be no different from a contract between a supplier and a customer, with incentives and penalties on both sides.

I'm sick of being lied to about Europe. For God's sake, can't Labour even manage to tell the British public what 'subsidiarity' really means? It's not a squalid mechanism for keeping power in the nation-state rather than in Brussels. No, it's a principle which should be sacred to all honest politicians: all political power - including especially the power to raise taxes and spend the resulting revenue - should be devolved to the most local level at which it can be exercised effectively. That emphatically does not mean giving the power to the parents of children in an infant school (whose children will be there for just three years) to take that school, once and for all, out of the control of the elected local council and to hand it over to yet another unelected quango! Nor does it mean rate/charge/tax-capping by central government - a travesty of local democracy if ever there was one!

Can't we give them an honest definition of 'federal', either? Look at the USA - a confederation of largely self-governing states, each with a very individual character, which agree to work together in some areas. Sure - a truly federal Europe would take power away from national governments, but it would give most of it to regional and local government and very little to a central European government.

As a national (rather than regional, local or continental) politician, and a prime-minister-in-waiting, would you be willing to pass much of the power of national government inwards to the centre of Europe and outwards to the regions and districts?

Enough. As I said, some concerns from an ordinary, intelligent citizen who has been made miserable by fifteen years of dismal Conservative government. Maybe an odd idea or two which you can pick up and develop.

Finally, as one who is fascinated by and loves imitating accents, may I ask how a native Scot, albeit educated in an Edinburgh public school and an English university, ended up sounding very like Bryan Gould? It's certainly preferable to Morningside cowie-English (I am married to a Dundonian!), but couldn't you either let just a trace of real Scots back into the accent or at least lose the spurious notes of refined-antipodean? You never know - the few votes gained might be the ones that make the difference...

If you have been, thanks for reading this.

Very best wishes -