

Martin Jacques on Labour's prospects

# The Mild Bunch

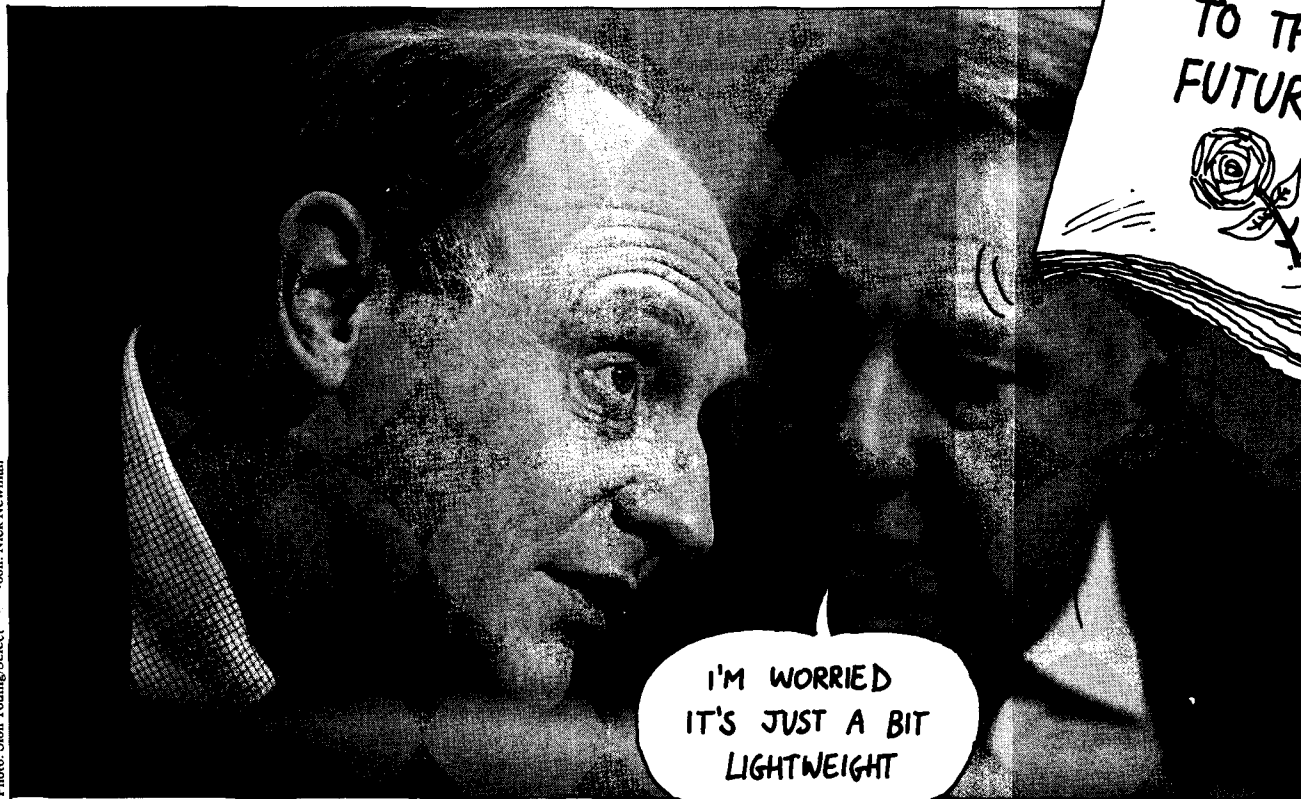


Photo: Stan Touhig/Select. Cartoon: Nick Newman

**D**omestic politics may, for the moment, have been somewhat overshadowed by events in the Gulf, but the party conference season serves as a reminder that Labour is back with a vengeance. The miserable days of the early 80s when Labour was divided, appeared obsolescent and was under desperate pressure from the Alliance now seem like a bad memory.

Much of the credit for this transformation must go to Neil Kinnock. The turnaround has been remarkable. A new sense of unity and purpose has been forged. The party is in the midst of historic constitutional changes; a new team of competent leaders occupies Labour's front bench; and policies which were both sacred and a liability have been ditched. The policy review shows that Labour has begun to think anew and flex intellectual muscles which have for long been inactive, while nobody can doubt that Labour has learned the art of public relations.

Labour, in short, is back in business. For many months now it has led the Conservatives in the opinion polls. Although victory in the next election represents a formidable challenge, it is by no means inconceivable. Who could have said that in 1987? Yet the transformation in Labour, remarkable as it is, leaves something to be desired. It may be clear what Labour is not, but it is far from clear what Labour actually is. The policy review was not simply an exercise in burying unpopular commitments, but the new too often remains vague and woolly.

Of course, Labour's task is not easy. The whole of the European Left is obliged to rethink much of what not so long ago it took for granted. No one expects Labour to solve problems which will take years to answer. A new social-democratic vision which can substitute for that of 1945 remains as elusive as ever. But short of that, Labour must have something distinctive to offer. Saying as little as possible while relying on the Tories to cock things up is not a sufficient recipe for victory.

Labour under Kinnock has demonstrated enormous political courage in its internal affairs. But when it comes to the wider political argument it remains timid in the extreme. It has finally begun to move along the European road. Yet its europeanism remains half-baked and too often opportunist. It has yet to take the final plunge and say openly, as Edward Heath has long said, that curtailing Britain's sovereignty in the cause of European union is not only inevitable but also desirable.

Or take Labour's response to the end of the cold war, which has been thoroughly uninspiring. Here is one of the great moments of the century and yet Labour has had virtually nothing to say except the obvious. Its contribution to a pretty puny national debate has been almost non-existent. Yet the implications for Britain's foreign and defence policy are enormous. One can understand Labour's reticence on matters to do with defence, given its experience in the last two elections, but silence will get nowhere, not least because it suggests a lack of thought.

These are but two symptoms of a wider malaise. Labour needs to bite the intellectual bullet. The policy review was a good idea. But it was a beginning not an end. Moreover, the latest version, published in the early summer, marks a significant retreat on that of a year ago. Blandness and safety have replaced enquiry and exploration.

If Labour is to win the next election it cannot rely on a nice image and a feeling that 12 or 13 years of Tory government are enough. It has to stand for something. What is more, unless Labour manages to come up with a distinctive agenda of its own, one cannot entertain very high hopes for what a Labour government might be like in practice. Even if it succeeds in climbing the greasy pole to power with a friendly smile, sharp public relations, good anti-Tory rhetoric and the apposite slogan, that will count for little once in office. ●

Bea Campbell explores policing in the 90s

## A Fair Cop

John Newing is chief constable of the Derbyshire constabulary

**The police everywhere are the object of enormous criticism and public dissatisfaction.**

Public satisfaction with all services has deteriorated, maybe because people are more questioning, more aware of their rights.

**So what do you feel as a chief constable about what kind of room for manoeuvre you have about exactly those issues that concern the public now? For instance, how would you have dealt with a corrupt unit in your constabulary or force? Your colleague in the West Midlands couldn't sack anybody, so he had to disband the unit. That's a ridiculous situation, isn't it?**

You need evidence first, like every thing else, if you have a suspicion that people are corrupt then you need to investigate it.

**Who should investigate it?**

Now you're really getting to the crunch! The Police Federation would now prefer to see an independent unit. But I am not sure that it would necessarily be any more effective. You have to try to instil a wider loyalty than to the service itself, which means you have got to make them see the general public in a different light.

**And how do they see them at the moment?**

There are elements within the police force that see the public as the problem not the customer. We are starting to view ourselves as much more of a service than a force. Force is part of the service, providing it is done properly, lawfully. We now need another Royal Commission or something equivalent to determine what it is society wants its police service to deliver. Crime is about society; it is not about policing.

**What would your view be of the law and order lobby, whose response to their fear of crime is to want to reinforce you lot, get you back on the streets?**

What they are looking for is not the exercise of more force but reassurance. They would like to see more bobbies on foot or on bicycles where they can get at them. It might reduce public nuisance, and it is very often the rowdy youngsters on the street going home late at night that troubles people.

**Is that telling us something about what people's ordinary experience is? The fear of going out at night, for instance. For years and years people mocked women's fear in**

**particular, but it is serious if people's freedom of movement is curtailed.**

It is the quality of life that should concern us. That's what the police service should be addressing. We can not have a society where we have a police officer on every corner of every street. That would be oppressive.

**Police state?**

It would be like an occupying army. Eventually people have to rule themselves. And that is why we have seen this quest to get people more involved in crime prevention, why you have Neighbourhood Watch.

**Does any of that stuff work?**

I have yet to see any real evidence that it has longterm value, because crime continues to rise.

**So what is producing the rise in crime?**

I wish I knew. You could say that if there is an increase in drinking then you get an increase in crime, but that begs a question, because drinking is usually symptomatic of something. Another possible factor could be that people are being pushed towards wanting things.

**We have lived through a decade in which the gaps between some people's economic resources and other people's resources has increased.**

You have to have a catalyst to make that a factor in crime, how else do you explain the many people who are not well off, who are law-abiding and all the people who *are* well off, who are criminally inclined?

**What kind of crime do you think we need to be prioritising?**

I suspect the police professional view will be murder, serious sexual crimes and rape, buggery, indecency with kids.

**Let's take sexual abuse. How much police time are we prepared to devote to an investigation that may never lead to a prosecution, because as we know, sexual abuse leads to very few prosecutions? What kind of budgetary pressure is there on somebody like you to withdraw resources from something you might think was very important, but is going to consume a lot of policing time?**

We will find the resources, at the expense of something else, because they have a high priority. There will come a time in any investigation when you ask the question: are we going to get a result?

**And what is a result?**

Identifying the person responsible, acquiring the evidence to put that person

before a court.

**So a prosecution is the result.**

No. Most police officers would say a conviction is a result.

**What's your view of the notion about, for instance, sex offenders, that punishment doesn't do anything to reconstruct their relationship to the victims?**

Punishment generally has no rehabilitating effect on offenders at all.

**But if you are into crime prevention then rehabilitation is important.**

We should look to different ways of dealing with people. We lock too many people up now.

**We live in a punishment culture.**

Yes. And yet we are supposed to be a Christian society, and Christianity is based upon forgiveness.

**Are you a Christian?**

Practising, no. Emotionally, I like to think so.

**There have been a number of very serious cases that have discredited the police, like the Guildford Four. What do you think about that case, about the length of time it has taken to resolve itself?**

They were there for a long time, but isn't it inevitable in a case like this that the government, the institutions concerned, are going to be reluctant to admit any mistakes? The only good thing in this case is that capital punishment has been abolished.

**But what has really given the police a bad name has been active bad behaviour rather than slobby bad behaviour. How would you get rid of the baddies?**

There are strong arguments in favour of saying that constructive dismissal should be on the basis of most other professions, where you dismiss a person on the balance of probability. But if you do that, it is even more important that an independent element be involved.

**Is it going to happen?**

Constructive dismissal for inefficiency will take place in due course. The change to balance of probability is more doubtful.

**Can it work without it?**

Not in my view.

**You have just emerged from the Met. It's an overwhelmingly masculine force and, if last year's figures are anything to go by, whiter than ever. Forty-two black recruits but 44 black people resigning. This is very**