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New Labour's plans to teach kids "traditional" values

New Labour, New Scoundrels

Anarcho

May 18, 2006

Samuel Johnson is rightly famed for saying that "*patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel.*" As with the Tories before them, New Labour is doing its best to prove him right.

Given the utter disaster of Major's "Back to Basics" nonsense in the 1990s, you would think that New Labour would have more sense to repeat the same mistake. But, as Blair proves everyday, slavishly following Thatcherism comes naturally to him, even its mistakes.

You can always tell when a government is on its last legs: it starts going on about "traditional values." It makes sense though. A regime which has lost the respect of the people will complain that people no longer respect "traditional values" (i.e. authority). Rather than adjust their activities to gain respect, politicians simply blame the people they claim to represent and scold them for thinking for themselves.

To solve the problem of the population respecting their intelligence more than their politicians, New Labour is urging that children be taught "traditional British values" in school. This

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is, it is claimed, part of an attempt to challenge “extremism” and promote a more cohesive society.

The latter part is understandable as the market tends to break up society, to weaken the social bonds and interpersonal empathy in favour seeing others as things, as means to an end. Given that the market utterly destroys “traditional” values and society, it always seems contradictory for conservatives to advocate it. Look at Thatcherism, which transformed British society and, in turn, provoked the “back to basics” campaign. New Labour is in the same predicament. On the one hand, an utterly ideological support for the market and, on the other, a hypocritical lament about its social impact (and the rush to increase state power to combat it).

New Labour’s proposals are for all 11 to 16-year-olds to learn about free speech and democracy in the UK, as well as the contribution made by different communities. The irony of discussing free speech and democracy in an institution where neither exists is not mentioned. But what can you expect, reality will be the last thing this proposal will reflect.

The aim is to see how best “core British values” can be incorporated into the school timetable. The arrogance is staggering. To suggest that there are uniform values for the 60 million inhabitants of a nation as diverse as Britain is as ridiculous as implying that these values set us apart from other people and nations. As such, “British” values do not exist as “Britain” does not exist in any meaningful way except as a state. We are a diverse people, many of whom (like most of my fellow Scots) do not even consider themselves “British.” Moreover “we” are divided by class and hierarchy. What is considered a “value” by, say, a trade union member will not be shared by her boss nor will the sexist have the same set of “values” as a feminist.

That specific peoples should be free to fully develop their own cultural capacities is something anarchists obviously support. The world would be a drab place indeed if the magnificent mosaic of different cultures is replaced by the largely ho-

mogenised world created by modern capitalism and the state. Yet “official” attempts to define “core values” is doomed to failure precisely because it is self-contradictory. As Rudolf Rocker put it in “**Nationalism and Culture**”, the “*nation is not the cause, but the result of the state. It is the state that creates the nation, not the nation the state.*”

Every state is an artificial mechanism imposed upon society by some ruling elite in order to defend and make secure their interests within society. Nationalism was created to reinforce the state by providing it with the loyalty of a people of shared linguistic, ethnic, and cultural affinities. And if these shared affinities do not exist, the state will create them by centralising education in its own hands, imposing an “official” language and attempting to crush cultural differences from the people’s within its borders. Hence the current attempt to define “traditional British values,” to stop actual people living in Britain developing their own values themselves.

That these official “values” apparently include the tradition of free speech and the view that Britain was founded on freedom and democracy should present New Labour with an interesting challenge. Britain dates back to 1707 (with the merging of the Scottish and English Parliaments) or, at best, 1606 (with the union of the crowns under James VI). By no stretch of the imagination can the resulting state be said to have rested on freedom or democracy. Indeed, attempts to expand freedom and introduce democracy were resisted (often violently) by the ruling class.

So freedom and democracy are all very recent aspects of “British” life. Universal suffrage dates back to 1928, for example. All increases in liberty were fought tooth and nail by the ruling elite. As such, they are hardly British “traditional values,” given that they did not exist for most of Britain’s existence. Nor are they particularly “British” as freedom and democracy have been fought for across the globe, with varying degrees of success. Unsurprisingly, the British state has a long career of

oppressing democracy and liberty at home and abroad (and will that grand British tradition of invading other people's countries make the list?)

According to Education minister Bill Rammell *"there is a need for a debate and the essential values already taught in citizenship classes, like freedom, fairness, civil responsibilities, democracy are there."* What utter, utter rubbish. "Fairness"? In a country where inequality in wealth and power has been rising for decades? "Freedom"? In an economy where most people are wage slaves and the "management's right to manage" (i.e. "the workers duty to obey") has become the basis for economic life? "Democracy" when the people are asked to vote every five years for a bunch of muppets who will ignore your wishes and protests (not to mention their own manifestos) to please big business and US imperialism? "Civil responsibility" when New Labour have been systematically undermining civil liberties and enhancing police and state powers? What a joke!

But "civil responsibility" gives the game away. Given that freedom means not only questioning authority, but resisting it, we can be sure that "liberty" will be twisted to justify authority (aka the "respect" agenda). The aim of these proposals is to indoctrinate young people into believing that liberty means doing what your superiors tell you, that your "duty" is not to question authority but to follow it: *"Yes, you have liberty but your 'civil responsibility' is not to exercise it! So get back to work."*

Every society is marked by hierarchies of wealth, power, class, sex and race, including the UK. Progress has been made in challenging and changing "traditional" values, in breaking down "traditional" hierarchies in the name of freedom and equality. It is these communities and people, those who have rejected the ruling class and its "traditional" values wholeheartedly, who have been the real champions of liberty and democracy in this country (and across the world). Will they and their values be discussed or will the myth that we

are (and have always been) one happy family prevail? Not too difficult to answer as mentioning these people and their struggles would explode the myth that freedom and democracy are "traditional British values."

It is never a good idea to invoke the times when we knew who we had to look up to and who to sneer down at. That New Labour invokes the mythical past to bolster its authority today shows how reactionary that whole agenda is. As if we needed any more proof...