

Greasy Pole: Hard work, decency and politicians



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Are you decent? Are you hard-working? Do you always play by the rules? If you can tick the "Yes" box in answer to these questions you should be aware that our politicians have it in mind to look after you. Both Blair and Howard are agreed that you are a specially deserving case. In a recent speech Michael Howard told us that the Britain he believes in "will give hard-working families the support they deserve.

Those people who play by the rules, pay their taxes, respect others..."and he complained in the Tory election manifesto that "instead of rewarding families who do the right thing, work hard and pay their taxes, Mr. Blair's government takes them for granted."

This in spite of the fact that Blair has already told the 2004 Labour conference that his government planned to change Britain for better, into a country "where hard working families who play by the rules are not going to see their opportunities blighted by those who don't."

And he followed this up in Labour's manifesto, which he said was "a plan to improve the lives of hard-working families...(and) building communities strong and safe for those who play by the rules." But plans to celebrate would be premature. From past experience any promise by a politician to improve your prospects needs to be received warily.

Abbey Bank

When Blair and Howard talk about their ambitions to improve the lot of hard working families they are overlooking the people - there are thousands of them - whose dearest wish is to work hard for an employer but who are denied this on the grounds of profitability. That was the case with MG Rover and with a more recent, less publicised, example of the Abbey Bank. This bank was once the Abbey National Building Society, whose business was locking workers into a lifetime of debt in order to have somewhere to live. They advertised themselves with a catchy jingle about getting the habit for being an Abbey debtor, a slogan about Abbey making life simpler and a comforting logo of a cheery family striding confidently into the future protected by an umbrella in the form of the roof of a house. That was when working for a building society gave someone a job for life, which encouraged them to work that bit harder for their employer.

Then the Abbey National became a bank, which plunged them into a savagely competitive industry where they found it hard to survive, let alone prosper. The hoped-for remedy was to be taken over by the Spanish bank Santander, who took a more robust view of the processes of employment and the reasons for people working for them - and presumably of the complacent delusions fostered by that advertising jingle and the company logo.

A principal concern for Santander was their new acquisition's cost/income ratio, which persuaded them that there had to be some economies. These involved getting rid of a few thousand employees,

which must have dissolved a lot of ideas about the bank being a kind of charity. Originally Santander intended to cut about 3,000 jobs but recently their boss, Francisco Gomez-Roldan, announced that another 1,000 would have to go, which may not be the end of the redundancies. The finance services union Amicus angrily described the sacking as "an example of worst practice" but of course right - the right of an employer in the class relationships of capitalism - was on Santander's side. Gomez-Roldan was unmoved. "We want to be a strong competitor" he argued, "We have to manage the cost/income ratio". So a few thousand hard working people, who would like to be allowed to continue in that way, are joining the dole queues.

Meanwhile, Santanders' profits rose by 38 percent, to £820 million, in the first quarter of this year. And that logo? It too has been made redundant and is being replaced with another - of red flames - which will soon be on all the country's High Streets.

Deception

Decency is another human characteristic which Blair and Howard promise to see appropriately rewarded. How do they match up in this? Howard was one of the more prominent figures in the Tory governments of the 1980s and 1990s and during that time he did not amass a reputation for fastidious devotion to the truth. After the defeat of the Major government in 1997 he languished in comparative obscurity until the final months of Iain Duncan Smith's disastrous leadership. As desperate Tory MPs began to manoeuvre to get rid of Duncan Smith, Howard was asked whether he would be willing to stand for the leadership. His reply was an emphatic "no," saying that he could not imagine any circumstances, even if Duncan Smith resigned, in which he would be a candidate. Soon after that Howard was engaged in a conspiracy with other Tory leaders to nominate him and, circumventing the rule which laid down that the leader must be elected by the party membership, ensure that he got the job because he was the only candidate. This gave the Tories in Parliament the leader they wanted and avoided another Duncan Smith experience but it was an example of dishonest political manipulation.

Lies and inconsistency were an important issue in the last election, largely centred on Tony Blair and his deceptions over Iraq, tuition fees and the like. At a post-election meeting of Labour MPs Glenda Jackson recounted a common experience: "I was told on the doorstep time and again that they cannot vote for me while Tony Blair remains leader". But this kind of attack on the leadership concealed the fact that among the doubters in the Labour Party there was considerable inconsistency, not to say deceit. Let us take the example of Tony Benn, who for a long time has claimed to be the passionate, undying defender of true Labour Party values. Last December he was, as expected of him, complaining that the Iraq war was based on "a blatant lie about Saddam's possession of WMD" and he described the war as "deeply immoral and unwinnable". Again as expected of him, he has consistently attacked Labour's "shift, by stealth, towards privatisation in health, housing and education". These doubts should be enough to persuade anyone to leave the party and go into opposition against it.

But when the election came Benn proved how adaptable his principles are, by telephoning wavering Labour voters to forgive and forget and get down to the polling station and vote for another period of Blair government, with its wars, its privatisation, its lies. "I am supporting Labour candidates up and down the country" was how he airily put it.

Coercion

In February 2002 Transport Secretary Stephen Byers had to apologise for telling a lie on TV about his responsibility for sacking his press chief Martin Sixsmith. Byers' indefensible deception was justified by the then Education Secretary Estelle Morris by a peculiar, but convenient to Blair's Labour Party, definition of a lie:

"It (Byers' lie) wasn't an attempt to deceive - he couldn't possibly have thought that people wouldn't have known...What I call a lie is when you say something to somebody and hope to get away with it because they won't find you out."

That feeble and transparent attempt at propping up the unsupportable was all the more remarkable because of Morris' reputation as an unusually honest politician, the woman who later resigned from

her Cabinet job admitting that "I just don't think I am as good at it as I was at my last job" and who did not stand at the last election because she could not endure the high profile media scrutiny. In that sense she was an exceptional presence in the political jungle but in another - her readiness to excuse and encourage blatant deception - she was completely typical.

The "hard work" and "decency" we are supposed to conform to and the "rules" we are riven to keep are fashioned by the needs of this class society in which privilege exists by virtue of minority ownership of the means of life. That system of property rights is supported by its "rules" - a huge complex of coercive laws and punishment - which defines concepts such as "hard work" and "decency". Political leaders like Blair and Howard work to justify that coercion and to encourage the working class - the voters - to acquiesce in its continuation. But they could not do that through any clear and consistent statement of reality; to justify the capitalist system relies on a repetition of false arguments. So the politicians who manage capitalism impose on the workers their own flexible interpretation of the rules. They need to lie, to evade, to conceal, to manipulate, because they could not do their job, at which they are notably hard-working, in any other way.

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