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Rainforest drawing by Michael Heindorff

Michael Heindorff is one of the artists who has pledged support for the MSF Charter's aim of making protection of the environment a top priority to save the planet from destruction. Join him in signing the charter and be part of...

The beginning of politics

About our cover illustration artist

Michael Heindorff has just been awarded the Royal Academy's Hugh Casson prize for drawing. More of his drawings can be viewed in the 21st Century Art (Featured Artists) section at www.socialistfuture.org.uk

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The BEGINNING of politics

THE OUTCOME OF THE 2001 GENERAL ELECTION MARKS AN HISTORICAL TURNING POINT IN BRITAIN. NEW LABOUR'S CRUSHING MAJORITY IS ALMOST SECONDARY TO THE FACT THAT 16 MILLION PEOPLE CHOSE NOT TO VOTE. THIS UNPARALLELED ABSTENTION IS A SURE SIGN THAT THE CURTAIN IS CLOSING ON A LONG CHAPTER IN BRITISH SOCIAL HISTORY, WHEN ELECTING GOVERNMENTS MEANT SOMETHING TO THE MAJORITY. BY *PAUL FELDMAN*, THE EDITOR

THE SENSE THAT we are entering the unknown politically in Britain, and in many other countries too, is grasped by liberal commentators who fear that the disdain for parliamentary politics will usher in something much more unpredictable and unstable.

For many commentators, the record low turn-out conjures up a nightmare scenario of the "End of Politics", by which they mean that voters have turned their back on parliament. This is a frightening prospect not only to the careers of political writers but more seriously because a turn away from the ballot box undermines the legitimacy of the political system itself.

Legitimacy is essential for a system that claims to rule on behalf of the majority. Without it, the institutions of the state lose their authority. This is what has already happened to the monarchy, the police and the judicial system, for example. When nearly 42% of the population, for a whole variety of reasons, boycotts a general election, this loss of legitimacy reaches into the parliamentary system of government itself.

Capitalism rules not through force but by convincing the majority that there is no alternative. This ideological grip has always depended on parties like Labour to deliver this message to the working class. But a turn-out of 59.1% meant that only one in four voters backed New Labour, many of them reluctantly, judging by what many have recorded. No government has secured office with the active support of so few voters since the first (minority) Labour government gained office in 1924. Try as hard as they can, New Labour ministers convince no one when they claim they have mandate from the electorate.

As John Curtice, deputy director, ESRC Centre for Research into Elections and Social Trends, noted: "Never before has a party had so much command over the House of Commons, yet so little over the electorate. That appears to be the stark contrast that now faces British politics over the next four or five years." (*The Independent* June 9). Despite the landslide in terms of seats won, Curtice added:

"If we take a look at the votes, we can immediately see the fragility of the popular mandate Labour has secured. Only in October 1974 was a post-war majority government elected with a lower share than the 42% of the vote Labour won on Thursday. Its lead over the Tories is less than that secured by Margaret Thatcher over Labour in both 1983 and 1987. And then there was the astonishing low turn-out, at 59%, lower even than any one dared to predict."

The Blair project to "connect" with people has clearly failed. New Labour won in 1997 largely on an anti-Tory vote. Four years later, with the Tories no threat, there was little to vote for in a positive way. Two thirds of young people did not vote; in many seats, more than half of the working class vote stayed at home. New Labour won, in fact, with the votes of the middle class, many of them former traditional Tory supporters. Meanwhile, in areas like Finchley in north London, the middle class who once voted for Margaret Thatcher turned

a marginal seat into a safe one for New Labour. Says Curtice: "Labour is now more likely to be regarded as a middle-class party than a working-class one. According to the ICM/BBC poll, just 57% think that the Labour Party looks closely after the interests of working class people, while 68% believe it looks after the interests of middle class people. In 1987 the equivalent figures were 89% and 58%."

He added: "The ICM/BBC poll confirms there is widespread antipathy towards greater private-sector involvement in the NHS and schools. Just 30% would like to see more private sector companies run schools, while only 26% would like commercial companies to run NHS hospitals. Reforming the public services may have been Mr Blair's new big idea in this election, but his campaign evidently failed to persuade voters."

Curtice's observations verify what many have understood for some time – that New Labour is not simply a right-wing version of the party that was founded in 1900. Under Tony Blair and his supporters, New Labour was long ago transformed into a managing agency for the powerful transnational corporations that dominate life in every country, rich and poor.

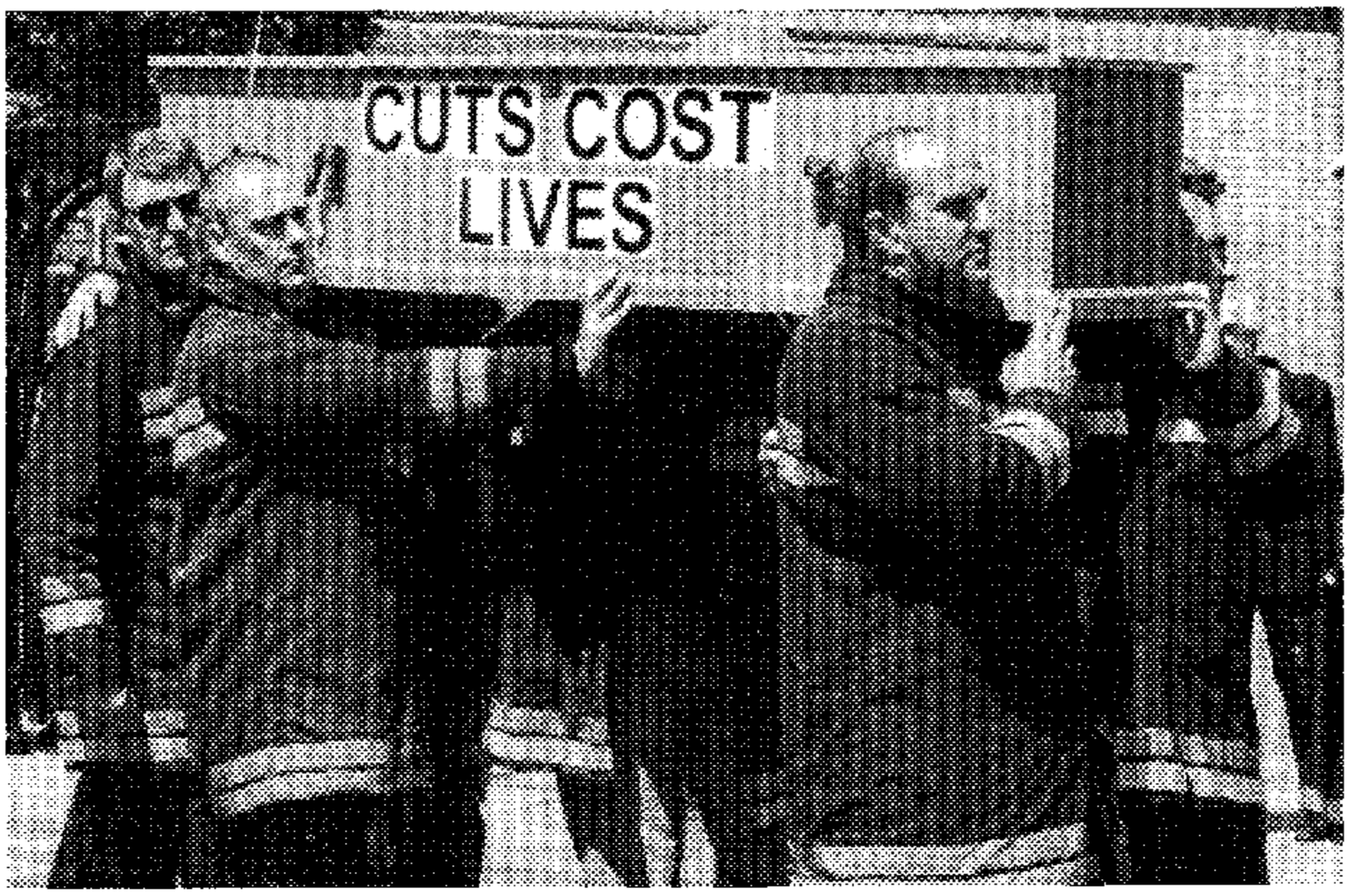
The Blairites believe as an article of faith that the global market is all powerful and that the best governments can do is to make sure the big companies have the conditions to thrive in. New Labour rejects the fact that society is divided into economic classes, or that governments are there to reform society and to ensure that the working population is not totally at the mercy of corporate interests. Quite the opposite, in fact. They believe that if global capitalism prospers, the wealth will somehow trickle down to the working population and then to the rest of society. Blairism puts Thatcherism in the shade.

Little wonder, therefore, that there was absolutely no enthusiasm for a New Labour manifesto that actually promised to open up public services to private business interests. Even the pussy-cat trade union leaders who sat on their hands for four years have started to challenge the government – at least in words.

New Labour is, therefore, a creature of the globalisation process, whereby the possibilities of reforming capitalism have passed over into a new agenda – attracting investment into your own country by holding down living standards, making it easy to sack workers and forcing people to take low-paid jobs. So when an opinion poll during the election showed that 67% of the population now believes that big international companies have more influence in their daily lives than do their own governments, no one voiced surprise.

When Motorola announced it was closing its Scottish plant, Blair couldn't even get the chairman to the phone. And when Marconi announced thousands of sackings, the government simply said that the company was reacting to changing global economic conditions. Not much point in voting for a government that is so helpless.

There is an air of desperation about the commentators, who are paid large amounts to utter less than profound thoughts about what is taking place. Take Noreena Hertz, the new darling of the



Health workers and firefighters are in the forefront of the resistance to New Labour's policies

media, who has written about "the end of politics". After the election, she noted: "People are not voting because they have just stopped believing that politics matters." Instead of coming up with an alternative, however, she pleads for politics to become "a space in which diversity and debate thrive", warning: "Unless it is made to work again for all the people, the people will continue to reject the ballot box and look outside politics to be heard."

This is pure wishful thinking. Firstly, politics has never ever worked "for all the people". The "politics" Hertz talks about is the privilege of a narrow group of people, who seek a "mandate" once every four or five years. Once this group could mediate between the powerful and workers, disguising the real relationships in society. Globalisation has torn that mask away in a swift and dramatic fashion. The institutions of capitalist democracy clearly no longer attract the active population in society. And they also appear as a hindrance to the corporations, who prefer to rule through bodies like the World Trade Organisation and the World Bank.

Even in parliament, there is a realisation that the game is up. In the Commons, Graham Allen, who lost his job in the post-election reshuffle, told an empty House of Commons: "If you start from a low base, it doesn't take many thousands to pose a very serious threat to the stability we have enjoyed in this democracy." Government ruthlessly controls the membership of select committees, which can challenge policy. Legislation sails through without even cursory checks for legality and the Speaker does nothing to protect rights of MPs.

On June 20, *The Independent* asked: "What's wrong with Parliament?" It answered: "Thanks to the diverse misdemeanours of a relatively small number of MPs lumped together in the public mind under the label 'sleaze', the House of Commons has sunk to a depressingly low ebb in public esteem. No wonder there was such a lamentably poor turn-out on 7 June. Nor are the public impressed with the way parliament holds ministers to account." The editorial concluded: "We are not optimistic. For now, and for all the lush pageantry, Parliament remains in peril."

... no wonder the first man through the door of No.10 after the election was Rupert Murdoch, whose right-wing newspapers endorsed New Labour...

Meanwhile, the Blairite contempt for parliament and the old Labour Party develops at speed. The Cabinet Office, which is not a ministry, is becoming an unofficial department of state. It has taken on huge powers over other departments, but is not accountable to parliament. The Downing Street policy unit, which is staffed by party special advisers, is to merge with the prime minister's special office, which is run by civil servants.

This gives Blair a dictatorship at the heart of Whitehall. No wonder the first man through the door of No.10 after the election was Rupert Murdoch, whose right-wing *Sun* newspaper was

joined by the *The Times* in endorsing New Labour. First things first, however. Blair awarded himself a 41% pay rise and increased Cabinet Ministers' salaries by £18,000. No restraint here.

As for the party, Blair simply ignores its constitution. He appointed Charles Clarke as party chairman, breaking the party's own rules which say the national executive committee elects the chair. Soon the remaining powers of the local parties will go and conference will resemble a convention. As New Labour embarks on its programme of carving up public services, withdrawing benefits from people with disabilities and curbing a range of civil liberties, we should not even think of trying to breathe life into the dying dog of parliamentary politics. The end of traditional politics must become the starting point for the beginning of real politics. There is a great opportunity presented by the fact that capitalism is unable to maintain its political hold on growing numbers of people. To develop an alternative to the discredited parliamentary system is **at the same time** a challenge to the power of the transnationals, who have made "politics" their property.

... a new Charter, which puts forward a framework for replacing New Labour and the sham of parliament...

With the aid of governments like New Labour they have neutered the remaining powers of national parliaments at European, national and local level. Even when a new body is created, like the Greater London Authority, it has no real powers. Though the vast majority of Londoners reject privatisation of the Tube, Mayor Ken Livingstone is powerless to prevent the government from imposing this policy on the capital.

Yes, it is the end of politics – the end of that long period of the development of parliamentary democracy, which fostered the illusion that real social progress was possible simply through the ritual of electing MPs every four or five years. The formation of the Labour Party in 1900 resulted from this approach. The trade union movement of the 19th century had eventually decided that the creation of a party to represent the interests of working people was the way forward to achieving social reforms and to redress the balance of class forces. Behind their move was the fact that British imperialism was facing stiff competition from Germany and the United States and was, as a consequence, attacking living standards and trade union rights. The union leaders, who did not reject capitalism, easily convinced themselves that this was the best course. It was, of course, for them far preferable to the alternative – social revolution.

For a century, the labour movement was on the whole convinced that struggling to elect a Labour government made a difference. That has changed. June 2001 was historic for a number of reasons. Three major unions, the FBU, Unison and the RMT – representing firefighters, low-paid public sector workers and railway workers – voted to reconsider their links with Labour, the party they helped to found. Their hostility to the capitalist nature of New Labour was self evident.

The early period of globalisation brought the Labour Party into existence; the modern form, with its transnational corporations operating freely across national borders, provides the conditions for a new movement to emerge. This cannot be a rerun of the experience of reformism and parliament because the development of capitalism itself has undermined this road.

In the final years of the 20th century, globalisation produced a change in world consciousness. There is a growing awareness that there is no mediator between workers and their employers in the form of parliaments, whether in Indonesia, Britain or the United States. This coincides with and is reinforced by the obvious ineffectiveness of national governments. You can't put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Why should we even want to try?

The more astute commentators are anxious about the "apathy" because they know that social pressures are building up and must find an outlet. As attention turns away from parliament, it will emerge in workplaces, schools and colleges, in the streets and in the community.

In Bradford, Oldham, Blackburn and Burnley, a generation of dispossessed youth have already gone beyond "political channels" to defend themselves against the racists and fascists. In city after city around the world, tens of thousands take to the streets to protest against the power of the corporations, the WTO and the World Bank.

The challenge is to go beyond protest at the system and the police who prop it up. All the energy and frustration felt by millions in every country can exhaust itself unless there is a perspective of replacing the old order with a new society based on co-operation, mass democratic control and ownership and human rights. This is a

perspective for today, not for some distant future.

In defending services, we fight to bring down the New Labour government. We do not protest against New Labour, or ask it to tax the rich, or expect any more of it. It is a capitalist government. We treat it as we would the Tories. We ask the unions to break with New Labour. The party they founded is no longer theirs, anyway. They should disaffiliate from New Labour and open the debate about an alternative.

Workers should be encouraged to occupy and take over workplaces facing closure, appealing to workers locally and globally for support, raising the prospect of running industry on a not-for-profit basis to replace the anarchy of the free market.

There is no time to waste. A global economic slump is sweeping across the Atlantic, destroying jobs and lives in its wake. Global warming goes unchecked because the oil companies and car manufacturers are more concerned about their profits than the future of the planet.

More than 160 years ago, a movement sprang up in Britain to demand political representation at the time when there was none. The Chartists collected millions of signatures and mobilised rallies of hundreds of thousands in struggles that lasted more than a decade.

One wing of the movement supported armed revolution to achieve their aims. The Chartists were driven by hatred for the capitalists who had built their fortunes on the harshest exploitation in their new factories. Their battle cry was: "The Charter and then some".

Chartism was the first mass movement of workers in history. The hope of many involved was that it would lead to the end of exploitation by capitalism. In the 21st century we have to complete the unfinished business of Chartism.

The Movement for a Socialist Future is sponsoring a new Charter, which puts forward a framework for replacing New Labour and the sham of parliament. Turn support for the Charter into the beginning of politics. ■

A CHARTER FOR BASIC DEMOCRATIC RIGHTS

We believe that the existing system of government at European, national and local level does not represent the interests of the vast majority in terms of public services, health, transport, education, housing and the environment. The system is democratic in name only. Parliament and the New Labour government act simply as rubber stamps for the powerful business and financial interests which impose their will through the World Trade Organisation. Therefore, the time has come to defend our right to vote by extending it to every area of society. We call for new, truly democratic bodies to represent the views and interests of the majority, which will:

- **Put people directly in charge of decision-making through local, regional and national Peoples' Councils. Delegates to be elected on an annual basis to represent different sections and groups in society, from workplaces and communities**
- **Democratise ownership and control of major corporations to put their resources at the disposal of society. Place the NHS, public transport, education and other key services under the control of those who work in and use them**
- **Make protection of the environment a top priority to save the planet from destruction. End the abuse of science, technology and agriculture.**

Gambling health care on the global market

SECRET TALKS ON REVISING THE GENERAL AGREEMENT ON TRADE IN SERVICES (GATS), WHICH IS ADMINISTERED BY THE WORLD TRADE ORGANISATION, ARE AIMED AT OPENING UP A WHOLE RANGE OF PUBLIC SERVICES TO PRIVATE PROFIT. TAKING THE LEAD IN THE TALKS ARE THE BRITISH, U.S. AND CANADIAN GOVERNMENTS. NEW LABOUR'S MANIFESTO PROPOSALS TO CONTRACT OUT AND PRIVATISE KEY SERVICES ARE IN LINE WITH THE PLAN TO IMPOSE A NEW-LOOK GATS. THIS ARTICLE SHOWS HOW THE CREEPING COMMERCIALISATION OF THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE IS ALREADY OPENING THE DOOR TO THE GLOBAL CORPORATIONS.

The information in this article is drawn from a research briefing by *Sarah Sexton*, of The Corner House group. The group aims to support the growth of a democratic, equitable, and non-discriminatory civil society in which communities have control over the resources and decisions that affect their lives and means of livelihood.
You can contact them at cornerhouse@gn.apc.org/ www.cornerhouse.icaap.org.

The photograph opposite, by Andrew Wiard, shows workers from Dudley NHS Trust campaigning against privatisaiton of their jobs

SERVICES HAVE BECOME an important part of many countries' economies, overtaking manufactured goods in significance in some places. Providing services (excluding public services) now represents over 60% of the Gross Domestic Product of industrialised countries and 50% of that of others.

International trade in commercial services was worth US $1.35 trillion in 1999, about one quarter of the global trade in goods, up from some $400 billion in 1985 and from $1.2 trillion in 1995. This trade is firmly in the grip of the industrialised countries, which exported nearly 71% of services traded internationally in 1997 and imported 67%. Services account for 60%, or US$210 billion, of annual foreign direct investment, much of which is connected with privatisation of state entities.

Governments the world over have been deregulating and privatising both the funding and the provision of public services, sometimes on their own initiative, sometimes as a condition of IMF structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) and sometimes on World Bank advice.

In some cases, governments have simply sold public entities off. For instance, in Britain, the

Photo: Andrew Ward

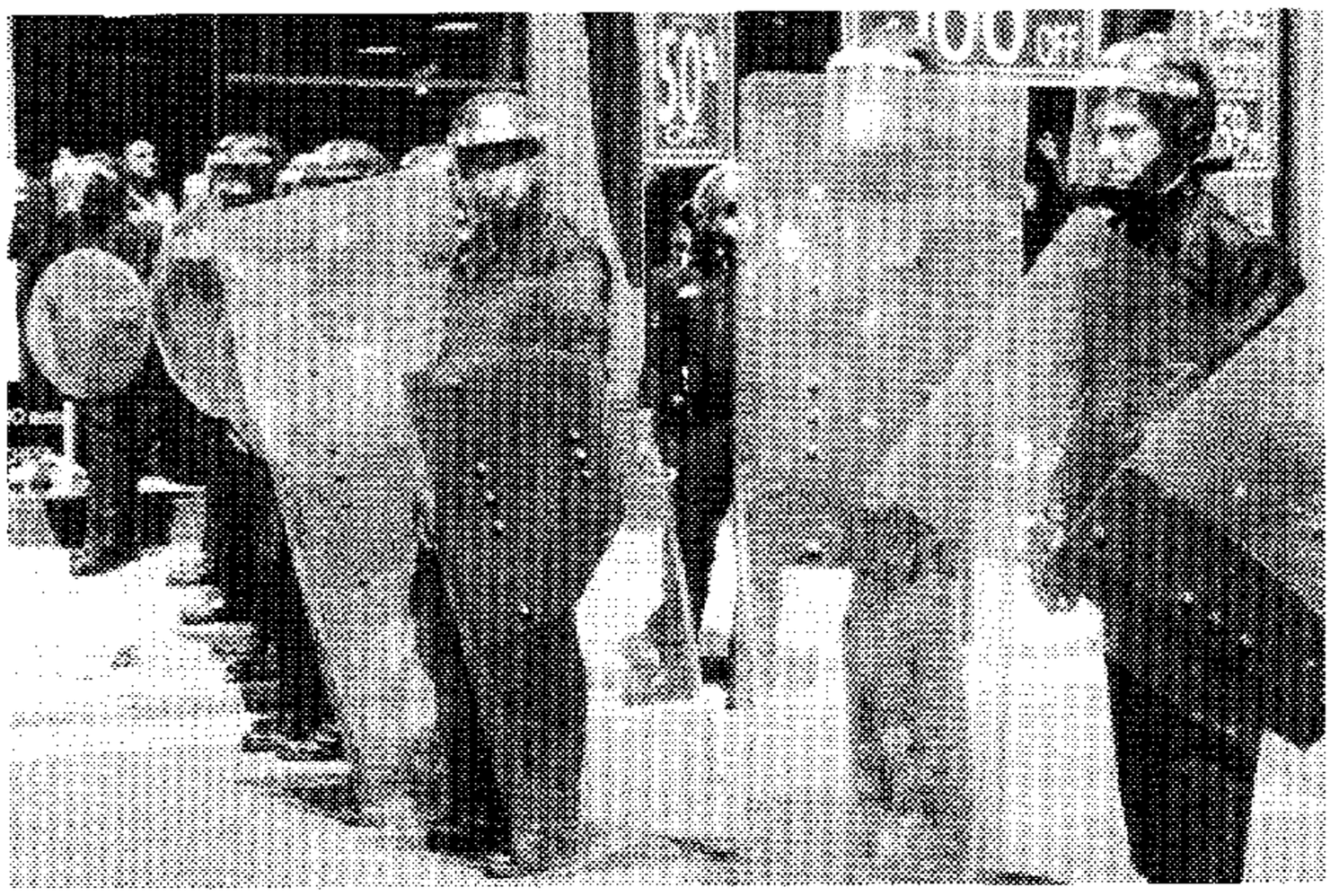
railways, telephones, and electricity, gas and water utilities have been transferred to the for-profit sector. Governments are transforming other public services, particularly those which it might be politically unacceptable to privatise outright, by requiring the public body to contract services out to for-profit companies or to institute a process of compulsory competitive tendering.

They have separated infrastructure such as buildings from service provision, and privatised the infrastructure by means of an array of public-private "partnerships" that retain an ostensible public dimension and thus appear more politically acceptable. Examples in Britain include the Private Finance Initiative (PFI), build-own-transfer (BOT) schemes, and build-own-operate-and-transfer (BOOT) projects.

Governments have also introduced internal markets, that is, divided purchasers from providers within a public service sector. Management from the private sector has been introduced to infuse the public service sector with market-oriented methods and principles. As David Hall of the Public Services International Research Unit points out: "The corporatisation of public service organisations...usually involves the introduction of business accounting...and may be a change as significant as that to private ownership itself."

This "creeping privatisation" is critical because it opens the door for the revision of the General Agreement on Trade in Services, which at present excludes services provided by government. Where a government contracts out any part of its public services, such as cleaning or catering, or if private (either for-profit or voluntary) companies supply services also provided by the government (for instance, if private schools exist alongside state ones, or if there is a mixture of public and private funding), those services could be judged by a WTO dispute panel as no longer being a government service. The service would thus be subject to GATS rather than exempt from it, that is, subject to competition from operators from abroad.

As a result of existing deregulation and privatisation, national and increasingly transnational companies have sprung up and made inroads into a wide range of public services in many countries, particularly utilities (water, energy, telecommunications, transport), refuse collection, prisons, housing, social services, and



World trade agreements, including GATS, are to be imposed by force if necessary, as protestors from Toronto to Gothenburg have discovered. It was reported that Italian police had ordered 200 body bags as part of preparations for policing the Genoa G8 summit meeting. The picture shows City of London police during anti-capitalist protests.

support services (cleaning, catering, information technology).

Via GATS, they could gain access to many more. The European Union, for example, wants all WTO member countries to open up their water delivery systems to competition because this "would offer new business opportunities to European companies, as the expansion and acquisitions abroad by a number of European water companies show". French-based companies such as Vivendi, Suez-Lyonnaise and Bouygues (SAUR) have taken the lead in water supply. Education has been described by investment group Lehman Brothers as "the final frontier of a number of sectors once dominated by public control".

Other targets include museums, libraries, energy and transport. Via GATS, private companies could prise open for themselves public funding for services.

Public money provides guarantees for private companies which simply avoid competition from the public sector. There is little or no accountability or regulation within the private sector, and job cuts or reduced conditions of work are common. The bulwarks of public health – air quality, safe drinking water, food safety, road safety, drainage and sanitation – have been under threat because of privatisation for some time now; under GATS, they could be permanently dismantled.

The health service is paid for out of general taxation, which is considered, even by the *Financial Times*, to be the fairest, most economical, most efficient and least bureaucratic way of funding the great bulk of health care. But under the guise of modernisation and reform which many of those working within the NHS believe is necessary, the health and social services are being commercialised and privatised.

Given the general popularity of the NHS and its entrenched public nature, however, this process has been ad hoc, fragmented and covert. A first step has been to undermine confidence in public provision through unrelenting criticism of public services.

Some of the methods to encourage for-profit involvement in the NHS are well-known: compulsory competitive tendering for "support" services such as cleaning, catering, laundry, computing and laboratory analysis, for instance. But other, more subtle mechanisms, are less familiar, mechanisms which the World Bank is recommending to other countries:

- separating the purchaser from the provider of health services;
- introducing commercial accounting and private financing;
- allocating resources on the basis of each patient's health risks rather than a population's health needs;
- introducing user charges and private insurance.

In 1991, the Conservative government introduced an internal market to the NHS by separating the providers and purchasers of health care services from each other. Whereas health authorities throughout the country used themselves to plan and provide hospital services to a local

population within a geographic area on the basis of its anticipated health needs, now they had to purchase care from NHS trusts (or the private sector) providing these services.

The NHS trusts running the hospitals, meanwhile, had to compete with each other to obtain patients. Services were separated from each other and other activities, packaged into saleable and marketable items, priced separately and offered to purchasers, who began to shop around for the best financial deals. Despite further organisational changes in 1999, the purchaser-provider split remains.

At the same time, commercial resource accounting procedures were introduced. Since 1991, NHS trusts have had to pay a "capital charge" to the government for the use of buildings and equipment even though the state already owns them outright. The cost of replacing these assets as new is estimated; the trusts then pay 6% of this valuation out of their annual income (even though if the state were to replace the assets, it could borrow money for about 3%).

Trusts also became legally bound to break even, ensuring that their expenditure matched or was less then their income. Indeed, the only legal requirements of NHS trusts providing hospital and community services are now financial and are not related to health care at all. There are no legal mechanisms to ensure that they serve the interests of the local communities from which they draw their patients.

In 1996-7, one third of NHS trusts failed to meet at least one of their financial targets. Many continue to fall short. Current proposals would enable private firms or other trusts to take over trusts which do not meet their statutory financial targets.

In an attempt to balance their books and pay the capital charge, trusts have had to reduce their expenditure or increase their income. Many have made major cuts in staff and in the services they provide, such as long-term care, rehabilitation and elective surgery (surgery for non-life-threatening conditions). Unsurprisingly, waiting lists for operations have grown. Trusts have also reduced their capital charge by selling off assets: the higher the value of the asset base, the higher the capital charge and the lower the budget available for clinical care.

Trusts have also tried to generate extra income by getting in more private patients or more funds for commercial research, or by treating more patients more quickly. "In effect, the hospital becomes a factory for conveyor belt care", says health policy professor Allyson Pollock and her colleagues. Thus hospitals and services are now planned more according to the financial demands of trusts than to the clinical needs of the people in the area they serve. Affordability has become far more of a critical constraint in planning priorities in which clinicians and public health doctors are not required to be involved.

Administrative running costs within the NHS are estimated to have doubled because of the imposed market processes, rising from 5% to 12% of total costs. The introduction of the capital charge provided a stream of funding that could be used to pay for new capital investments, one that could be channelled directly towards the for-profit sector.

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Capital spending within the NHS, allocated by the government to maintain, refurbish or replace buildings, has been insufficient for years. The backlog of maintenance and repair in the NHS is now over £3.1 billion.

But public capital funding has now been virtually eliminated. Trusts, which became responsible for capital financing (by the introduction of the capital charge) instead of the government, have thus had to turn to the private sector to finance new investments if they want to remain "competitive" in attracting purchasers of their services (even though private finance is more expensive than public financing).

The Private Finance Initiative (PFI), launched in 1992 by the Conservative government, was extended to the National Health Service in 1997 by the Labour government. A source of finance, not funding, PFI allows private companies and consortia to build and own hospitals which they lease to the NHS for between 20 and 60 years. The NHS pays for the building's capital and running costs out of its incoming (mainly public) revenue. In effect, public funds subsidise the expansion of the private sector. PFI hospitals cost the NHS more than if it were to build its own hospitals. A new hospital in Edinburgh, for example, would have

cost the state £180 million, but will cost it £30 million a year for 30 years at current prices, £900 million in total. The health authorities will meet these costs by selling three existing hospitals, and cutting 33% of beds and 20% of staff budgets.

Most PFI schemes involve centralising hospitals on a single, usually cheaper, site and selling the land on which previous hospitals were built. Private money is now funding the largest hospital rebuilding programme in Britain for 30 years. And, ironically, as health researcher Allyson Pollock points out, it "is being paid for by the largest service closure programme in the history of the NHS".

Overall, the introduction of the Private Finance Initiative to hospitals in the National Health Service has resulted in a 30% reduction in staffed acute beds and a 20% reduction in clinical budgets and workforce. Some 12,000 NHS beds have closed since 1997. Government consultants have calculated that every £200 million spent through the PFI leads to the loss of 1,000 doctors and nurses. The costs of proposed developments have soared 75%. Even in the short term, payments for a PFI hospital are usually higher than the capital charge to the government. Annual payments range from 11-18% of the construction costs, compared to the 6% capital charge. Additional payments cover cleaning, lighting and laundry services that the private hospital provides. Shareholders in PFI schemes can expect annual returns of 15-25%. As hospital trusts would never be allowed to go bankrupt, there is no risk to the consortia's funds.

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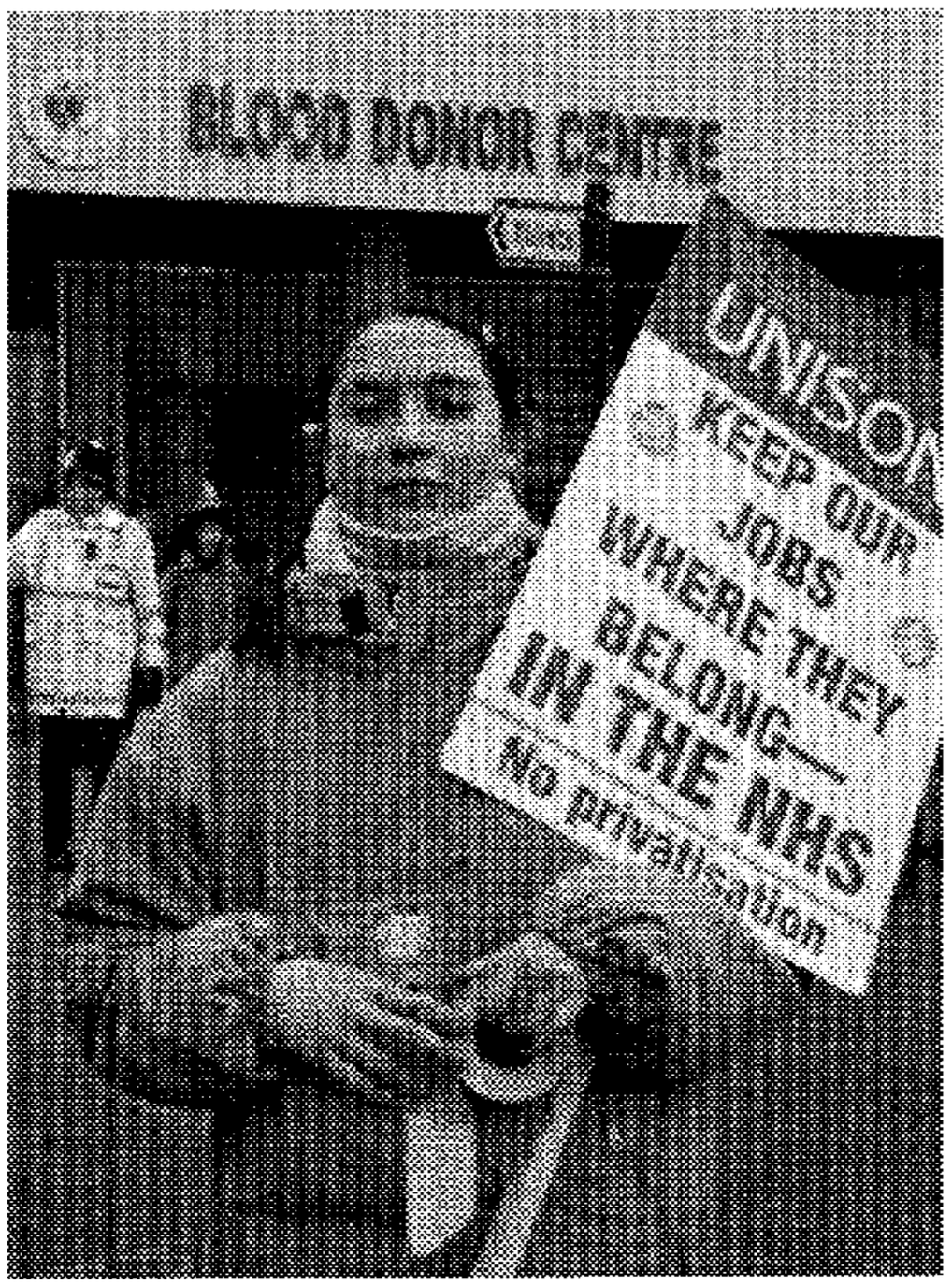
The planning, supply and support of PFI hospital services is left to private sector consortia. Detailed information about PFI hospital schemes, particularly planning assumptions about the numbers of beds and services needed, is rarely publicly available because of commercial confidentiality. The data that has been obtained, however, suggests that projections about clinical activity and beds are lower than current trends and health authorities' projections.

Although ostensibly financing the infrastructure only, the private sector decides how to supply the



services and the investment needed to support these services. Health authorities and trusts no longer control the number of hospital beds or the levels of service they believe are required for the people in their area. The government health minister said in November 2000: "We had to get the hospital building programme started. If you like...we had to create a market in PFI because there was not a market."

Although PFI is an expensive way to build new hospitals and leaves less money to be spent on patient care, the government recently extended the initiative to some 3,000 local doctors' premises, community pharmacies, health centres and long-term care facilities. Already health care companies and property developers are expanding into the ownership and provision of primary care premises. The government is also considering encouraging the private sector to co-ordinate payroll, administration and computer services for local doctors, and even the provision of clinical services under PFI arrangements.

In the year 2000, the UK government promised £20 billion of extra money to the national health service over four years. But where will this

taxpayers' money end up? A large chunk of the billions the government has promised to the National Health Service could simply disappear into the for-profit sector.

Health authorities receive block budgets from central government on the basis of the anticipated needs of all the people in the geographical area they serve. But the new NHS primary care trusts which came into effect in April 2001 will be reimbursed not on the basis of geographic populations but on that of general practitioner's patient lists. This fundamental shift in funding allocation is similar to the US insurance based system. It gives local health care practices incentives to select carefully the patients they enrol "cream skimming" and to argue for reimbursement linked to individuals' needs. Both undermine the risk pooling and risk sharing basis of resource allocation on a geographic basis.

Moreover, the government recently introduced legislation which allows trusts to put a time limit on the care they provide to a patient (rather than providing it for as long as a patient needs it). The legislation also creates an incentive for them to redefine some care as "personal" care (which can be charged for) rather than "nursing" care. Taken together, these changes pave the way for replacing public sources of funding with private in some areas of care. Trusts will be under financial pressure to encourage patients to take out private, voluntary insurance.

Overall, the reimbursement mechanisms are being altered in ways that facilitate a shift towards personal insurance and user charges for care that used to be free at the point of delivery.

Despite the running down of the NHS, private medical insurance in the UK has barely grown in a decade, certainly not to a level that it would erode the social solidarity needed to support a state-run, taxation-based medical service. Just 11% of the UK population, 6.5 million people, have private insurance, largely through their employer and they are concentrated in the richest quarter of the population.

Many people in Britain still think of private medicine as "hernia fixes in nice surroundings" and assume that if you are seriously sick, you need to be in an NHS hospital. An advertisement for one private health care insurance scheme plays on just these assumptions: "We use the private facilities of the NHS [teaching hospitals] in London, so you get the best of both worlds. First class medical treatment when you need it." Those who want to leapfrog NHS waiting lists tend to ignore the insurance market and simply use their own "out-of-pocket" money for private treatment. The proportion of elective treatments (for non-life-threatening con-ditions) paid for privately is just over 13% and has changed little since 1981.

Moreover, most private medical insurance does not cover emergency treatment. It tends to cover unforeseen (acute) medical conditions, but only if treatment is likely to lead to a full recovery. It does not usually pay to treat long-term or "chronic" conditions that have no known cure, such as arthritis or asthma, or that lead to permanent disability. Private medical insurance focuses on those who are good medical risks and rarely extends to the over-75s who are most in need. Where it does, the cost of premiums escalates dramatically to reflect the presumed higher risk.

...people could be charged higher health or life insurance premiums, or refused insurance altogether, if they had to tell the prospective insurer the results of a genetic test...

If those who could afford to do so opted out of the public health service, for instance, by claiming rebates for taking out private health insurance, the NHS would still retain the vast bulk of its business – children, the elderly and chronic sick – but it would lose large parts of its income.

Looking further into the future, health care financing could have implications for the genetic testing of individuals for their predisposition in later life to certain illnesses.

There is concern that people could be charged higher health or life insurance premiums, or refused insurance altogether, if they had to tell the prospective insurer the results of any genetic test they have had, particularly results indicating a susceptibility to a disease. The British government recently stated that more genetic tests would soon be available on the NHS, but that they would not have these discriminatory effects because the health service is publicly funded from taxation, not from insurance. But the market changes introduced into the health service over the past decade which pave the way for private health care insurance cast doubt on these assurances. As NGO activist Pat Mooney points out, "if your doctor is also your insurance agent, the fight for genetic privacy is going to seem a little silly."

Britain's 300 or so private hospitals predominantly treat five ailments: replacement hips, hernias, hysterectomies, heart conditions and haemorrhoids. At present, they do little work at either end of the medical spectrum where most patients use or need the health system: primary care such as visits to the local general practitioner which account for nine of ten patients using the NHS (a market the private sector is trying to enter), and catastrophic injuries and illnesses. The NHS did buy in 30,000 operations from the private sector in 1999, but carried out 6.5 million itself. In the year 2000, the private sector carried out some 800,000 elective surgical procedures. Private hospitals could, if permitted, corner the market in conditions such as hip replacements, cataracts and heart bypass grafts, and then drive prices up. More public services could be contracted out and more charges introduced. As The Observer points out: "What the government and therefore all taxpayers can achieve with its health budget will diminish because private providers, which have to make profits, will be dearer".

...these proposals could enable the private sector to expand rapidly as hard-pressed hospital trusts shift elderly patients from hospital beds to for-profit care...

The need for commercial returns, particularly for companies with shareholders, could increase the cost of providing health care. When the US government sent patients to private hospitals run by the Hospital Corporation of America (HCA), the company sent back inflated bills and expenses. The case has now become the largest fraud investigation in US history.

The Department of Health has no experience of preventing private hospitals finding imaginary illnesses or performing unnecessary operations. Costs, moreover, still fall on the public sector for the training of nurses and doctors and for emergencies when operations go wrong as private hospitals tend not to have emergency backup. *Observer* journalist Nick Cohen points out that the NHS does not "appear to know that their [private sector] record of treating patients who suddenly develop complications and need emergency care is terrible". In the year 2000, there were nearly 142,000 admissions from private hospitals to the NHS.

But instead of restoring public provision of beds or abandoning private finance, the government has turned to the private sector to make up the shortfall which it itself produced. In October 2000, it signed a "concordat" with private hospitals and nursing homes to treat NHS patients for waiting list operations, intensive care, and rehabilitation and preventive services for the elderly (intermediate care). The arrangement will make it easier for private sector companies to operate former NHS facilities and clinical services and to take over the clinical workforce. The government is also considering allowing private contractors to manage health authorities and primary care groups, and to run specialist services such as diagnostic centres, cardiac and neuro surgery, and radiotherapy.

Just half the private hospital sector's 10,000 beds are usually occupied compared to the 186,000 in the public sector which are now almost always occupied. Two fifths of general and acute hospital beds are occupied by people, mainly elderly, who are not well enough to go home but not ill enough to need to stay in hospital. New legislation passed in 2001 allows NHS bodies in future to redefine what health care shall be free and to charge patients for "personal" care (washing, feeding, toileting and dressing) but not "nursing" or "medical" care.

There are no regulation or accountability mechanisms for this increasing use of the private sector. These proposals could enable the private sector to expand rapidly as hard-pressed hospital trusts shift elderly patients from hospital beds into for-profit intermediate care. The trusts would pay for the first six weeks of their stay, but subsequently charge for personal care, which it would be in the trusts' financial interests to define as broadly as possible. Ultimately, public funding could be further reduced or withdrawn altogether. This was the pattern followed by long-term nursing and residential care in the 1980s.

In 1983, the government allowed people entering private homes to claim social security (welfare) to pay for their care, an option not available to residents in public homes provided by local authorities or the NHS. This system created an incentive for public authorities to switch the elderly, disabled and mentally ill into the private sector, close down the services and homes they did provide, and thereby release funds for themselves through reduced expenditure and the sale of assets.

This "unrestricted availability of an untapped funding stream", says consultant geriatrician Peter Crome, fuelled the extraordinary growth in private

Public sector union says "drop PFI"

The Blairite Institute for Public Policy Research report "Building Better Partnerships" calls for more private involvement in public services. Union general secretary Dave Prentis says the evidence it presents "is a complete endorsement of UNISON's criticisms of the private finance initiative".

He adds: "Where the commission has looked at the evidence it has come to similar conclusions to UNISON. It says that managers have been forced down this road, that the value for money case does not stack up, that the cost of borrowing is adding huge amounts of money to these schemes and that they have failed to deliver real innovation.

"It has also recognised the public-private partnerships have been used as a way of forcing down low-paid workers' pay and conditions, leading to a two-tier workforce, and it calls on the government to address this problem."

Yet the report calls for more PPPs, leading Prentis to note: "There is clearly a reality gap between the evidence and the theory, and the evidence in this report is very thin. "It provides no proof that PFI is working and yet perversely concludes with a recommendation that there should be more PPPs covering more jobs.

"It is a disappointing and surprisingly flimsy piece of research. Where are the hard facts?" asks Prentis. "Where is the evidence? What lessons have been learned from the experience abroad?

"Looking at the hard facts, these schemes should be abandoned as an expensive and discredited experiment and yet, instead of calling a halt, the report suggests that we give them the green light."

institutional care in the 1980s and 1990s: 175,000 places in 1985 had nearly quadrupled by 1998 to 650,000 places, a growth funded almost entirely out of the public purse. Today, the state provides not even one fifth of places but pays for the care for 70% of people in private residential and nursing homes.

Residential and nursing home care firms make much of their profit by paying low wages to casual labour, mainly women. Low staffing levels are associated with poor quality of care, but there are no legal minimum staffing requirements.

Once the private sector had developed, the government switched the funding for long-term care from the national social security budget to that of local authorities, which could set eligibility criteria. An increasing number of some of the most vulnerable groups in society the elderly, disabled and the long-term sick now pay for their own care, or go without. There are widespread differences across the country in assessing needs and determining eligibility for services or for financial support, creating inequities.

Access to care is increasingly based on ability to pay. Long-term care has become primarily an individual rather than collective responsibility. Health care researcher Allyson Pollock concludes: "There is little evidence to show that the shift to private sector financing and ownership of long-term care by these companies will save money, especially if the corporations in the UK have similar patterns of spending on administration, capital and profits to those in the USA."

Since it was set up in 1948, the NHS has made great gains in ironing out inequities throughout Britain in the availability and accessibility of health and social care services. The various structural changes made to the funding and delivery of services over the past decade could reverse these efforts, conflicting as they do with the principles of universal coverage, shared risk and redistribution that tax-funded or social insurance-funded systems generally uphold and aim for.

The NHS would not be dismantled but reconfigured, left as a "sink service" trying to cope with emergencies and complex health conditions, while the private sector profits from the lucrative parts of health care, such as elective operations and intermediate care and from public subsidies .

Once the NHS model of universal care, free at the point of delivery, is lost, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to get it back. ■

The business take-over of education

NEW LABOUR'S FIRST TERM EDUCATION POLICY WAS A SOFTENING-UP PROCESS FOR OPENING SCHOOLS UP TO CAPITAL. *GLENN RIKOWSKI* EXPLAINS HOW THE BLAIR GOVERNMENT INTENDS TO GO MUCH FURTHER THIS TIME.

BEFORE THE 1997 ELECTION VICTORY, New Labour proclaimed that education was its number one priority. Many who had witnessed the Tories' wilful under-funding of schools enthusiastically supported Tony Blair's mantra "education, education, education".

In office, New Labour offered a continuation of many Tory neo-liberal education policies. Standard Assessment Tests (SATs), the National Curriculum and local management of schools (LMS) all remained in place from the Tory years, maintaining the essentials of an education quasi-market. The Private Finance Initiative (PFI), brought in by the Tories in 1992 for securing private sector finance for infrastructure projects, was also supported and extended by the New Labour government.

New Labour generated a plethora of initiatives – Education Action Zones (EAZs), Excellence in Cities, the literacy hour and many others – yet ended its first term with massive recruitment and retention crises and teacher unrest resulting from Education Secretary David Blunkett's performance-related pay arrangements.

There was advance warning regarding what New Labour would do to schools in a second term. In March 2000, David Blunkett announced City Academies would be established in inner-city areas where "partnership with businesses, churches or voluntary bodies would be key. In the summer of 2000, Blunkett floated a number of business-friendly proposals, including by-passing local education authorities (LEAs) for school funding (giving individual schools greater scope for striking up commercial contracts) and plans for massive expansion of specialist schools backed by private sector cash.

In the autumn of 2000, Estelle Morris, Minister for Schools, went on a fact-finding trip to the US to explore strategies for bringing private capital into schools. New Labour's Green Paper, published last February, spelt out the business agenda for schools in detail.

New Labour's Green Paper on education

New Labour's Green Paper on education, *Schools: Building on Success* (February, 2001), can be read as a blueprint for intensifying, expanding and legitimising the business take-over of schools. However it also linked this to the long-standing policy of socially producing labour-power (capacity to labour) for capital.

Human capital is at the foundation of New Labour's education policy. The Green Paper argues that human capital development must proceed throughout our lifetimes – a kind of "learning unto death" that includes everyone. Teachers are to develop their human capital to the maximum to ensure that children are as work-ready for the labour market as inhumanly possible.

It is not just human capital development for an unspecified form of economy that is required, but for New Labour's "knowledge economy", or (as it is known in the US) the "new economy". Thus education is key to preparing the nation for "the emergence of the new economy and its increased demands for skills and human capital" .

New Labour and the "knowledge economy"

The "knowledge economy" is New Labour's biggest idea. It has survived into the Green Paper despite huge fallout in dot.com share values. Unlike the nebulous Third Way, the knowledge economy has real social substance. Peter Mandelson promoted the knowledge economy as a

leading idea for New Labour when he was at the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). The most succinct definition of the knowledge economy is offered by consultants TFPL: "*Knowledge economies are emerging in the western world where knowledge, expertise, and innovation are now the primary asset and key competitive advantage. (TFPL, 1999)*

The Green Paper's strategy for education is anchored in the knowledge economy. It is argued that a sense of urgency comes from the "imperative for public education to prove that it can respond to the challenges of the new economy" . It seems clear that "ICT is transforming business processes in every sector of the economy, both public and private".

On this basis, the Green Paper advocates that the education system for the 21st century must have a "leading edge", and this will be provided by advanced specialist schools linked to developing the "school of the future". Advanced specialist schools will arise out of specialist schools that have indicated high-performance levels of output over a five-year period.

Secondly, the Green Paper states that there will be some "Beacon" schools with a mission for achieving "effectiveness in teaching the skills relevant to the emerging economy, including promoting creativity and the use of ICT". Finally, to ensure that schools are sufficiently geared up to producing labour-power for the knowledge economy, they will receive broadband connections so that the "speed and quality of Internet working will be greatly enhanced". A special £10 million "Classroom of the Future" pilot scheme will "enable schools in 12 areas to explore radically new and inspiring ways of delivering education".

Business into schools does go

The previous points connect with the project of meeting the "needs of industry" that was kick-started by Prime Minister James Callaghan's Ruskin College speech in 1976 and the subsequent Great Debate on Education fronted by the then Education Secretary, Shirley Williams. But the Green Paper takes a dual track: it connects with the Callaghan project, but also argues for the consolidation and extension of the role of business in schools. The extent of proposed business involvement in schools is startling:

- Business take-over of "failing" schools: external sponsors are to take responsibility for under-performing schools.
- Learning from business: those in the education service will be encouraged to "learn from others, including business" .
- Consolidation of the role of the private sector in nursery education.
- Public-Private Partnerships in nursery education: from September 2004, every 3-year-old whose parents want one will have a free nursery place. This provision "will be based on partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors".
- New Specialist Business Schools: "In addition to technology, languages, sport and the arts, we will offer schools three new specialist options: engineering; science; and business and enterprise. Business and enterprise schools will be expected to develop strong curriculum-business links and develop teaching strengths in business studies, financial literacy and enterprise-related vocational programmes".
- Extension of PFI: "Many schools are also benefiting from the Private Finance Initiative. Twenty one deals have been signed so far, and funding for a further 33 has been agreed in principle, bringing benefits to around 640 schools. The scale of activity is increasing".
- Business sponsorship and business mentoring: a significant extension of these (especially business mentoring for Head teachers).

These proposals are set to open school doors to corporate capital on an expanding scale. They seek to break down barriers to trade within England's schools on an agenda that is consonant with the World Trade Organisation's mission to open them up to corporate capital. The Green Paper has purchased a neo-liberal ticket for schools.

Local Education Authorities as business agents

Local Education Authorities (LEAs) have a specific and significant role to play. They must become the "business agents", the collective spivs, of school life. The Green Paper argues that for the crucial role of school improvement LEAs are simply inadequate. For *"the lack of professional standards for school improvement services and those who work within them is ... a key weakness of the current arrangements, and one which could hold back the pace of reform"* .

LEAs will be charged with assisting the corporate invasion of schools. There will be progressive contracting out of school improvement

work, though some regulation (for quality) is deemed necessary. There are hints that LEAs not embracing the new business culture or hamstringing business penetration of English schooling are liable to be taken over by private sector operators.

On the Green Paper's agenda, the spirit of business will haunt educators in schools. The key tasks are to struggle for an education that has neither human capital development or profit generation as foundation of its functioning – but is recast for collective human need and self-development.

...privatisation schemes have become increasingly extreme and bizarre - for example the suggestion that private sector operators could run individual departments...

The Green Paper defers to business values and outlooks, and the democratic impulse is suppressed or downplayed. This outlook was carried forward into New Labour's General Election Manifesto.

The Manifesto argued it was important that Britain become "the best place to do business in Europe", and that investment in education was crucial for establishing Britain's role as business heaven. Private sector investment was to be a central ingredient in this mission, for "where the quality is not improving quickly enough, alternative providers should be brought in. When private-sector providers can support public endeavour, we should use them". There was talk of "radically modernising" comprehensive schools, further City Academies and more state/private partnership.

Just before the election, an Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) report leaked to *The Guardian* argued that the injection of private sector capital into public services was essential for their improvement. The report urged private sector management of schools. Trade union leaders bit their tongues. Tory-controlled Surrey announced it was handing over the management of a school to Nord Anglia on a seven-year contract. The following week, Kevin McNeany, Nord Anglia's chairman, floated the idea of directly employing teachers, arguing for legislation on this issue.

After New Labour's election landslide, Estelle Morris was installed as the new Secretary of State for Education and Skills in a revamped department committed to opening up education to capital. Morris has been described as "more Blairite than Blair" by some journalists. A few days before the election, at the National Association of Head Teachers' conference in Harrogate, she announced that not only would "failing" schools be taken over by private operators but that successful schools would too. Stephen Timms as new Schools Standards Minister partners Morris. Timms is a keen supporter of the WTO and the development of the knowledge economy and for inviting the private sector into all sectors of education. Blair has picked a duo the WTO should be proud of.

The juggernaut unleashed, but resistance builds

"What we are seeing now is a juggernaut of privatisation moving across the education system." (Melian Mansfield, CASE, at the "Education: Not for Sale" Public Meeting, Hampstead Town Hall, 11th July 2001)

Since the election New Labour's project for the business take-over of schools has gathered pace. The Queen's Speech indicated that New Labour would encourage greater use of private companies in the delivery of public services but not the extent to which they would do it. The proposed Education Bill made it clear that the role of the private sector would be extended as part of a "radical overhaul" of secondary education, with much greater opportunities for private sector control and sponsorship.

Proposed schemes for school privatisation have become increasingly extreme and bizarre. For example, Timms suggested that private sector operators could run individual departments within schools. Department for Education and Skills officials quickly played this down. Secondly, a leaked paper from the government's Review Body of Independent-State Partnerships suggested that consortia of private schools could run EAZs or Excellence in Cities schemes, or sponsor specialist schools. This plan will be discussed in September.

Thirdly, a government discussion paper has suggested that where businesses are awarded contracts to turn round "failing" schools then they should be given a "controlling interest" on school governing bodies – massively alarming national school governor associations. These ideas and proposals have sparked off a new determination to resist school privatisation amongst swathes of teachers, school governors and parents.

Those hoping for the "real" New Labour to stand up on education after the June election have been given a clear picture of what this reality actually means for schools.

Furthermore, trade union leaders who maintained silence during the General Election campaign on the issue of privatisation suddenly found their voices once the vote was counted. Bill Morris (TGWU), Dave Prentis (UNISON) and John Edmunds (GMB) waded in with some early interventions against the privatisation of public services. They promised a "summer of discontent" if New Labour persisted with plans to let private operators run public services, hinting that the bankrolling of New Labour might have to be reviewed. Realising that he had overplayed his hand Blair called in public sector trade union leaders for a very Old Labour dinner on 27th June at 10 Downing Street.

There are conflicting accounts of the extent to which Blair managed to calm union fears, but his strategy is clear: to buy off opposition. This was obvious a week earlier on the issue of payment for teacher overtime, when Morris argued that teachers should be paid for supervising after-school activities. When Nord Anglia argued at the National Association of Head Teachers' conference in May that Heads should be given shares in companies running their schools, government officials did not rule out the possibility.

A more wide-ranging deal was struck between the public sector unions and Blair at the June meeting. Basically, privatisation of public services will go ahead on the back of above-inflation pay rises for workers. After this, it becomes clear why public spending on education and other public services has to rise: first, to buy the consent of the trade unions, secondly, to provide enough funding for businesses to make a profit.

Resistance to this strategy is growing. Some union leaders don't seem inclined to readily trade in more privatisation for higher pay rises for members. More significantly, there is a growing grass roots opposition of rank and file teachers, school governors and parents that are fighting PFI (e.g. at Pimlico School, and in the Haverstock School in Camden), contracting out of education services and the running of schools by businesses.

Even in Conservative-controlled Surrey, parents' groups are putting up a fierce fight against Abbeylands School, Woking being run by private operators. In July, a meeting sponsored by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) against PFI at the Haverstock School in Camden drew in over 100 teachers, parents and education activists. It is groups such as these that are providing the first line of defence against school privatisation.

Organisations such as the Socialist Teachers Alliance, which has recently produced a pamphlet called *Not for Sale: The case against the privatisation of education (Regan, 2001)*, the Campaign for State Education (CASE) and the Socialist Education Association are providing crucial supporting roles. In March this year, a Promoting Comprehensive Education Network (PCEN) was formed, an umbrella group involving many organisations committed to defending comprehensive education against the privatisation juggernaut. Resistance to education privatisation is having an effect. Morris has cancelled the publication of the White Paper on education, due for mid-July, until September 2001, hoping to forestall a summer of anti-privatisation protest.

Unfortunately, resistance to New Labour's plans for the business take-over of schools lacks an overall strategy. Many speakers at the Camden meeting called for a united campaign by all the trade unions involved, together with parents and school governors, for terminating the privatisation process in education. Secondly, some speakers noted the lack of organisational links between the fight against the WTO/GATS and privatisation in education in Britain.

The WTO/GATS education agenda and education privatisation in Britain are welded together. Effective action against the latter involves practically an encounter with anti-capitalism. On the other hand, socialists focusing primarily on the WTO, the International Monetary Fund and other global institutions need to be aware of what is happening in places like Pimlico School and Haverstock School in order to grasp the depth of capital's force. Capital is everywhere, but we (as labour), who ensure that this is so, can therefore take on the beast anywhere and everywhere.■

Acknowledgements The section on New Labour's Green Paper appeared previously in Post-16 Educator, issue 3, May-June 2001.

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About the author Glenn Rikowski is an education researcher. His booklet, *The Battle in Seattle: Its significance for education* (Tufnell Press) was published in March 2001.

Top lawyers challenge Appeal Court threat to civil liberties

THE BLAIR GOVERNMENT "HAS PUT CIVIL LIBERTIES AT THE BOTTOM OF ITS AGENDA", MICHAEL MANSFIELD QC TOLD A POWERFUL MEETING CALLED TO DISCUSS THE PRESENT ROLE OF THE APPEAL COURT IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM.

Leading lawyers, including Gareth Peirce, Susannah Arthur, John Batt and Mike Topolski, joined with those campaigning for the release of wrongly-convicted prisoners in London on July 4. Speakers at the gathering, convened by Bolton solicitor Campbell Malone, denounced the role of the present government.

"Many people feel that New Labour has an agenda to 'look again' at safeguards within the legal system, such as jury trial, double jeopardy and previous convictions, " Malone told Socialist Future. "Many people want to work together and form a united front to address this. This is the beginning."

"The pendulum has swung back in favour of an approach where convictions are sustained in the face of compelling fresh evidence or new arguments never before the jury," said Malone, who is solicitor for Eddie Gilfoyle and many other suspected wrongly convicted prisoners.

"While the bigger picture is important, lawyers are also looking at the specific issue of the Court of Appeal, with a view to forming a panel composed of those with experience in handling cases that come before it," he added.

The purpose would be to help the increasing numbers of people who do not get proper help with their cases. "Lawyers are greatly encouraged by support from other members of their profession and the experience of non-lawyers for the campaign to raise the standards of assistance," Malone added.

"We are looking into whether we need a lobby group to target MPs, but we do not have a blueprint for the future. We are considering holding a demonstration outside the appeal court. We need to think about the experience of this meeting and how we can move things forward."

Both Malone and Mansfield called for an umbrella group that would co-ordinate the many campaigns and individuals who are working for the same objective. A limited amount of public money was available, but often cases go through two or three firms of solicitors, without anything being achieved except "the production of mountains of paper", Malone explained after the meeting.

"The aim is not to preserve a monopoly but to get a dozen firms of solicitors to act as a voice, determined to see this through. To continue to campaign and to work collectively.

Mansfield, currently lodging an appeal against the conviction of Barry George, referred to the "widespread recognition that something had gone wrong with the criminal justice system after the wrongful convictions of the Guildford Four in the late 1980s".

A number of key cases had come before the Court of Appeal and were kicked out. After this a Royal Commission was set up to look into the functioning of the appeals system.

The 1995 Criminal Appeal Act was intended to remedy the Home Office's failure to identify potential miscarriages of justice by setting up the Criminal Justice Review Commission. But Mansfield, like solicitor Malone and many other colleagues feel that the "malfunctioning" of the system, especially over the last 12 months has gone back to "before Guildford".

The change in the Criminal Appeal Act which was intended to enable a wider interpretation of the reasons to challenge convictions was "not happening on the ground", Mansfield said.

Focusing on the exceptional nature of the jury

trial system in Britain, he explained that in most other countries judgements are made by a panel of professionals. The Lockerbie case was an example where three judges had sole jurisdiction.

For centuries in Britain, the Court of Appeal did not exist at all. But after 1900, a celebrated legal case revealed a wrong identification by 15 witnesses. This led to the "realisation that another legal mechanism was needed".

In 1907 the Appeal Court was set up to remedy the problem of there being "only one decision" within the jury system. However, the additional safeguard which the court was intended to supply, had been turned into its opposite. Instead of checking out the judgment of the previous court, which involved trial by jury, the Court of Appeal was becoming a substitute for jury trials.

"Do we want the Court of Appeal to second-guess juries?" Mansfield asked. Instead of referring cases back to the jury, the Court of Appeal was becoming even more restrictive. "Instead of a jury of 12, three people hand down judgements. The Gilfoyle case is a classic example in which the Court of Appeal performed the role of the jury in weighing up the evidence on the basis of facts. Intended as a review body, it was now convicting, without the process of hearing witnesses. But that is what we want juries to do, that is what we trust them to do. The jury sees witnesses, hears the evidence, in order to make its assessment. Instead the appeal court works off a mere summary."

The drift towards superseding the jury was part of a dangerous anti-democratic trend, in Mansfield's view. The presumption of innocence was only just operational.

Barrister Susannah Arthur told the meeting: "The Court of Appeal protects the system. It is not concerned with justice. I believe it makes up its mind before it hears the evidence in court. The appeal judges then twist things to protect the status quo."

Paul Caddick of the Eddie Gilfoyle campaign said the gathering of members of the legal profession and campaigners was remarkable. "Never before have men and women who work in such an insular profession joined together to question their bosses." ■

SWP: reforming the 'Third Way'

PHIL SHARPE SHOWS HOW THE SOCIALIST WORKERS PARTY USES REVOLUTIONARY LANGUAGE TO DISGUISE A STRATEGY OF WINNING REFORMS FROM CAPITALISM.

THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL before 1914 was dominated by the German Social Democratic Party. The SPD's main theoretician was Karl Kautsky, a person of vast knowledge, but who essentially justified a stance of formal revolutionary politics and reformist political practice.

On the eve of the First World War he wrote an article which argued that capitalism was entering a new period of peaceful development, with the aggressive period of imperialist colonialism gradually being replaced by an ultra-imperialist stage of co-operation between the main capitalist powers.

The immediate purpose of Kautsky's article was to defend the opportunist and reformist repudiation of revolutionary politics by the SPD and Second International. A considerable price was paid by the workers of Germany and other European nations when in 1914 imperialism launched a world war with the help of parties like the SPD.

In this century, the practice of revolutionary talk and reformist practice is embodied in the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), whose leading theoretician and spokesperson is Alex Callinicos. His new book* is unusually revealing, however.

Under the impact of globalisation, Callinicos is compelled to try and justify how, contrary to all the evidence, pressure can make New Labour deliver reforms.

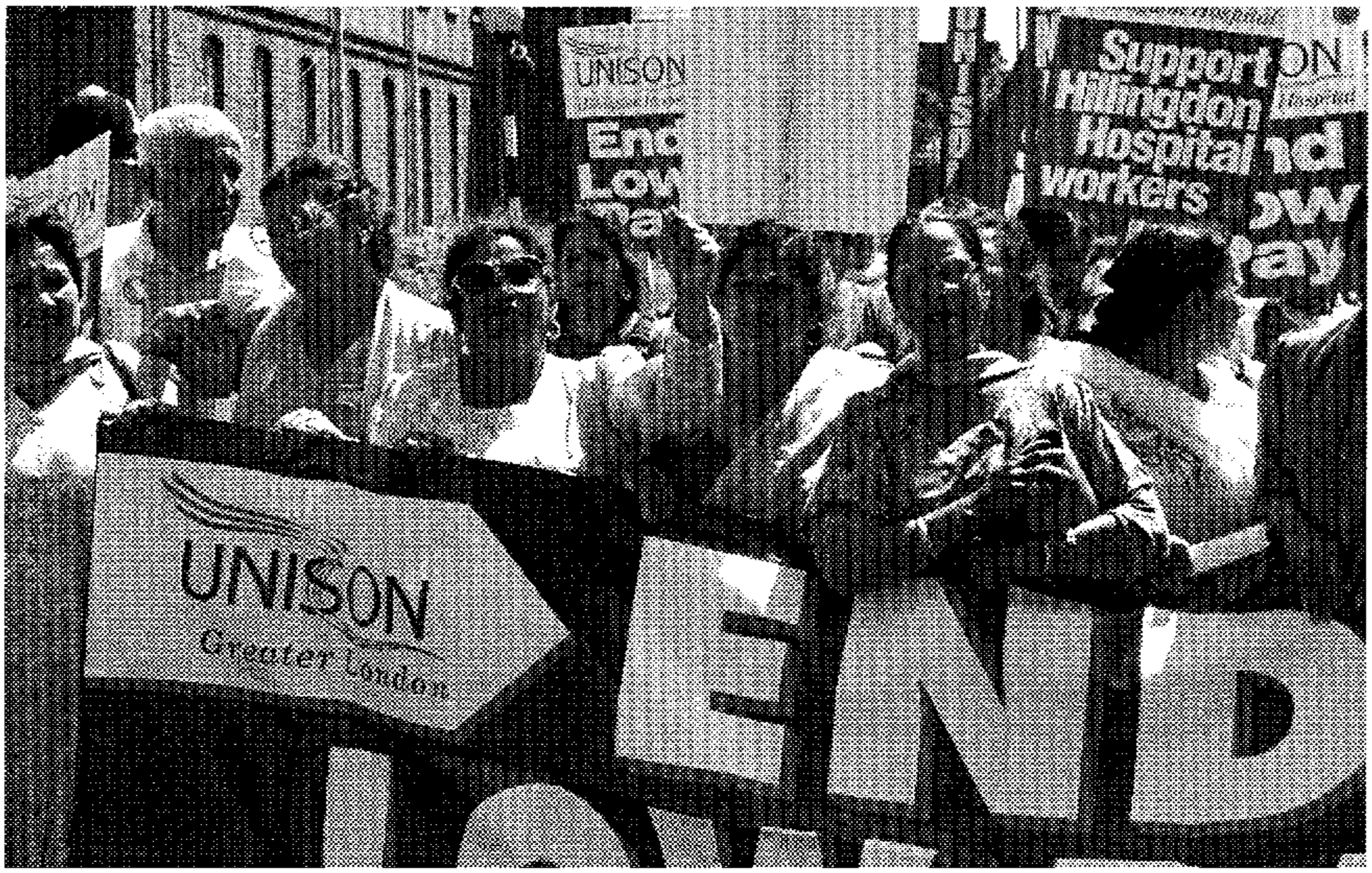
The pseudo-radical imagery of the book, as shown by its fierce denunciation of New Labour, cannot gloss over its real content. This defends a strategy in which the struggle for "reforms" becomes the main emphasis of political practice, and the historical necessity of a socialist alternative to capitalism is relegated to an ambiguous and distant future.

Callinicos would no doubt maintain that the whole purpose of his book is to show the viability of the alternative of socialism in the era of globalisation. But subjective motivations cannot solely define the objective content of a theoretical work. For what his work lacks is a recognition that the contradictions and antagonisms of capitalism are actually developing the historical necessity for a revolutionary change.

Thus to Callinicos globalisation is a mass of facts and figures about the growing internationalisation of production and culture. But his strategic conclusion is the necessity for political struggle on the basis of reform and not revolution. In other words, capitalist globalisation is actually presented as a form of resolving contradictions in reformist terms.

Callinicos accepts that we live in a world of globalisation, of increasingly integrated production, growth of international trade, mobile capital markets, and domination by transnational corporations (TNCs). This is the context in which the ideology of the Third Way arose. It is the contemporary form of the neo-liberal doctrine of the domination of the market and rejection of a significant role for economic state intervention.

But Callinicos is insistent that globalisation does not mean that the national content of capital has dramatically changed. Indeed, he explains, social democratic governments have historically accepted



Workers' struggles are distorted by the SWP

the economic and political limits imposed by national capital, from Ramsey MacDonald's minority government of 1929-31 to Callaghan's acceptance of IMF dictates in the mid-1970s.

Thus, to Callinicos, New Labour is not a tool of TNCs in the era of globalisation, but is instead a continuation of the traditional social democratic political acceptance of the historic domination of capital:

"Yet, set against the background of history briefly recounted above, these episodes, undeniably important as they are, seem indicative less of the impact of globalisation than of a more fundamental constraint on governments not to engage in actions that threaten the viability of capital, national as well as international."

In other words Callinicos cannot actually accept that New Labour is the personification of the needs of capital accumulation in the era of globalisation. Instead, he still wants to project New Labour as the management of national capital and so open to pressure from the organised working class.

Hence Callinicos makes an idealist criticism of New Labour for ideologically and politically accepting the dictates of TNCs: "When BMW decided to get rid of its Rover subsidiary in March 2000, the Blair government discovered it was Munich that called the shots, not the local management in Birmingham and Oxford (let alone the politicians at Westminster). On the larger political scene, the sheer size and wealth of the big corporations gives them enormous influence, particularly where, as in the US and Britain, the major parties are largely dependent on business donations to finance their electoral campaigns."

The reality is far more significant. New Labour did not reluctantly go along with the decision of BMW to shut plants in the UK, but was actually the active agency implementing this decision.

New Labour is the political form of the economic requirements of the TNCs. In contrast, Callinicos tries to abstract the reactionary political and ideological forms of New Labour from its primary economic content. This flawed methodology is based on crude idealism and impressionism. So to Callinicos, New Labour represents the brainwashed puppets of the TNCs, and consequently it is possible to pressurise the Labour government to change course. This illusion is the basis of a reformist strategy to get New Labour to recognise "common sense" and reverse measures of privatisation, etc.

For, if as Callinicos argues, New Labour has been fooled by the ideology of globalisation, it may be possible to rationally and politically persuade them to change their mind and act more like a traditional social democratic party managing capitalism in statist terms.

Callinicos' idealist approach can be shown in relation to his critique of Gordon Brown's role as Chancellor of the Exchequer. He explains Brown's role primarily in terms of ideological acceptance of Tory and monetarist economic policy: "We thus see that, paradoxically, Brown's formula for reconciling economic efficiency and social equality depends upon his acceptance of the version of neo-liberal economics under whose hegemony British society became far more polarised between rich and poor than it has been for half a century."

...Callinicos criticises New Labour for "a lack of political will" instead of recognising it as the purest expression of the antagonistic interests of capital against labour...

So the requirements of capital are not considered to be the main basis for Brown's policy, but rather Brown has been "fooled" by right-wing economic ideology. Brown has naively defended economic prudence, low public spending, inequality of income and resources, because he has dogmatically defended monetarism, says Callinicos.

This separation of the needs of capital from ideology has a definite political purpose. It is to show the "reasonable" and "realistic" possibility of the old social democratic project of the modification of the inequality generated within the capitalist system. For it only takes an ideological rejection of economic neo-liberalism and it will then be entirely possible and feasible to revert to a traditional social democratic policy of realising equality through progressive income taxation. In this way, Callinicos become a left-talking version of Roy Hattersley! "The traditional social-democratic strategy for reducing poverty has been the provision of universal benefits financed by redistributive taxation. Such an option is ruled out by New Labour's commitment to the neo-liberal policy introduced in the Thatcher government's first budget of shifting the fiscal burden from direct to indirect taxation (a policy that the IMF and World Bank are now pressing governments to apply generally). Brown boasts of having reduced corporation tax to 30 per cent, the lowest level of business taxation in the major industrial countries. The effect is to deprive governments of the main redistributive mechanism that could alleviate poverty by transferring resources from rich to poor."

In his generally descriptive outline of the political nature of globalisation, Callinicos makes no attempt to establish that the contradictions of globalised capitalism enhance the objective (material) and subjective (consciousness and practice) possibility for world revolution. Indeed, the working class makes no appearance as a potential universal and international class that is capable of transforming society.

This is expressed by an effective call for "change from above". Callinicos castigates New Labour and its Third Way ideology for accepting international inequality and for failing to regulate capitalism in a rational and efficient manner that would facilitate overcoming economic crisis.

Thus Callinicos is implicitly suggesting that better policies from bourgeois politicians can overcome the worst effects of capitalist economics. Hence his criticism is linked to defining New Labour as an expression of "a lack of political will" rather than the purest expression of the antagonistic interests of capital against labour.

Callinicos presents himself as a spokesperson for the global anti-capitalist protests. He argues that it is necessary to oppose the domination of the TNCs because the requirements of capital are increasingly against the needs of human and social progress. But his conclusion is not for revolution as an urgent strategic necessity. For the ideological illusion of New Labour's Third Way, Callinicos argues, is to reject the social democratic project of reformism, while it can still be realised in the era of globalised capitalism.

He concludes: "This analysis does not imply that it is futile to seek reforms. One of the main reproaches against the Third Way is that its policies operate well within the limits set by the requirements of capitalist reproduction. A decent minimum wage, more generous pensions and efficient public transport would not, for example, bring British capitalism tumbling down, yet New Labour shuns them."

So Callinicos' strategic approach is to show that it is necessary to modify the capital-labour relation in favour of the working class through the

development of trade union struggles for reforms. He is concerned to prove that the working class can still develop such trade union struggles in the era of globalised capitalism. There is no mention of the revolutionary potential of the working class. Instead, he considers the possibility for anti-capitalist protests linking up with trade union struggles, which will "challenge the institutions of capitalist power".

Callinicos could point to references in his book to the need for discussion about theoretical models for transcending capitalism. Formally and eclectically he does call for revolution: "Bringing such a society into existence will be an arduous task. It will mean a revolution – in other words, a systemic transformation of society, the replacement of one social logic with another."

But this call is superficial because the essential content of his analysis is to uphold a revival of reformism as an alternative to the anti-reformism of the Third Way ideology of New Labour. He explicitly appeals to the nostalgic reformism of Old Labour as the content of his so-called anti-capitalism: "In an effort to clarify the meaning of anti-capitalism, I set out...nine theses. There is no reason in principle why someone committed to a reformist approach could not accept most or even all of them. During the 1930s Labour left-wingers such as Stafford Cripps envisaged an elected government using constitutional means to force through a programme of socialist reforms over capitalist opposition. A variant of this strategy could be adapted to seek a series of structural reforms whose culminative effect would be radically to transform global capitalism.

"Beyond broader strategic considerations, demands for specific reformist measures are far from having lost their political resonance: thus opinion polls consistently show strong public support for the renationalisation of Britain's railways."

Callinicos' essential strategic emphasis is upon the continued viability and relevance of reformism in the era of globalisation: "One dimension along which a genuine renewal of the left would develop would be an exploration of the scope for a robust form of social democracy in the era of global capitalism."

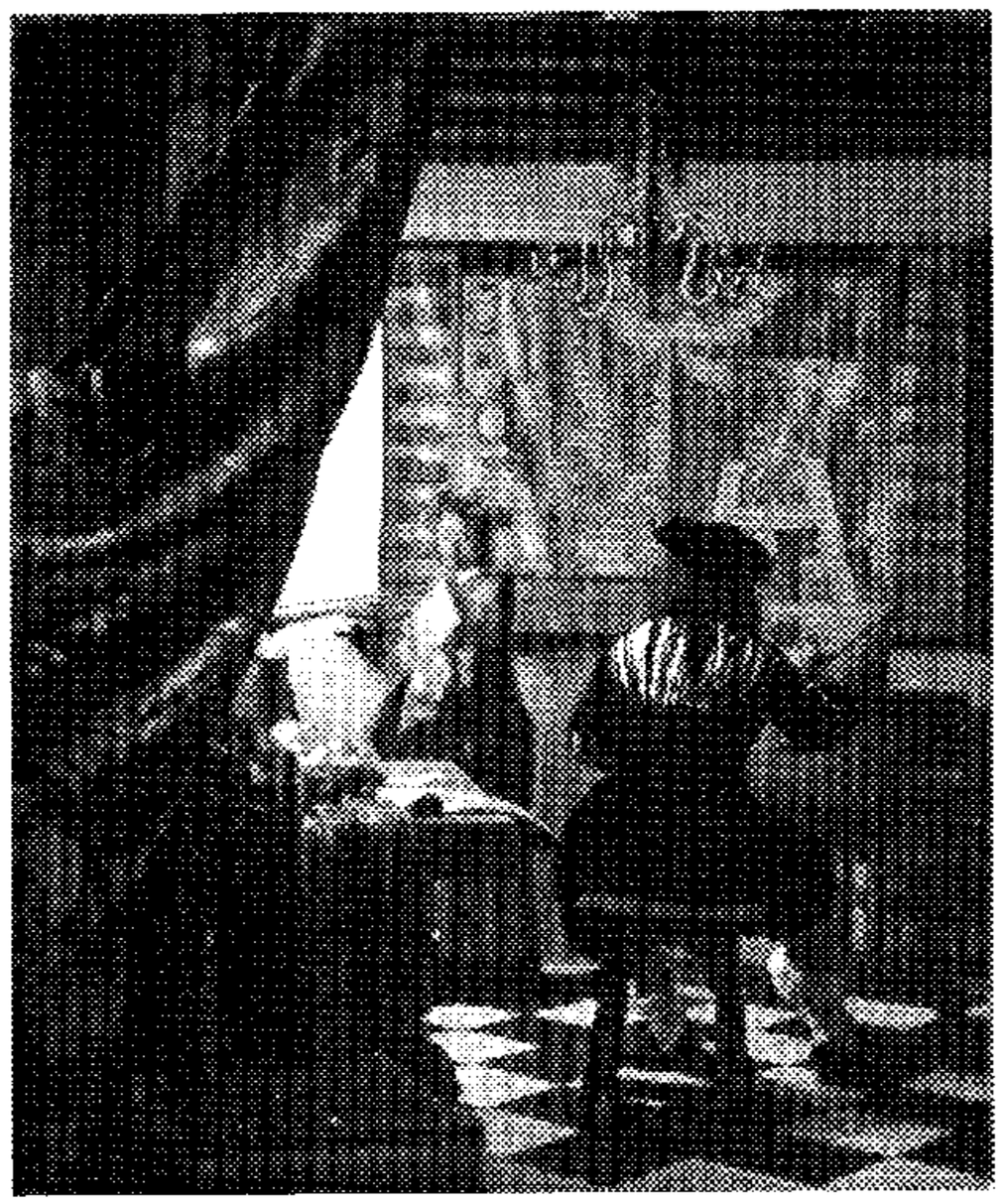
This means Callinicos has to downgrade and gloss over the actual and revolutionary significance of the antagonisms between capital and labour in the historical era of increasing globalisation within the world economy. Ultimately his politics, and those of the SWP, represent an empirical adaptation to globalisation.

Like Kautsky in 1914, Callinicos envisages that once the ideological illusions in aggressive capitalism are undermined, society can evolve into a more peaceful and harmonious form of capitalism, one which will inevitably become socialism. And pigs will fly! ■

* *Against the Third Way by Alex Callinicos, Polity Press. £10.99*

Vermeer – light years ahead

A CLUSTER OF SMALL PAINTINGS FROM 17th CENTURY HOLLAND IS PULLING IN RECORD CROWDS AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY IN LONDON, WITH VISITORS EVEN CROSSING THE ATLANTIC FROM AMERICA HAVING FAILED TO GET IN TO THE FIRST SHOWING IN NEW YORK. ***REVIEWED BY CORINNA LOTZ***



JUST OVER FIVE YEARS AGO, a Vermeer exhibition, including many of the same works as this one, drew huge numbers to the Mauritius Gallery in the Hague and then to Washington. Why does Vermeer hold this unusual fascination for today's art lovers?

In their own day, as the National Gallery's director, Neil MacGregor, has noted, it was Rembrandt's pupil, Carel Fabritius, who was considered the greatest of the constellation of painters working in Delft.

"Then for 200 years, de Hooch was the big star; in the whole 20th century, it was Vermeer," MacGregor says. And now, it seems the 21st century will follow suit in its admiration for the short-lived artist of whom only 35 paintings survive.

The French critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger first focused international attention on the artist in 1866. He researched collections in Germany, Belgium and Austria. With Berlin museum director Gustav Waagen, he identified Vermeer's hand in a number of key paintings.

The individual qualities of the artist could begin to be appreciated by more than a handful of connoisseurs as some of his works entered public collections in the last years of the 19th century. The new Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York acquired *Young Woman with a Water Pitcher*, one of the great paintings in the current show, in 1899.

Eventually, the first solo exhibition for Vermeer was held in Rotterdam in 1935, and his reputation has grown ever since. Thus, it is a combination of the detective efforts of critics, art historians and curators that has brought the identity of the artist to the fore.

In addition, the rise of a new way of viewing nature and changes in artistic style, which also marked the second half of the 19th century, were instrumental in enhancing an understanding the 17th century painter of Delft. Manet and the Impressionists shared Vermeer's freshness, the feeling of well being and confidence, his

Opposite page *The Art of Painting* c.1666-68 and left *Girl with a Red Hat* 1665-7 by Vermeer

elevation of daily life to high art. They took forward the observation of light effects with deft touches of coloured pigments.

There is a further connection between the Delft school and the 19th century advances in showing what was described as "nature's pencil" – the way light "creates" the visual world. The Impressionists worked under the influence of early photography, just as the Delft school employed devices using optical lenses, like the camera obscura.

And so, today we see the artist's jewel-like canvases, through eyes "schooled" by the colour and light of the Impressionists. We can appreciate their vibrancy, their reproduction of light at a time when high quality colour images, reproduced by laser scanners and digital technology bombard us every day through the media. But there is an added dimension here. He is not only a master of enchanting – almost hypnotic – plays of light and colour. What we see in Vermeer's 13 canvases at the National Gallery are not simply " impressions".

Like the Impressionists, Vermeer captures the immediate. But he also evokes the mediated – the bright and diffuse fall of light on the body and surrounding objects in space, on the surface and into depth and the subtlest of transitions.

Vermeer's personal style is inseparable from the social, scientific and political revolution of his time. It can be understood as a visual expression of a new philosophy, a new understanding of the material world. In addition, he studied and absorbed the innovations of southern Baroque artists like Caravaggio. Painters in the Protestant countries learnt a great deal from the art of the Counter Reformation in Italy.

At the National Gallery we can see Vermeer's evolution from 1653, when he was 21, to 1670-1672, a few years before his untimely death at the age of 43. Three major early works are an eye-opener, so different are they from what to many seems Vermeer's "usual" style. They seem closer to Poussin, Caravaggio and the Italian Baroque than any Dutch artist.

Diana and her Companions and *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* show large figures, bathed in a golden light. One is religious, the other mythological. Contrasting themes, but both depict women engaged in contemplation. Sweeps of bold colour and composition combine with telling gestures to involve the viewer in the mood of the protagonists. In *Diana and her Companions*, the goddess of the hunt has her feet sponged by an attendant. Each of the five women, their faces in shadowy profile, seems absorbed in thought.

By 1658 Vermeer drops all references to religion and mythology. Within short three years, we move from the classical to the contemporary, from sacred to the profane. We are now firmly in the present. Instead of a literary reference, we witness a nodal moment in the life of a living person. *The Procuress* is set in a brothel. It is the moment when money changes hands. The client holds a gold coin above a smiling prostitute's hand, the brothel keeper looks on. The only intimation of mortality is the ambiguous leer and dark "chador" of the procuress. The man on the left, possibly a self portrait, looks out at us, involving us in the event.

Unlike his contemporaries, Vermeer minimises the sordid aspect of the transaction. A sense of mystery and contemplation, however, persist. Now they are embodied in images of contemporary life.

Vermeer was not the first to draw his subject matter from the life of ordinary people. Countless "genre" scenes of peasants or the middle classes, "merry companies" populate Dutch paintings from the time of Breughel in the 16th century.

The Dutch school pioneered scenes of low life, and later the domestic life of the middle classes in contrast to most of their counterparts in the Roman Catholic countries of Italy and Spain. Painters such as Ostade, Steen, Metsu, Ter Borch and de Hooch took peasant life, tavern scenes and drinking parties as their subjects.

But instead of showing groups of people, Vermeer zooms in on the complex connection between an individual and another. Sometimes he shows two people in a relationship.

He presents them engaged in intellectual, artistic or domestic labour, or courtship in iconic images. He encourages mediation on the emotions and thoughts of the men and women of his time.

Often he singles out a woman caught in a moment of action, set in a carefully delineated space. Pouring milk, playing a musical instrument, opening a letter acquire an astonishing intensity. His women are endowed with a richness of significance hitherto attached to goddesses or saints. Vermeer combines the here and now with an element of infinite mystery probably unprecedented in the history of art.

Opposite page *The Procuress* 1656 and left *The Milkmaid* 1657-8 by Vermeer

The Milkmaid, one of the most popular paintings of all time, is exceptional even within Vermeer's own work by showing an ordinary servant woman alone at work rather than a lady of leisure. She, above all, symbolises a cultural revolution – what the poet Baudelaire two centuries later called "the heroism of modern life".

We are presented with the mysticism of the ordinary, finding exquisite beauty in one person, one action and a few objects made by skilled craftspeople. A loaf of bread, an earthenware bowl, a woven basket, a luxurious carpet, a map caught in a silvery light. As H.W. Janson wrote in his *History of Art:* "We feel as if a veil had been pulled from our eyes; the everyday world shines with a jewel-like freshness."

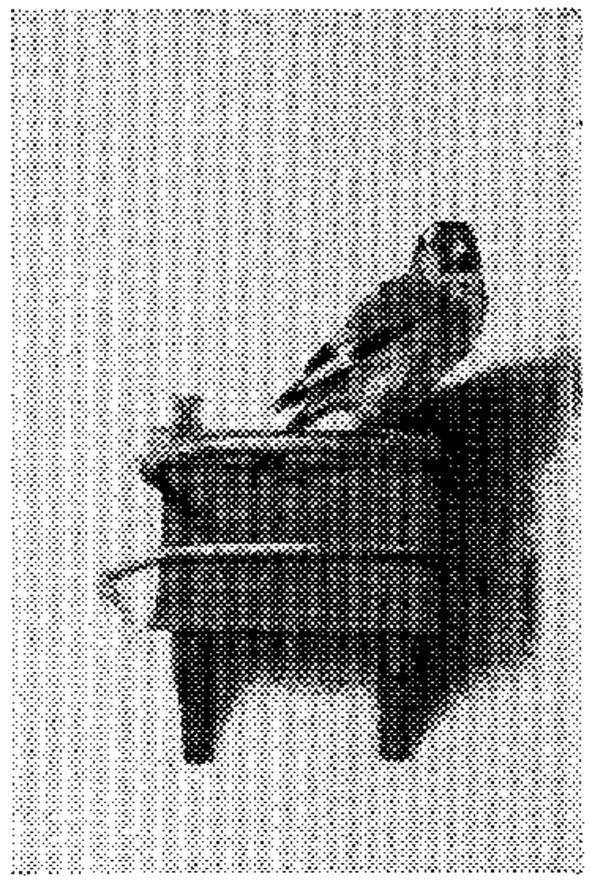
The milkmaid stands by herself, set into depth, with space flowing around her. The kitchen table is crowded with a basket of bread and crockery on the left; light from the window is balanced by the bare wall and tiled floor to the right.

The strong yellow of her bodice with its red stitching is heightened by the blue apron and upturned blue and green sleeves. The primary colours then sink into shadows which form a curved silhouette against the illuminated wall.

There is a simultaneous process of reduction and then re-synthesis whereby every object and colour is brought into play with every other. Each form, each touch of the brush plays its part, like an actor in a play. Vermeer focuses the eye on a few essentials, each concentrating thought and emotion. The intellectual stimulus seems to emanate from within the figure and her relationship to her surroundings rather than being artificially imposed by the artist.

It is a suspension in time when things are at a juncture: the milk flows from the jug. Is it about to run out? Who is it for? What lies beyond the window? We are invited to take part as privileged spectators in an intimate moment. Vermeer captures transitions, when things are in balance in the relationship of people and things. More questions than answers arouse the imagination.

Through his work, which is now nearly 350 years old, a 21st century person can explore the mysteries of human existence and study on the canvas itself a revolutionary moment in time.



In the ecstatic critical reaction to these works, the intellectual driving force has tended to remain hidden. We need to place Vermeer in the context, not simply of the diarists of the day, but the major ideological currents sweeping Europe in the 17th century.

Dutch painting celebrated the rise of a new class in history which was based on Protestantism. The burgher merchants waged war on the rule of Catholic Spain, which until 1574 controlled the Netherlands. In 1648, Spain was forced to recognise the United Netherlands at the Treaty of Munster.

The 1640s and 1650s – Vermeer's formative years – were a convulsive revolutionary period, both in the Netherlands and across the Channel in England. In 1649, after seven years of civil war, Charles I was beheaded and England became a republic under the rule of Oliver Cromwell.

Protestantism challenged feudal religious and political dogmas while discoveries in science and technology and new philosophical outlooks transformed the way people understood the world. In England, Francis Bacon put forward a materialist view which saw matter in motion and as a combination of particles and nature as a combination of bodies endowed with manifold properties. In this early materialism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels later wrote, "matter smiles at human beings, as a whole with poetical sensuous brightness".

A new spirit of scientific discovery prevailed in the Netherlands as in England. Advances in astronomy assisted navigation to distant shores. Scientists and skilled craftspeople, especially painters used lenses to study and reproduce space throughout centres of artistic activity like Amsterdam and Delft.

Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, a fellow citizen of Delft, and the executor of Vermeer's will, devised double-convex lenses held in position by brass plates – the first microscopes. With his instruments van Leeuwenhoek discovered the microstructures of biological life such as red corpuscles, protozoa and bacteria. Meanwhile in Amsterdam, Benedict de Spinoza was one of the illustrious group of philosophers of the day, who were mathematicians and scientists as well – men such as Leibniz, Hobbes and Descartes. Spinoza was born in the same year as Vermeer and outlived him by only two. He was well versed in science and mathematics, believing that the latter was the means to discovering the truth about the universe.

Spinoza was immersed in science and mathematics, believing that the latter was the means to discovering the truth about the universe. The most shocking aspect of his thought for his contemporaries was the philosopher's identification of God with the physical universe. Spinoza's search for truth involved a concept of substance as that which exists in itself and does not depend on anything external for its existence.

We do not know if Spinoza's ideas were discussed in Delft. What we do know is that van Leeuvenhoek, who almost certainly knew

Opposite:
The Goldfinch
1654 by Fabritius
Above:
A View in Delft
1653 by Fabritius

Vermeer, lived in Amsterdam from 1648 to 1654. He returned to Delft in 1654 where he worked, like Vermeer's father, in the textile business.

As a distinguished scientist and philosopher, Van Leeuvenhoek would have been aware of Spinoza's free-thinking heresies, which came under severe fire in the late 1660s. Whether or not Vermeer knew about all this remains to be discovered. But he did make two images which show his admiration for the scientists of his time – *The Astronomer* and *The Geographer*, between 1668 and 1669, which sadly are not on view in the current show.

The climax of the exhibition leaves us surrounded by eight works from the last decade of Vermeer's life. All of them are brilliant, but it is *The Art of Painting* which is truly exceptional. Here the painter marshals all his skills and knowledge and takes a leap into new territory, both in form and content.

A richly woven curtain is swept to one side to reveal the painter in his studio. No paint flecked palettes or messy brushes here. All is serene as the elegant model stands dreamily holding a book and brass trumpet. A precious parchment map shows the coast of Holland.

As in *The Milkmaid*, blue and yellow are contrasted to intensify each other, repeated in delicate touches throughout the canvas, enhanced by touches of red, orange and gold. We see the artist from the back as a black silhouette brightened by slashes of his white blouse and the dashes of his red stockings.

The austerity of northern Protestantism, the latest investigations into perspective and light blossom into a meditation on illusion and artifice and the role of painting in history, which astonishingly deploys the dramatic devices of the Roman Catholic Baroque.

The new complexity of spatial effects and use of symbolic objects, the comment on the role of the painter himself brings to mind another contemporary of the Baroque period, Diego Velasquez. His *Las Meninas*, painted at the same time as *The Milkmaid*, elevates the artist's profession to an equal among his royal patrons. As in Velasquez, there is a controlled passion as the eye roams through those elusive depths and spaces, the interaction of empty and filled volumes, contours of dark and light, to emphasise interval and interaction, movement and tension, the contrast between optical illusion and reality.

Vermeer explores new areas of perception – both visually and emotionally. He gives form to human emotions and interactions – caught at a significant moment in time. He encourages the eye to navigate a specially-designed intellectual journey while at the same time revelling in pure painterly delight.■

Vermeer and the Delft School, National Gallery until Sept 16. Open 10am-6pm (9pm Wed, Sat, Sun) price £8, £6 concessions, £4 students and 12-18 year olds. Advance tickets by post or in person, telephone 020 7747 2885.
Email: information@ng-london.org.uk
www.nationalgallery.org.uk

Fire Brigades Union - Merseyside

Firefighters strike to defend agreement

THOUSANDS OF FIREFIGHTERS FROM ALL 14 REGIONS IN MAINLAND BRITAIN AND THE NORTH OF IRELAND MARCHED THROUGH LIVERPOOL IN JULY TO CALL CHIEF FIRE OFFICER MALCOLM SAUNDERS' BLUFF.

THE MARCH COINCIDED with the start of eight days of strike action by the Merseyside brigade while Saunders brought in Green Goddesses manned by the army. The Fire Authority want to appoint as new senior officers non-uniformed staff who have never been firefighters. That would break the Brigade structure in which management must come up through the ranks.

The employers claim they want to promote women and ethnic minorities but are being blocked by the intransigence of a union whose membership is overwhelmingly white and male But this was given the lie by National Women's Committee and Merseyside FBU member Vicky Knight. She told the rally: "We've been fighting for equality for years before you turned up, Malcolm. But women are not prepared to let you use us as a battering ram against the union. We want equality, not superiority. If you want to pay someone £26,000 to sit in an office, that's up to you, Malcolm. But don't call them Fire Officers."

The FBU stance has been upheld through the internal disputes procedure culminating in a 6-0 ruling at the National Disputes panel (national Employers and Union representatives). But Saunders and the Merseyside Fire Authority decided to press ahead regardless.

Les Skarratts, Brigade Secretary Merseyside FBU said: "FBU members in Merseyside are not surprised by the intransigent stance taken by the Chief Fire Officer as we have been dealing with him for nearly two years and he continues to refuse to listen to anyone else's point of view on every issue. However we are saddened by the stance taken by the Fire Authority in supporting their Chief Fire Officer, who is clearly acting outside of National Conditions of Service. It's a shame that members of the Fire Authority have shown little regard for public safety or for their employees, the emergency fire control staff, fire officers and firefighters who daily put their lives on the line for the public of Merseyside."

FBU general secretary Andy Gilchrist spelled out the significance of this dispute for the entire FBU membership. "If Saunders can tear up National agreements and Panel decisions, they'll all be at it. The employers can either force Saunders to abide by the May 3rd panel decision or we have a problem at national level. We can recall Conference at a moment's notice. If you sack one firefighter here, you won't have a Fire Service in Britain," Gilchrist warned Saunders directly,

Saunders, as Deputy Chief Fire Officer in West Yorkshire, was responsible for a number of policy decisions which are still having a detrimental effect on the West Yorkshire Fire Service.

In 1995, Saunders refused to pay pension entitlement to firefighters who had been off sick for long periods. These firefighters should have been medically retired. Saunders, in his wisdom, did not regard them as unwell enough to be retired – even though he has no medical expertise.

Following a long legal battle which ended in the Appeal Court, Saunders and the West Yorkshire Fire Authority's actions were found to be illegal. The West Yorkshire public had to foot the bill (estimated at over £3 million).

Another of Saunders' radical ideas was to reduce the number of fire appliances sent to automatic fire alarms. He continually refused to reverse this decision, even after a fire in an old age persons' home was attended by one fire engine and only five firefighters, which is well below the number required to ensure public safety. ■