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
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...
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.”

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 newspapers endorsed New Labour…

---

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

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.