7 From Equality to Inclusion

How does New Labour's development of the third way bear on their treatment of inclusion? Is social inclusion, as distinct from political inclusiveness, connected to broad, social democratic definitions of citizenship and thus to civil, political and social equality, or is it more narrowly construed in terms of waged work? To what extent does it reflect the moral inclusion which Room sees as contained in continental versions of social exclusion, and which is present both in discourses about the underclass and in the communitariansim of Etzioni and Gray? Political inclusiveness has a high profile, connected to the consensual assumptions of Labour's third way. While this commitment is consistent with RED, the flight from equality means that discussions of social exclusion omit or actively debar redistribution towards the poor. Like stakeholders, and consistent with SID, Labour understands social inclusion primarily in terms of participation in paid work. This is most obviously the case in the New Deal or welfare to work policies — although the justifications for benefit cuts in conjunction with these policies have overtones of MUD. The Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) combines a broader conception of social exclusion with an emphasis on questions of social order, and is strongly imbued with MUD. Both the New Deal and the SEU emphasize opportunity and employability. As employability is represented as something individuals must actively achieve, it is transformed into an individual obligation. Inclusion becomes a duty rather than a right, and something which requires active performance.

THE FLIGHT FROM RED

The 1997 election was fought on the basis of commitments not to raise standard or top rates of income tax for the whole of the parliamentary term, and to stick to Conservative spending plans for the first two years of office. These policies, imposed by Blair and announced by Brown early in 1997, were seen at the time as a defensive strategy to prevent a repetition of 1992, when Labour lost the election at least in part because of Tory scare stories about the tax rises implied by their expenditure commitments. The subsequent landslide victory could be seen either as a vindication of promised fiscal restraint, or as evidence
that the self-imposed straitjacket was entirely unnecessary. Some argued throughout that the parallel with 1992 was false. The opinion polls had been solidly in Labour’s favour for over four years, even if the extent to which the Conservatives remained mired in sleaze throughout the election campaign could not have been predicted. But even opponents of the self-imposed constraints interpreted them as an electoral strategy, rather than an essential part of an overall programme. Yet the development of New Labour rhetoric and the policy changes which were effected between 1992 and 1997 constitute a continuation of the flight from redistribution and equality towards a mixture of market-oriented and socially authoritarian policies.

In contrast with 1997, the 1992 manifesto had proposed the introduction of a new top rate of income tax of 50 per cent, together with the abolition of the ceiling on National Insurance contributions, and adjustments to personal allowances which would exempt 740,000 people from paying tax. It also promised to increase Child Benefit for all children, with the full value going to every family (implying that the increase would not be taxed or deducted from income support payments); to replace the Social Fund; to restore benefit rights to 16 and 17 year-olds; and to increase pensions. These commitments were notably absent from the 1997 manifesto. Labour was hardly recognizable as the party which five years before had insisted that ‘the most effective way to reduce poverty quickly is to increase child benefit and pensions and take low-paid people out of taxation’.

Blair’s stated priorities were ‘education, education and education’. He offered less funding and more policing – or standards, not structures. The promise of training and support for teachers in 1992 was accompanied in 1997 by the promise of new and speedier procedures to sack them. The home-school contracts in 1992 were to tell parents what the school undertook to deliver as much as to set out what might be expected of parents; by 1997 the balance had shifted to ‘a culture of responsibility for learning within the family’, with homework targets. The 1992 commitments to the abolition of selection at 11 and the return of opted-out schools to local authority control were both dropped. The 1997 manifesto promised that the system of funding would not ‘discriminate unfairly’ between schools – without comment on what level of discrimination might be fair. In May 1992, additional investment was promised; by 1997, the commitment was simply a reversal of the trend of cutting expenditure, with increases dependent upon ‘savings’ from the social security budget, although both manifestos promised to reduce class sizes.