Changing British Politics

Introduction

The general election of 1997 marked a transformation of British politics. The first Labour government formed since 1974 meant an end to one-party politics after 18 years of Conservative government. But the policy stance of that Labour government completed a realignment of British politics away from the ‘welfare consensus’ which had followed Conservative acceptance of much of the post-1945 welfare state – a realignment begun by the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s.

The ideological and intellectual terrain chosen by the new Labour government was heavily conditioned by its inheritance (in terms of both ideas and policies) from the outgoing Conservative administration and by its perceptions of international economic reality. Early debates between heads of government within the European Union brought this home: the new Labour Prime Minister was talking the language of deregulation and the ‘world market’ more than the (then) Right-of-centre German government, let alone his nominal bedfellows in the new Socialist government of France. In education, the new government actually made choices which the previous one would like to have made but had not dared.

Thus a Labour landslide was to be used for Conservative consolidation, it seemed, in political economy if not in constitutional matters. Socialism (the s-word banned by the Blairites) not only frightened the electorate; it raised aspirations that were incompatible with employability and profit in the global capitalist economy.

Realignment?

In political studies, realignment often refers to electoral realignment. A swing from one party to another is one thing – and the typical swing
without realignment sees similar percentage swings in all key classes and groups. A realignment in voting occurs when key classes ‘swing’ in different directions – or, less spectacularly, when swings in key classes are of different proportion to swings in others. On that basis, neither 1979 nor 1997 qualifies clearly as an electoral realignment. Nevertheless, realignment theory often wrongly assumes constancy in the policies or ideology of political parties – Labour and Conservative, Democrat and Republican in the US (where realignment theory was born) (Chambers and Burnham, 1967) are assumed to stand for the same things, or the same ideologies, across the period of change. Where this is not the case, it is possible to have disguised realignments in voter choice and identification, on the one hand, or apparent realignments which are something less, on the other hand.

In Britain in 1979, there was less a realignment than a swing to the Right, as voters registered disillusionment with the Labour government’s ability to work with the trade unions. In 1997, it may well have been the case that Labour’s fundamental (and continuing) transformation meant that the traditional left-of-centre voters voted Labour, without changing their views, while some of the traditional Right voters, without changing their views, recognised a fresh new receptacle for their votes. A real realignment, however, concerns a dominant worldview or ideology, and therefore likely to mean a change in the social structure which diminishes or augments party support – or a change in those determinants of voting which are salient (for example religion rather than class, or vice versa; in the modern age, lifestyle rather than welfare, or some such thing).

Realignment, then, is both more gradual and more substantial than one election – a key election is likely to be one which brings change to the surface or catalyses it in the political arena. Just as students of US politics talk of ‘New Deal politics’ from the 1930s to the 1970s straddling both Democratic and Republican periods (with Lowi (1995) calling Nixon ‘the last New Deal President’), one can talk of the welfare consensus in British politics from the 1940s to the mid-1980s (when Thatcherism took on its bolder ideological garb). Given the frequent transience of allegedly seminal periods in economic change (such as embourgeoisement in the 1960s (Goldthorpe et al., 1968a; 1968b; Mackenzie, G. in Parkin, F., 1974) and also ‘Tory affluence’ in the 1980s), realignment is a process driven by ideology as well as ‘neutral’ changes to economic and social structures. For example, people may believe themselves to be the ‘new middle class’ long after the transience of their economic success is revealed.