

NINA TEMPLE spoke to **ROBIN MURRAY** - Director of Twin Trading and the London Recycling Consortium - about the very new role for the left,

Productive

NEW SOCIETY

NINA TEMPLE: Last year in DL's post-election conference

Reconnecting Society, you were talking about lifting the depression over social democracy. What inroads do you feel new Labour have made in this direction?

ROBIN MURRAY: First we need to define the cause of this depression. In the '90s I think it was widespread among the left, not just where neo liberals were in power as in Fujimori's Peru, but where the left was in government - as in Manley's Jamaica in the early '90s, or the NDP in Ontario, or the many governments that had come to power through successful revolutions in the '70s in South East Asia, and Africa. There was such optimism in the '70s, but over the next decade the new regimes had either swung into centralist repression, disintegrated or adopted fierce market policies of their own. As we surveyed the wreckage wrought by neo liberalism - which included the collapse of the Soviet empire - part of that wreckage was the economic and political models on which the left's earlier optimism had been based. The fact that many social democratic governments which did advance in these years espoused quasi neo liberal economic policies only added to the depression.

NT: What about Britain?

RM: In Britain partly because neo liberalism has been particularly savage, there has been a vigour of experiment in the economy as in local government. It is at the local level that the new sensibilities of power arising from the social movements have been manifest. The GLC is the best known example. It is striking how in the past few weeks the GLC is being cast in the press as the epitome of the old left, when it was in fact a kind of Silicon Valley for new forms of governance (some of which interestingly enough are parallel to the organisational structures of the actual Silicon Valley firms). I remember a young Tony Blair visiting County Hall in the mid '80s to discuss post Fordism and its significance for government in the light of what was happening at the GLC. But there are many other examples - Harlow is one of the least known but most challenging - where extraordinary innovations were made by councils close to the social movements.

I see the current period as very open from this point of view. The glacier is moving. The Government senses the need for a formulation of the Third Way but is still uncertain of its terms. It operates more from an 'aesthetic' than from a hard theoretical position. Novelty, economic smartness (less is more) and sustainability have become the touchstones against which policies are judged. As a result a whole variety of spaces have opened up - theoretical and practical - which makes this a period of great opportunity for the left.

I see these spaces and the Government's support for progressive initiatives within them as more important than its measured performance in delivering on manifesto promises. This is the model of the postal state, delivering packages that have been promised in the market place of representative democracy.

Labour's core pledges are quantitative, and as we know from the Thatcherite legacy of quantitative controls, this skews priorities to that which can be measured. Qualitative changes are a different matter. Part of the idea of productive democracy is that we should not wait for policies to be delivered to us - as passive citizens - but identify means which allow widespread involvement in the construction of new ways of meeting social needs. This is a period for productive socialism - something the greens have been more ready to embrace than the structures of the left.

NT: It sounds as if you are moving towards a concept of 'productive spaces'. Could you give an example.

RM: Yes. Take the case of ethical trading. In the past 10 years there has been an extraordinary growth in so called ethical trade, which grew out of the solidarity trade of the '70s and '80s (solidarity coffee, vinceremos wines and so on). Its aim is to establish new relations between small scale producers in the South and consumers in the North. Café Direct for example is supplied by 15 groups of small farmer co-operatives in Latin America and Africa with a collective membership of 400,000, all of them threatened in different ways by neo liberalism. The goal of this trade is not only to pay higher than world prices, with a guaranteed floor, but to strengthen the small farmers organisations politically and economically. We call it the 'alternative multinational'.

Ethical trade is now valued at over £600 million world wide. As with green trading it offers a great range of points of engagement, from the simple purchase of a packet of Café Direct, to its active sale in groups, to the organisation of a trading chain based on trust, to political campaigning (one of Café Direct's long standing suppliers are coffee farmers in Chiapas who are under constant threat). Building alternative trading networks of this kind contrasts with the problematic structures of inter-governmental aid, with its layers of bureaucratic and political mediation. It is exploring different mechanisms of redistribution.

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NT: And what has been the role of new Labour?

RM: One of explicit support. Claire Short has made ethical trade one of the key points of her new policy. She has been supportive of the community traders working in this field and of programmes geared to strengthening producer organisations.

NT: What about examples within Britain?

RM: There are many 'productive spaces' opening up in the environmental field. Here the greens have led the way, not only as campaigners, but as innovators of new ways of doing things. They have shown many of the aspects of



A GREEN COLLAR FRONTLINE WORKER

"This completely new method of recycling has halved collection and replaced a huge truck costing £100,000, with a new street sweeper's barrow with electric gears, for £9,000. We soon realised that it was the street sweepers, not the dustmen, who went at the pace you need if you are interested in recycling. A key role for the people up above is to defend this space for change.

What this has meant is that street sweepers have had to be upskilled. It is much more complicated to run the barrow and explain to householders. In each of these spheres, the issue for trade unions is how to participate, not just in defending old working practices, but in making alliances with all those partners in civil society who are in favour of these new systems."

our daily life can be produced and lived in quite different ways. They are exponents of the propaganda of practice.

Take waste for example, an industry dominated in the UK by multinational waste companies and under pressure to convert to capital intensive (and polluting) incinerators. One political path is to campaign for an alternative waste management system based on waste reduction and recycling. Another is to engage in establishing this alternative. Friends of the

The activists have built an alternative 'productive system', which is centred on householders. Surveys have shown that recycling is overwhelmingly popular, and that participating in recycling increases environmental awareness. As against an Enlightenment view that people have views that lead to actions, the experience of recycling suggests that the development of a point of view is part of action, and that action often precedes a point of view.

This link between knowledge

wedded to centralised organisation, suppliers of capital intensive equipment, many in the traditional professions, public sector managers. These form a coalition of resistance. Against this are the new forces, younger people and, in the case of waste, women as against the middle aged white males who currently dominate waste management. There are also new industrial interests which are potential allies in the coalition, including those sectors converting to so called 'secondary materials'. Government cannot determine the outcome of this contest, but their support may at times be decisive. In the case of waste, politicians and their key advisers have been providing just this kind of support over the past year. It has made a real difference to have a Labour government in power. But they are dependent on initiatives from civil society.

NT: What does this kind of governmental support involve?

RM: In changing productive systems, it is not usually major legislation that is needed - new laws involve long drawn out stand-up wars. What is needed is often only an interpretation of a particular regulation, a change of guidance, a channelling of existing funds, a sentence in the Finance Bill. The closer 'productive democracy' is to the front line the more evident are smarter and speedier ways of approaching things. Sometimes the key levers are so obscure that only the people who actually operate them know how they work.

NT: Doesn't that run counter to

and action is of course also present in the green enterprises doing the collection. The new 'green collar' workers now know more about the industry, and alternative possibilities than any civil servant or indeed any senior manager in a large waste company. This is an example of productive democracy. It has decentralised control over production and industrial knowledge.

NT: How would you formulate the role of government in this?

RM: Changing a whole system of production requires building a productive coalition. On the one hand there are forces resistant to change - the large companies

Earth have followed both these routes. The practical initiatives, connected though the community recycling network, have made the community sector the largest kerbside recyclers in the UK. They have become a major economic force. Green activists have invented new low-tech, electric collection vehicles that operate at one tenth of the capital cost of conventional wagons and run on the pavement rather than the road. In conjunction with local councils, they have already created over 2,000 jobs, requiring new skills, and have collected recycled materials that are the basis for a revitalised paper and aluminium processing industry.

political parties, trade unionists and Government in a...

democracy

NEW
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any kind of 'open government'?

RM: From the viewpoint of production the concept of 'open government' begs the major organisational question posed by FW Taylor in the 1890s. How does any one in management, let alone politicians or a wider public find out about what happens on the front line of production. Taylor designed an organisational system which sought to concentrate knowledge in management, and was one of the foundation stones of Fordism. In public services this model is profoundly inadequate. Quite apart from the deskilling of front line workers, there is no way that a senior manager or politician

in political theory. There has been no general theory of political production, of how materially the effects in the political sphere (whether services, or the production of law and force for example) are produced and therefore how they can be democratically controlled.

The importance of this point is that given the ever increasing complexity of contemporary capitalism, the myriad of decisions that have to be taken in the public sphere (let alone the private) it is impossible with existing forms of organisation and political representation to control the beast. The core institutions of Fordist democracy – the mass party, mass

are growing social movements centred around the way goods are produced, about whole systems of production. In Japan for example the concern of parents for their children's health has led to the growth of a massive co-operative consumer movement, organised on the basis of home delivery, which is supplied by known local producers and organic farmers. This movement, which now has 12 million members, arose because of a distrust of the health effects of branded food. It has led to the strong growth of organic farming in Japan in the '90s and to the virtual elimination of supermarkets in some regions. This system is

NT: But surely there are some sectors where large scale investment is required, such as transport?

RM: The era of mass transport was centred round modes of transport – whether railways and trams or cars and roads. Much transport thinking is still locked into the speed up of modes, the building of new railway lines and so on. If we start instead from the traveller as producer whose need is access, then many things follow. First new zoning of urban centres can bring people nearer to the workplace (Toronto have increased those households living in their urban core by 30,000 during the '90s and this has saved 1.2 cars per household). Then there is a question of the journey, which involves the efficient production of millions of different journeys every day. When you look at it like this you discover that the issue is not modes but the links between modes. Very little research is done on journeys, but a recent survey in London found that over 50% of the time taken travelling around London using public transport is spent in switching modes. Instead of building new tube lines, an investment in speeding up interchanges, regularising services, and delivering integrated information so that the traveller can better plan their journey, would involve only a fraction of the cost. The city of Curitiba in Brazil has transformed its transport system on this basis – designating bus only streets with speedy interchanges – and is a model of the new mode of public provision. In Curitiba's case the new system

RM: A key role for the state is the setting in place of productive systems which allow for citizen centred provision, the supply of necessary elements of support (notably advice and equipment), the defense of public spaces for individual and collective pursuits, and the guarantee of access and collectivity. At the same time it needs to reform the system of public finance to allow for the partial funding of coalitions of producers that are formed around the new systems (the proposed use of lottery funds for healthy living centres is a good example).

NT: What about the issue of agency and in particular, what is the role of trade unions?

RM: Involvement in the new productive systems produces its own constituency. It is a form of politicisation, supported through magazines, networks, and situationist actions. At the level of formal organisation – necessary in terms of the circulation of power – both political parties and trade unions still have a critical role.

The trade unions because they above all are based on the organisation of production and are in a critical position to determine the types of new productive system which are put in place. Politicians for their part play a critical part as brokers in the formation of productive coalitions and for ensuring that the state supports these coalitions in appropriate ways.

NT: A lot of the left are frustrated and are looking to a new left wing party to redress their feelings of betrayal. It doesn't sound as if you think this is particularly useful.

RM: The idea of betrayal is linked to expectations, and is not one I find fruitful at the moment. Rather the opposite – I think the present Government has opened up more spaces than I expected, particularly in the environmental field. I would rather turn the question to us – readers of *New Times* and activists in social movements – and ask how far we can take advantage of these opportunities, not least the space for new theoretical formulations of democracy and economic organisation. A part of this will undoubtedly be a critique of the structures of mass democracy. Of course we need proportional representation because that allows innovation, whereas current political systems are profoundly risk and innovation averse. And we need new forms of political parties to replace the dead forms which are our current inheritance.

As I said a year ago, I see the issue of organisation, how we organise in the state, the market economy and the third sector, as the 'big one' for the left. I have come to this conclusion as an economist working on the economic problems resulting from the forces of globalisation. A lot of the frustration and depression of the left throughout the world can be traced not to values, but how to organise production and distribution to reflect those values. The problem is not money. It is the lack of organisational capacity for creating a 'new times' social economy that can hold its own 'in and against' the market. That is what we must try and address.

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can know how refuse collectors do their job when there are 10 or more layers of management above the front line worker. Today's public service require a new priority to be given to the front line worker, the front line user and the quality of the relationships between them. Open government in production should start from there.

NT: How then would you define productive democracy?

RM: Productive democracy can take on four meanings:

- The design of systems which allow for citizen involvement/control individually or collectively in provision of their own services (whether self help health centres or tenants control).
- The design of services which meet wider social and environmental goals if they are based on citizen involvement in production (such as energy saving, or transport minimisation).
- The linking of public sector workers and citizens in the joint provision of services (that is a breaking with Taylorism in the public sphere).
- The engagement of producers/citizens in the design of the systems in which they themselves are engaged.

The significance of the idea of productive democracy is that it goes beyond the traditional problematic of democratic theory which is how to control decisions on collective issues. Theories of representative government have centred round the issue of the 'circulation of power', and have developed in parallel with the theories of economic circulation (exchange, distribution and consumption).

Bentham's *First Treatise on Government* came out in the same year as Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, and Bentham saw his theories explicitly as the public sector complement to Smith's theories of the market. The theory of economic production did not appear until Marx and has since been developed by Schumpeter, Freeman, Perez, and Michael Best. As yet there has been no equivalent

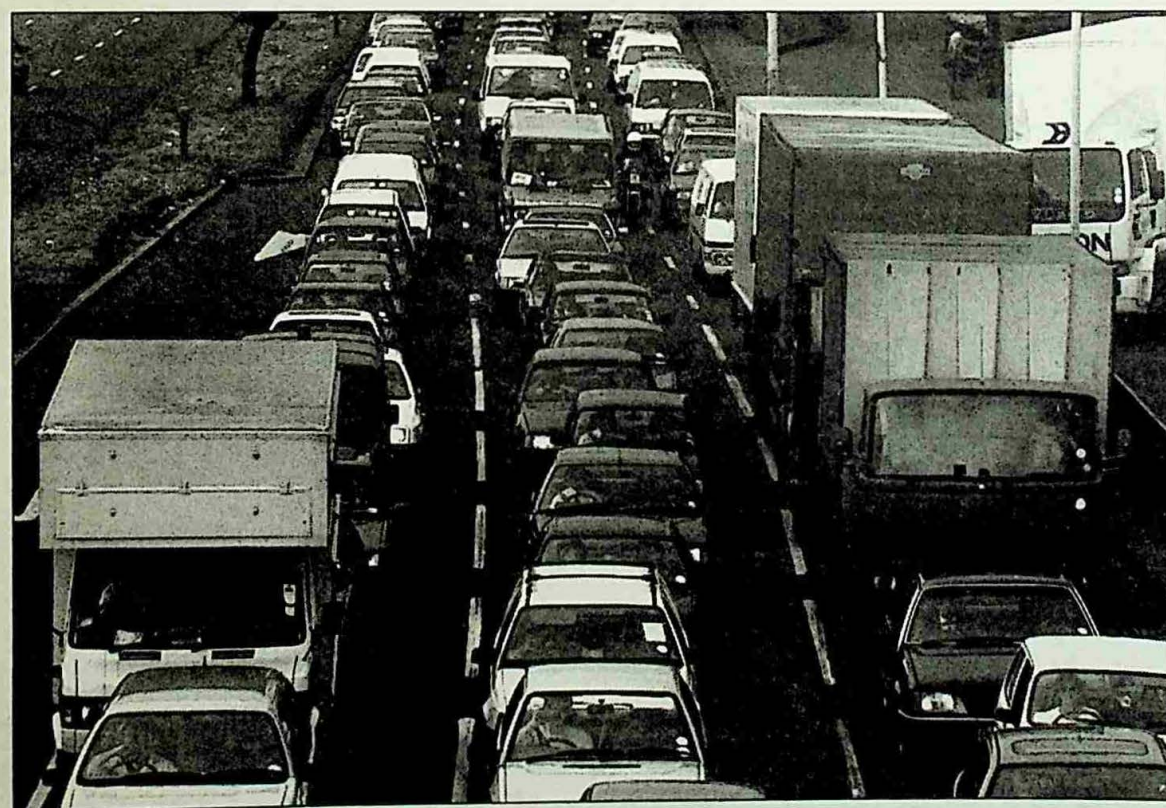
administration, the mass media – which were welded onto the early modern ideas of representative government, have themselves become archaic to the requirements of late 20th century society.

NT: We can agree with the inadequacy of these traditional institutions. But surely there are severe practical constraints in involving citizens in public or social production. Is there not a danger

almost entirely run by women. They work in the distribution centres, they deliver the food, and maintain contact with the suppliers. You could look at this as increasing the unpaid work of women, or you can look at it as a social movement to take back control of the food economy.

NT: How widespread is this trend?

RM: If you consider the main sectors of public need there are



that as with the Tories' idea of community care, this will just be putting pressure back on women in the home?

RM: There is this danger, but I am talking about a much larger change in what could be called the 'mode of consumption'. In the period of Fordism, consumers were defined passively, they were deskilled. Their impact came only through their purchasing power in the market. This was true of many public services as well as areas of private production. Today there

parallel movements. In health there has been an upsurge of interest in preventative health and alternative medicine, which centres round an active rather than a passive patient. In other fields from energy, housing, water, culture, and of course education, the systems that are designed with citizens, and operated by them, are proving far more effective than those centred round passive consumers served by large scale large scale plant – whether they be nuclear power stations or high rise blocks.

saves time. In other sectors – such as food or health or education – there is more 'domestic labour' involved, but the very term domestic labour already seems inadequate to describe activities which are the centre of people's expressive lives. What is required is a reduction in working time to make greater space for what could be called 'democratic time'.

NT: How do you see the productive role of the state in this new way of thinking about social consumption?