16 Cf. Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', *Political Writings, III. The First International and After* (London, Penguin Books, 1974), p 213.

17 Cf. Lash, *A Matter of Hope*, p 271.

18 At least, *I think* that this is what Barth asked! Bentley gives it as the assertion that 'In the materialism of Marxism some part of the resurrection of the flesh lies hidden' (op. cit. p 68). He took it from F.W. Marquardt, *Theologie und Sozialismus. Das Beispiel Karl Barths* (²Munich, 1972), p 15. Marquardt took it from W. D. Marsch, "'Gerechtigkeit im Tal des Todes". Christlicher Glaube und Politische Vernunft im Denkens Karl Barths', *Theologie Zwischen Gestern und Morgen, Interpretationen und Anfragen zum Werk Karl Barths*, edited by W. Dantine and K. Lüthi (Munich, 1968), p 181. Marsch took it from *Karl Barth. 'Der Gotze Wackelt': Zeitkritische Aufsätze, Reden und Briefe von 1930 bis 1960*, ed. K. Kupisch (Berlin, 1961), pp 120–121, where it appears as: 'Hat die Kirche eingesehen, dass im Materialismus des Marxismus etwas steckt von der Botschaft von der Auferstehung des Fleisches?'. Kupisch was reprinting an interview which first appeared in 1947 in a German evangelical periodical entitled *Unterwegs*, which is to be found in four libraries in Germany and none in Britain.

# What's The Big Idea?

Ann Dummett

Suppose a fairy godmother were to appear and offer you three wishes – not, as in the folk tales, for yourself, but for the future of the world or even just for the future of the country. My guess is that the instant answers from almost everyone would start with No. No more hunger; no more wars; no terrorism; no nuclear weapons; no more unemployment. But suppose the fairy godmother were to reply, rather acidly, that she was in the business of granting positive wishes, not negative ones, and that you must say what you actually wanted to happen, how easy would it be to formulate what you wanted in the few brief moments before, in exasperation, she vanished into the blue?

There would be two kinds of difficulty in stating three wishes. The first kind would be the technical problem of finding positive answers to what is wrong: for example, unemployment is obviously appalling and should be replaced by full employment, but even if a wave of the wand would achieve this, what exactly would "full employment" be? Would it be a situation recognisably better than the present one, with far more people having jobs but with a considerable number still unwillingly out of work, or doing unpleasant and badly-paid jobs, or having to work through every weekend in



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order to make enough to keep the family going? A world in which nuclear weapons had, by magic, been made impossible to produce, would still be a world manufacturing cluster bombs, napalm, bacteriological weapons and expanding bullets. But the challenge of the fairy godmother would touch a deeper problem than these. One might readily think, not just of three, but of a hundred wishes that responded to obvious present miseries in one way or another, but it would be difficult to put them together constructively. We should have to say not only what is wrong – that is easy – but what we want to happen. What is our vision of the future we want to see realised in our lifetime or our children's liftetimes?

Not only in Britain but in many other countries, capitalist and socialist, democratic and authoritarian, the vision of the future has dimmed. In this final quarter of the twentieth century, there is a widespread unease: a feeling that things are getting worse, not better, that all promises are hollow and all systems corrupt, that we must work hard just to stop things getting worse, or to make them at least worsen more slowly instead of worsening fast. There is no sense of hope. This is a state of mind that often afflicts the old, who throughout history have thought that the world was getting worse since their young days, and also the very poor, who learn early in life that just to get through, to survive, is a considerable achievement. But again, the problem goes deeper. The trouble is not so much a belief that the future is unlikely to bring everything the heart could desire: it is a fear that there is no real future to be faced at all. One individual may expect the world nuclear cataclysm, another see only the prospect of his own old age made miserable by inflation, the breakdown of medical services or the loss of his home: one may fear general social breakdown and lawlessness, another may be a year out of school and suspect, without really being able to face the idea squarely, that he will never get a job throughout his life but will spend a lifetime on social security. Fears for the future that are too worrying to allow through to the surface of the mind are not confined to the poorest or most pessimistic. In West Germany, still a very prosperous country and on the whole a very stable one, the economic recession has brought unease. So highly organised, so rich though it looks at present, this is a society with deeply-rooted fears of chaos. Twice within living memory it has suffered appalling hardships in the aftermath of defeat in war; the hyper-inflation of the 1920s left deep fears of financial instability; the Nazi era, often referred to now in television plays and documentaries, is a standing lesson of how rapidly and appallingly a society can be changed for the worse. The "economic miracle" of the last thirty years has been not only a triumph of consumerism but a triumph of peace, stability and democratic gov-



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ernment: a threat to that miracle is a threat not just to the new Mercedes-Benz but to the whole sense of security of the community. In this context, a middle-aged middle-class man with nothing worse to fear, in the short run, than a decline in real income, and a middle-class girl who will not get the sort of job she wanted when she leaves the university, though she will probably get some job she had not much wanted, both shy away from thinking about the future in the long term – with the same effect, though for less stark reasons, than the teenager in Liverpool or the factory-worker in his fifties who may suddenly be made redundant. The effect is to avoid thinking too hard about the future at all, to look only a very little way ahead.

This lack of confidence in the future is expressed, at the level of political leadership, in piecemeal programmes that are not informed by any guiding idea. The big political ideologies of the last hundred years have exhausted their resources. A big idea, in politics, is not always coherent or obviously practicable; what it offers is a vision of a future society to be worked for, an end to which immediate policies are the means. In the developed industrial countries there is a vacuum where the big idea ought to be. Nobody has a clear idea of the kind of society he or she is aiming for in the next twenty-five years. The only hopes offered are minor modifications of the *status quo,* whatever that may be in the country concerned, and the purpose of these modifications is more like a struggle to get back to the recent past somehow than a struggle to find a new future. Those were the days – not in a remote Golden Age, but ten or fifteen years ago, with economic growth of so many per cent a year, with new shops opening, with full employment. What policy must do is achieve economic growth – well, slow down the shrinkage: it must hope shops can do a bit better; it cannot ever again achieve full employment, perhaps, but it must try to slow down the growth of unemployment. It must do something to contain social discontent – maybe by arming the police, maybe by having programmes to plant trees on slag-heaps, maybe by encouraging young people into courses of study. All this sounds pretty hopeless, and of course it *is* pretty hopeless – literally so. Policies are not based upon hopes but upon a conviction that things are sure to get worse; the only thing to do is to patch things up here and there.

There are a few positive intentions about, for the realisation of innovations, but their nature only emphasises the larger problem. "The new technology" is often mentioned as the hope of the future: another industrial revolution, a provider of new services and new sorts of jobs. The trouble with microchips, however, is that their development would throw very large numbers more people



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out of work than are unemployed even at present. The workforce they need is highly skilled and small; the workforce they would displace is varied and very large. The argument that all technical innovations that saved labour have been greeted with similar suspicion but have in the end led to new wealth and new jobs, so that the "new technology" should be welcomed, is not altogether convincing if you happen to be outside the professional and managerial classes. Earlier innovations brought new prosperity in the long run: they also often brought great misery for decades to displaced workers, such as handloom weavers. Moreover the prosperity they brought depended on expanding markets: it was one thing to produce cotton cloth by machine for a growing Empire when Britain was the leading industrial power, but it is quite another to compete in the new technology with all other industrial countries for a world market. Perhaps this new industrial revolution will be great and good, but the point at the moment is that it does not offer cause for optimism to people at large, and it is nothing like big enough as a political idea to be the focus of general effort.

Nor is it big enough for politicians to offer it as a major aim. We are still left with the political vacuum: what sort of society do we want to prepare for? One can appreciate how important the present uncertainty is by looking back to political situations where there has been a real sense of the future. During the Second World War, and in the five years after it ended, Britain had a very strong sense of the future. It embodied a broadly socialist idea, though it was in fact shared by people in other parties. A new sort of society, with secondary education for all, with a welfare system that cared for everyone, according to need and not ability to pay, from the cradle to the grave; central planning of the development of towns; new road systems – not just for better communications but for public safety, to avoid death and injury on the old roads; a planned economy to avoid the old swings of boom and slump. National planning was one essential component of the idea, with control of selfish interests in the general interest of all; a secure, unworried future for the individual, rich or poor, was another. It was a vision that offered hope to everyone. And, in spite of difficulties, mistakes, and some second thoughts, a lot of it actually came into being. The Butler Education Act of 1944, the establishment of the National Health Service, the Town and Country Planning Act (though its effect was not at all so good as had been hoped), the nationalisation of major basic industries, and much more, were carried through in a very short space of time. For a few brief years there was a closer approach to social equality than there had ever been before; the maintenance of food rationing until 1951 ensured that basic food supplies were cheap and fairly



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distributed. Not all that happened was good, but there were two enormous advantages that are conspicuously absent now. First, difficult things got done, because there was the will to do them. Second, people in general, were not demoralised – even through the appalling fuel crises and the tiresome shortages, hope bred hope. It was all a bit difficult, but it was going to get better. The Festival of Britain in 1951 symbolised, and virtually ended, the period.

In the 1950s, consumerism, and economic growth, became the new visions: everyone would eventually get a car, washing machine and television; after that they would have two cars, a bigger house and a dishwasher, and so on. The simple idea was that everyone would get a little better off every year than he or she had been the year before: this vision too had an appeal for everyone. Just as conservative and liberal politicians had had to take bits of the socialist idea on board, socialists from the 1950s onwards took on packages of conservatism: first Conservatives claimed on platforms that they had been the true founders of the Welfare State and then Labour politicians claimed they would be the best financial and business managers for the economy. A society's vision of the future is not necessarily the preserve of one party: on the contrary, wherever the particular vision has originated, all parties have to claim to be its true interpreters once it has taken hold of the popular imagination. (Similarly, in a one-party State, particular party officials are judged by their capacity to bring the party ideal to fruition.) Postwar Britain was imbued with ideas which had been developed by socialists for half a century or more; Britain of the fifties and sixties was inspired by Americanism: equal opportunities in a free market, the take-away food in the cheap car, rapid replacement of consumer goods. This philosophy was called economic growth: what it really meant was a society that was good for business. Growth meant that business got richer and their employees could then be better paid and buy more goods that business had produced; it did not mean good housing, adequate public transport or other services. It was very good for the rich, pleasingly good for the people in the middle, and very bad for the very poor. What kept the system stable was that the band of people in the middle grew larger: life really did get better for the well-paid worker as well as for the manufacturer; those for whom life got worse were not a significant power-bloc, and were regarded by the rest of society as misfits – hence terms like "problem family" and "inadequate".

This vision of annually growing prosperity was the dream of all the industrialised capitalist countries through the sixties and into the seventies. In European countries it did not have quite the same character as the old "American dream" of raw free enterprise, be-



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cause there was already a socialist infrastructure to build on: centralised government planning, comprehensive social insurance, State ownership of some large enterprises. Sweden was the pattern of what all were attempting, with variations of their own: a strong framework of planning, humanitarian laws, full employment and a society almost entirely middle-class and comfortable. But from 1973 onwards nothing was the same. Even Swedish full employment and prosperity faltered. The oil crisis, higher interest rates, the world recession tore the dream apart and no political leaders were ready with a new answer.

A big idea in politics has two chief qualities: first a dream of the future that has an appeal for most people, and not just a minority, and that can be very simply and generally expressed: and secondly, a theory of social structure and political action, the methods for translating the simple dream into complex reality. If the aim is stability and internal order, the method may be a hierarchically planned society with a powerful single ruler: a monarch whose authority is divinely sanctioned, or a leader whose personality becomes a legend. In the twentieth century, socialism, in a very broad sense, has been the most important idea with a dream of social equality, protection of the individual ordinary man and woman from poverty, sickness, unemployment and ignorance, and elevation of the dignity of the worker. Even Fascism, so violently opposed to Socialism, had to couch some of its appeal in socialism's own terms, and Roosevelt in the 1930s had to use some socialist methods while carefully avoiding its rhetoric. The method of organisation designed to achieve the socialist dream has been central planning, with government taking over control of important sections of the economy and of finance, and government providing services such as universal education and health care.

In both western and eastern Europe, these centrally planned structures have come into being in various forms. Some countries have advanced a long way towards social equality, if one compares the present situation with that of a century ago – and yet social equality is still very far away. The poor are still with us: so are the very rich. Privilege has changed its face but not its character or importance. The agricultural worker in the Soviet Union who is not allowed to leave his village in search of work in the city is not equal in any practical way with the senior party official in Moscow; much more glaringly, the men and women who sleep rough in London streets, in cardboard boxes so as to keep out the cold, are not equal with those who sit on the British Rail Board or the directors of Shell. In France the African worker who lives in a hostel and cleans the streets, and may be seized by the police at Barbès-



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Rochechouart underground station, is not equal with the youthful judge who has a handsome flat in Paris and a family place in the country. All these inequalities concern income, security, power, personal respect, the chance of a decent family life – the very inequalities that policies have been supposed to remedy over many years of activity, whether in the name of Communism, Social Democracy, Christian Democracy or what you will.

The shock of the world recession in the 1970s hit the leaders of established political parties and systems like a blast wave, because they could no longer pretend, to themselves or to others, that the dream would still come true. Rank and file members of the public had long been aware that governments did not and could not deliver what they had promised: it came home to those governments with awful suddenness that this was true. The popular reaction was to turn, though without wild enthusiasm, to anything that offered a change, just in case any change was better than none, but voters and politicians alike shared the conviction that everything was bound to get worse.

Mrs Thatcher is the one political leader who has maintained absolute self-confidence. She took the amazingly bold and simple step of offering no dream at all: everything was going to get worse in the short term, in her programme, and, sure enough, it has. Her trick is to hold a mirror up to the twentieth century, showing everything the opposite way round: no State control, no master-plan for the economy, no guarantee of work, no belief in equality or in a right to be cared for. This sudden throwback to classic nineteenth-century *laisser-faire* is so startling that it has put all opposition, inside and outside her own party, into disarray. Her popular appeal probably rests on the fact that she looks completely sure of herself while everyone else looks uncertain and gives qualified answers. But boldness without vision can succeed only in one of two ways: either it must be ruthless in holding on to power or it can last only so long as, in Mrs Thatcher's own phrase, "there is no alternative".

One thing is sure: no alternative can emerge, no political big idea can catch popular imagination, fire people's enthusiasm and release their energies in its support unless it is an idea that convinces people that the future can truly be better. What is needed is a political theory that embodies real hopes: aims, for example, at full employment, and justifies its aim with a radically new plan. It will not be a theory based on the conventional assumptions of recent years about what is economically possible and what is not. It will offer a new framework of assumptions about what the world is like. Hope, after all, is not an empty illusion: with faith and charity it is one of the great virtues.



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