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Labour landslide is a gamble for Britain

THE LAST time Britain's Labour Party enjoyed a landslide victory was 1945. War leader Winston Churchill was rejected by voters attracted by the vision of the Welfare State. Labour captured 393 seats; the Tories were humiliated with 189 seats. The legacy of that landslide has been a series of policy disasters, the costs of which are still being paid today.

♣ The Welfare State is bankrupt: the social experiment is living on borrowed time. The dream of universally available pensions for the aged and 'free' health services for the sick has disappeared. Socialism is not a self-financing system.

♦ The Agriculture Act (1947) was supposed to raise the living standards of marginal farmers. Instead, it enriched the large landowners through the state-sponsored boards and marketing systems, subsidies and quotas: anti-market controls that were disastrous for the countryside. Graham Harvey has documented in *The Killing of the Countryside* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997) how that Act established "The industrialisation of Britain's countryside". Ecology suffered.

♥ Towns fared no better under the Town and Country Planning Act (1947). This tried to capture part of the unearned increment that was going into the pockets of private landowners. The provisions were so badly framed that Labour managed to distort the pace and the pattern of the rebuilding of war-torn Britain.

♠ A subsequent Labour government had another try with the Land Commission (1967). When that failed, it came up with the Community Land Act (1975),

followed the next year with the Development Land Tax. And they failed, too. These attempts at directly capturing rent for the community's benefit did not just fail: they were a botch-up that disadvantaged low-income earners who needed homes. But they also enriched the property speculators who were allowed to keep time - and the tide of the political cycle - on their side.

The outcome was a demoralised Labour Party: 18 years in the wilderness, taunted by the roughshod policies and contempt of Margaret Thatcher, whose pseudo-scientific defence of what she called "the market" will with time also be discredited. For Thatcherism was no better equipped to tackle the fundamental land-related problems than the post-war Labour governments.

The losers, as ever, are the common folk. The winners, of course, were the people who owned land before the speculative boom of the late 1980s.

And now we have New Labour. This is a pseudo-Thatcherite creation which will hold together only for so long as Tony Blair is able to deliver power. But what of the poor? What of our collective sense of social justice? New Labour does not have effective policies to deal with town or countryside. But perhaps this is just as well. In a sense, Tony Blair has already served his historical function: he has dragged Labour into the post-Soviet era by abandoning the blunderbuss Clause IV promise to socialise all the means of production. Now, with a clean slate, Labour is free to figure out the answers to problems that defeated it after the last landslide in 1945.

Seats without solutions are worth nothing.