

Keep your eye on the green shoots of sanity

Shruti Vadera was right. Sort of. There are indeed green shoots to be seen, but they have nothing to do with the economy. Rather, the green shoots that seem to be pushing through the hard ground of Left-wing Labour Party policy are in the social-policy section of the garden.

Perhaps the fine hand of the new gardener, Lord Mandelson, has replaced the clunking fist of the Prime Minister. Or at least persuaded Gordon Brown to unclench it every now and then. No matter: things they are a-changin', to borrow from Bob Dylan. Or at least, might be.

The first sign came from James Purnell, the Work and Pensions Secretary, whose Bill had a second reading yesterday. Purnell announced that virtually everyone claiming benefits will have to look for or prepare for work, or lose benefits. "Benefits were not intended to be a way of life," Purnell said, to the outrage of the trade unions.

Now, we all know that the Government is quite capable of announcing plans it has no intention of implementing, which is why the Purnell programme should be regarded as a green shoot, rather than a blossoming bush. Purnell might find that thinking the unthinkable does for

his career what it did for Frank Field's. But Purnell is not a man to front for a Potemkin Village of a programme, at least not knowingly. So there might be reason to hope that the notion of individual responsibility is finding its way into benefits policy.

Purnell's problem is that the Government's macroeconomic policies undermine his efforts to get people back into work. People know how to do arithmetic. If benefit cheques exceed pay cheques, after taxes and the costs of going to work (transportation, clothes) are factored in, the couch will remain an attractive alternative to the workplace, and Purnell's system for getting people into work will be "gamed". You can lead a benefits recipient to the classroom, or the jobcentre, but you can't make him, or her, work.

Consider this. Purnell would have the long-term unemployed agree on "action plans" to tackle their drug problems, or health problems, or debt problems, and attend work-focused interviews, or lose benefits. It is a long way from an "action plan", especially as it will be administered by, among others, the 6,000 extra front-office advisory staff that the Prime Minister is adding to jobcentres, to the workplace.

Let's not quibble. It won't be easy to wipe out decades of



Irwin Stelzer
thinks Labour is at last showing signs, however small, of stepping back from statism

paternalistic government, but Purnell is moving in the right direction. Which brings us to the next green shoot – the new NHS constitution launched last week by the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary, Alan Johnson. Forgive the overblown rhetoric. Or the decades it took Gordon Brown to concede that it is right that patients "be consulted on all decisions about their care and treatment", and "have the right to make choices about [their] NHS care".

Instead, applaud the test

programme that assigns to individuals, especially those needing long-term care and treatment, a "budget" to be spent as the patient decides will best contribute to his or her health and comfort. With luck, this shoot might grow into the voucher that dare not speak its name, or even a patient's passport.

The final green shoot is the most fragile of the lot, the one most in need of care if it is to grow; it might even need a new gardener. The Children's Secretary, Ed Balls, now finds the "excuses culture" that dominates poorer communities unacceptable. "Don't tell me that poverty means low performance," he said, triggering outrage among purveyors of the excuses culture.

This is not the place to wade through the conflicting data on school performance, or the data attributing such improvements as can be found to school uniforms, better head teachers, the National Challenge programme, or visits by the peripatetic Children's Secretary. But it is the place to note that if Balls, perhaps the most Stalinist of all ministers, is willing to attack the "excuses culture", there is hope that his boss is having a rethink about the role of individual responsibility as opposed to state-sponsored paternalism.

After all, Brown has expanded his policy of political resurrection to include Alan Milburn, a man who wants to move power from tax collectors to taxpayers, and give parents an "education credit" (aka "voucher") to be spent in schools of their own choosing.

New Labour redux? Benefits are not a right, but a temporary safety net to be used en route to a job. Patients, not bureaucrats, should decide on a course of treatment, and control how their NHS money is spent. Teachers cannot be allowed to use poverty as an excuse for the innumeracy and illiteracy of their students. People power. It sounds almost like a call to shrink the role of the state in the daily lives of its citizens.

Only, almost. At the same time we have those high taxes that destroy incentives to work, the trade union financiers of the Labour Party preparing to undermine Purnell, and millions of bureaucrats who know they will be around long after Alan Milburn again decides to spend more time with his family. Those green shoots need a lot of tender loving care before they blossom, and the gardener-in-chief will have to shed a lot of long-held beliefs if they are to flourish.

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