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## Blue sky thinking – or just plain barmy?

The thinktank Demos, which was influential in forming New Labour's political philosophy, has often been derided for its more outlandish ideas. So how can it make people take it seriously? **JOHN HARRIS** reports

Imagine, for a moment, a new date on the calendar reserved for something called British Liberty Day. According to a recent pamphlet authored by David Goodhart, the editor of Prospect magazine, it might include "a US-style state of the nation address delivered by the prime minister", and would also stand as "a focal point for citizenship ceremonies". In this vision, beer cans would crack open in celebration of "the post-1689 Whiggish liberal British culture of constitutionalism, rights and commerce", while street parties were staged in tribute to "the British national myth ... of brave islanders defending freedom against domestic tyrants and continental conquerors".

This rather bizarre recommendation was published by Demos, the thinktank that is paid to come up with policies, ideas and wheezes, and has long been in the habit of chucking forth headline-grabbing proposals. Indeed, surveying the more entertaining aspects of Demos's 13-year history, you can make out the framework of some sort of romantic modern utopia where - to take a few of its more out-there suggestions - the government makes a point of encouraging alfresco eating, there is an annual "physical activity week" in Manchester, and every airport has a library. Just lately, this vision of the future has been augmented by Demos's claim that hairdressers - "the most authentic voice on the high street", apparently - might be a useful sounding-board for local councils, and that more of our politicians should step outside the Westminster grind by writing poetry. To those who only hear about Demos via the occasional headline, it all might raise the question: are they a little bit barmy?

"We don't sit down and say, 'Right – what's going to really get everyone going this month?'" says Demos's 32-year-old director, Tom Bentley (born and raised in Bethnal Green, comprehensive-educated and an Oxford graduate). "But we do look for the kind of ideas that create talking points. To give you a pompous version of it, we're in favour of public deliberation, and media reaction is a precondition of that."

And does it matter if some of the ideas teeter on the edge of absurdity? "I don't care about being thought of as absurd," he says. "I don't mind people dismissing what we say, as long as they're talking about it, and there's some substance underlying the talking point."

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Demos was established in 1993 by Geoff Mulgan, who would go on to head the Policy Unit at 10 Downing Street, and Martin Jacques, the occasional Guardian columnist and ex-editor of the 80s magazine Marxism Today. It came into being at a low-point in the history of the British left. The third Thatcher election win had confirmed an epochal crisis, but it had yet to rise to the challenge, and so Demos had two essential aims: to build an organisation that might match the clout once wielded by Thatcherite thinktanks such as the Institute Of Economic Affairs; and to focus on such non-traditional areas as culture, community, national identity and participatory democracy.

Very quickly - as evidenced by Mulgan's move to Downing Street, and Bentley's spell as a special adviser to the then education secretary David Blunkett - Demos became New Labour's thinktank of choice. A decade on, with Tony Blair too busy clinging to power to be devoting much attention to interesting ideas, that once-close relationship has grown more distant, and Demos has branched out. As well as the obligatory pamphlets and seminars, it has also developed a role as a "do tank" - seeng to practical consulting work for such clients as Manchester city council, the British Museum and the government of Finland. They join the likes of Tesco, Woolworth's, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the National Union Of Teachers on a long-list of "partners"; Demos's literature emphasises that it is a registered charity that "does not become involved in political lobbying" and claims that it only "accepts funding for projects which are in the public interest." (By way of illustrating its limits, Bentley says it recently turned down an approach from a company which makes powdered baby milk - "a form of manufacturing we considered unethical".)

Demos's airy, minimally furnished offices, 10 minutes from London Bridge tube station, are the base for around 25 full-time staff, most of whom seem to be well under 30. In January, they hosted a visit from David Cameron, who used the occasion to signal his embrace of the New Labour consensus that combines "social justice and economic efficiency". Which makes me wonder: among Demos's young, bright-eyed personnel, are there perhaps some Tories? "I'm not sure about that," says Bentley. "But there are certainly people who are interested in and engaged by the centre-right. I'm sure there are Lib Dems. And, you know, what your politics are in party terms isn't really a relevant question, because we put it differently: what are the issues you care about? Where are the communities you care about? What do you think the sources of good ideas are?"

Given its reluctance to be contained by political categories, it's not surprising that Demos has plenty of critics, and on all sides. For many of those trying to divine a post-Blair future for Labour-oriented politics, Demos has so pushed itself beyond the traditional idea of right and left that critics now think it lacks any real clarity, a problem worsened by the fact that its work has rarely concentrated on such bedrock issues as poverty and economic equality.

Its detractors also claim that in place of hardened politics, Demos provided the springboard for New Labour's equivalent of Nathan Barley culture, marked by academic gobbledygook and an obsession with trivia. Perhaps the best example of

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the latter remains Britain TM, a 1997 pamphlet authored by Mark Leonard (the wonk-turned-author who has since written the more impressive polemic *Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century*) that stood as the founding text of the government's dalliance with Cool Britannia. In the course of outlining the idea of Britain as a modern "cultural hub", it made the recommendation about libraries at airports, as well as suggesting that people in the arrivals lounge should be greeted with "a mouthful of British food".

It's exactly that kind of frippery that has tended to irritate some people - including Jacques, who exited Demos in 1998, but is still listed on its "network of associates". "What is the legacy of Demos?" he wonders. "I think Demos has produced some interesting things, but their ideas are associated with soundbites, really; with good media stories. What was the thing about the rebranding of Britain? That's a good illustration. It was quite a good wheeze, but I'm not sure it achieved that much. The thing is, the extent to which Demos became associated with the ideas of Blair says a lot. He was the obvious political bedfellow of Demos, in that he also travelled extremely light.

"I don't think Demos guarded sufficiently against being the flotsam and jetsam. It was the froth ... The danger is that you become prey to the next headline, and your work is driven by a desire for publicity. And then the tail wags the dog."

Those still attached to Demos, naturally enough, are having none of that. Mulgan proudly claims that Demos has played a key in pushing a whole range of issues and ideas on to the national agenda, including "social exclusion, welfare-to-work, joined-up government, work-life flexibility, a strategy for our cities, personalisation in health and education". Bentley follows suit: he says that all the recent talk about the work-life balance, the politics of happiness and what it is to be British owes a great deal to Demos's ongoing influence.

In the autumn, after seven years as director, Bentley will be relocating to Australia – partly for family reasons, though he will take up a new job as an aide to the state premier of Victoria. His replacement will be the Guardian columnist Madeleine Bunting. If Bentley often gives the impression that ideological labels make him uncomfortable, a chat with Bunting finds her calmly stating: "My understanding of my remit is that Demos is centre-left – that's what the trustees made clear to me, and they wouldn't want it to drift away from that." That said, the fact that British politics is in such flux - as evidenced by Cameron's ideological gymnastics - creates all kinds of opportunities: "Alignments are breaking up, there's a hunt for new ideas, people are looking around for new positioning ... It's not quite as wide open as it was in the 90s, but I think there's similar potential there for opening up a new kind of politics. That's what really fascinates me."

What, I wonder, does she make of government by hairdresser or state-endorsed outside eating? "Almost by definition, thinktanks tend to employ quite young people," she says. "They're very bright, very ambitious, and they're doing blue-sky thinking. They've got to – that's what they're being paid to do. And so sometimes some of the ideas will be slightly wacky, but some of them will be absolutely

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brilliant. And sometimes you've got to float both kinds to see what catches on and why. If Demos was playing it safe, that would be pretty disastrous.

"Take the idea that politicians should write poetry. Is that so crazy? Actually, it's raising a very interesting point, which we all know plenty about – which is that we've bred a certain kind of professional politician. What kind of person are they? You only have to meet some politicians to think, where is the hinterland? To what extent are these people under such colossal pressure that they've actually lost touch with a wider human understanding of life?"  
Her conclusion suggests that Demos's strand of political romanticism will prevail. "In fact," she says, "I think lots more people should be writing poetry"