

Labour in Crisis? — Continued

THE REASONS — AND RESPONSE

by

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The General Election of 1983 was a catastrophe for the Labour Party. Not only did the result represent the lowest share of the vote achieved by Labour since 1918; it also helped to expose many of the defects in the Party's electoral base. The election of a new leader and deputy leader of the Party in the autumn of 1983 was followed by a recovery in Labour's fortunes, as measured in public opinion polls and local government elections. It remains to be seen, however, if this recovery will continue, or if the long-term trends which contributed to the electoral defeat of 1983 will continue, making it impossible for Labour ever to form a government on its own again.

A Coalition of Interests and Ideologies

Our argument is that the events of recent years are more than the travails of a political party in hard times, and are symptomatic of a deep-seated crisis in the 'Labour Movement', calling into question the whole progressive coalition which emerged in the early part of this century. It is a commonplace that the Labour Party is a coalition of interests and ideologies. It was formed out an alliance of pragmatic trade unionists, concerned to protect their rights to collective bargaining against political and judicial attack; advanced Liberals and progressives seeking social and political reform; and socialists who in turn were divided into Marxist revolutionaries and Fabian gradualists.

The 1918 Constitution was a careful balancing of these interests. The socialists got their Clause 4 promising the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange; the unions got their block vote, giving a veto over policy development. As the party under Macdonald's leadership moved from being a ginger group to aspirations to government, a third element became important, the Parliamentary Party, which insisted on a degree of independence to interpret the programme in the light of circumstances and on the need for a wide electoral appeal.

The Tacit Understandings

Like many constitutional documents, the Labour Party constitution could never 'work' in the literal sense if it were not underpinned by a number of tacit understandings and conventions. One was that the unions would limit their interventions in Party affairs to those matters of direct concern

to them; otherwise they would give general support to the parliamentary leadership, using their block votes to this effect. Another was that the parliamentary leadership would not meddle in industrial disputes, limiting themselves to open or tacit support for the union side. Finally, there was an acceptance of the need for the Parliamentary Party to have some room for manoeuvre in interpreting the programme.

The political wing of the Labour Movement was thus a complex and delicate construct, part political vehicle for the manual working class, part parliamentary-reformist grouping. Interpretations which see it in terms only of one of these miss the whole point. Underlying the coalition, certainly, was a set of common values — 'ideology' might be too strong a word — founded in collectivism, support for public welfare programmes and liberal values of equal opportunity. Such was the magnitude of the task facing the Party in its early days, there was little time to worry about where all this was ultimately leading.

Electoral Decline from 1951 and the Causes

Doubts about Labour's ultimate purpose were in any case seen as irrelevant at a time of electoral advance. Between 1900 and 1951, Labour's vote increased at every election except that of 1931, reaching a peak in 1951 at 13,948,883, 48.8 per cent of the poll. Butler and Stokes¹ attributed to the growing pervasiveness of class as the basis of electoral choice, even at a time when class attachments themselves were becoming weaker. To its base in the manual working class, Labour was always able to add middle-class sympathisers attracted by its programme of social reform and groups whose religious or regional upbringing made them unsympathetic to the Conservatives. In areas where the culture of the 'Labour Movement' was strongest, the Party was able to build apparently impregnable strongholds, while continuing to bid for support in the marginals.

The decline of the Labour Movement and of its political wing, which is our subject, has come about as a result both of changes in the external environment and of developments in the Movement itself. The traditional manual working class is in decline and now probably accounts for less than 50 per cent of the labour force in Britain.² Correspondingly, the service sector of the British economy has been increasing as labour power has decreased in the extractive and manufacturing industries. Between 1961 and 1981, the number of workers employed in agriculture, fisheries, mining and textiles decreased by more than 50 per cent, while nearly two-thirds of the total employees in Britain now work in the service sector.³ Nor is it possible to equate trade union membership with the traditional working class. Some of the highest rates of unionisation are among white-collar workers in the public sector.⁴

Diminishing Response to Collectivist Values and Services

At the same time, Labour's traditional collectivist values have a diminish-

ing appeal. The party has become identified with statist and centralist policies which are seen as responsible for monolithic, bureaucratic and inefficient nationalised industries. Frequently during the period 1979-83 the argument was advanced that Labour could achieve an electoral victory comparable to that of 1945 if only it had a radical manifesto and leaders committed to it. The 1983 manifesto was indeed the most radical since 1945 but the difference between the two years is that many voters in 1983 had no experience or memories of the inter-war recession or the collective spirit of the war years. They did, however, have experience of the policies implemented by Labour Governments and not all of these have been universally popular, indisputably beneficial or an unmitigated blessing.

Housing standards have improved, access to further and higher education is more open and less costly, free medical treatment is available to all who need it and extensive income-maintenance schemes provide a basic security for most people. However, many modern council estates have degenerated into modern slums of uninhabitable or unlettable accommodation; the National Health Service helps more people to live long enough to die of cancer and heart disease or to suffer the indignities of senile dementia; and relatively poverty is as extensive as before 1945. Perhaps most importantly, the main beneficiaries of the Welfare State in terms of housing health and education have been not the working class but the middle classes.⁵ This is not to discount the achievements of the Welfare State but merely to suggest that policies involving increased expenditure on the social services may generate less enthusiasm in the 1980s than in the 1940s.

Greater Dependence on Private Transport and Housing

At the same time, increasing unemployment is removing the collective experience of the workplace while television and video are helping to create a more home-centred social life. This trend away from collectivist experiences is increased by greater dependence on private as opposed to public services in transport and housing.

In 1945, a majority of households were living in privately rented accommodation. Now some 60 per cent of households are owner occupiers, with some 30 per cent being tenants of public authorities (over 50 per cent in Scotland). The Labour Party in attempting to defend the public sector in housing has acquired the reputation of being hostile to home ownership. Even on the left of the Party there are those who regard as 'tasteless' the 'spectacle of Labour branches packed with home owners insisting that council tenants should be persuaded that renting was more attractive.'⁶ Yet Labour continued to give credence to this view, with a resolution passed at the 1980 Conference (composite 33) that people who buy their council houses at a discount should be obliged to sell them back to the local authority at a discount similar to that on the original sale. While this did not find its way into the Manifesto, recent decisions by Glasgow

District Labour Party have not only opposed the sale of uninhabitable houses to people who are prepared to make them habitable (the 'home-steading policy'); they have also compelled the ruling Labour Group on Glasgow District Council to refuse to make land available for private house building.

Areas and Statistics of Decline

Since 1951, Labour's support has fallen at every General Election except those of 1966 and October 1974. In 1951, 48.8 per cent of the poll (40.3 per cent of the electorate) voted Labour; in 1983, 28.3 per cent (20.6 per cent of the electorate) did so. Even in Labour's apparently most impregnable stronghold, Scotland, support has, with the exception of 1979, been steadily declining since its 1966 peak (and of course it was in Scotland that the two-party mould was first broken with the rise of the Scottish National Party in the 1970s). The decline in Labour's popularity has been concealed by the vagaries of the electoral system and the concentration of its vote in the traditional industrial regions. In Scotland, for example, with only little more than one third of the vote in 1983, Labour obtained 58 per cent of the seats. A more equitable electoral system would have given Labour only 25 of the 72 Scottish seats and 184 of the 650 seats overall, with the Alliance Parties obtaining 169.

Outside of London, Labour now holds only three seats in southern England. Increasingly, its support is concentrated in the north of England, industrial Scotland, South Wales, in areas with large ethnic minorities or a large proportion of council house tenants, and in the big cities. Despite the party's strong commitment to women's rights, only 28 per cent of women voted Labour in 1983; despite its historic relationship with the unions, only 39 per cent of trade unionists did so; and despite the radical manifesto, only 33 per cent of 18-24 year olds. On the other hand, 51 per cent of council tenants voted Labour.⁷

Internal Difficulties

Labour's internal crisis is as serious as its external one. Since the 1960s, there has been a series of clashes between the unions and the parliamentary leadership over the management of industrial society. With some 30 per cent of workers now employed by the state in one way or another,⁸ Labour governments are inevitably drawn into issues of collective bargaining. Even in the private sector, the inescapable need for an incomes policy as a tool of economic management in a social democracy has led the party to encroach on traditionally exclusive union territory. The excessive reliance of Labour Governments on wage control in their economic strategies has exacerbated this problem but is not its cause. Hence the major rifts between the unions and the party leadership in the late 1960s and in the late 1970s, culminating in the 'winter of discontent'. Nor, from the 1960s, were the union leaderships themselves content with their tradi-

tional role. A new generation of more politicised and left-wing union leaders sought a wider role, leading to a series of clashes between Annual Conference and the parliamentary leadership.

Within the Membership and Constituencies

Amongst the constituency activists, the quantitative and qualitative change has been no less marked. Despite frequent attempts at recruitment campaigns, membership of the Labour Party has been in steady decline since 1952 when it peaked at 1,014,524. By 1982, it was down to 273,803 and although there has been a small increase to 297,135 in 1983, membership is now comparable with that of the 1920s.⁹ Although belief in the need for an active mass Party is a basic tenet of all sections, it is probably a forlorn hope.

Social life and leisure facilities have changed greatly since the 1950s. Labour would have to make its meetings and activities competitive with very sophisticated media of entertainment to attract new members. In fact, meetings tend to be boring and unnecessarily long, with an inordinate amount of time devoted to organisational matters, correspondence and resolutions on matters remote from the experiences of most people. Meetings, indeed, seem often to be geared to the perpetuation of the Labour Party as an institution and not to the interests of people outside the organisation. There is also a preoccupation with maintaining jobs in the public sector with little attention being paid either to the needs of workers in the private sector or the quality of services in the public sector.

Indeed, Constituency Labour Parties have increasingly become the bailiwick of the public sector professions and semi-professions – teachers, social workers, civil servants, local government officials, employees of nationalised industries and the National Health Service – and of full-time officials of trade unions with a strong interest in the public sector – NUPE, NALGO, GMBATU, ASTMS etc. Such activists may possess both a vested interest in the expansion of public services and the education, knowledge, confidence and verbal skills necessary to pursue it. It is a paradox of a party whose members continually invoke and appeal to the working class that its activists are largely from occupations which, in terms of income, security, status and working conditions are undoubtedly superior to those of most manual occupations. Despite the activists' rhetoric about the working class, the majority of conference delegates and parliamentary candidates tend to be from occupations which are not only privileged in relation to the working class but also often carry power over them.¹⁰

Tensions within the Party

The resurgence of ideology since the late 1960s has sharpened the conflict between the new activists and the other elements of the coalition. It is

ironical that it should be at a time of declining membership when Labour had ceased to be a mass Party, that moves have been made to increase activist power in the name of 'democracy'. We have analysed this question elsewhere,¹¹ concluding that what was under way was less a democratic transformation than a shift of power from one set of elites to another, carrying the danger of further isolation of the Party both from its traditional supporters and from the reservoirs of new support which it needs to tap.

The gap among the elements of the Labour coalition and between the Party and the electorate has been growing steadily for nearly twenty years. Periodically, the alliance has been patched together again, in the early 1970s after the rift of 1967-9, with the 'Social Contract', with the compromise Foot leadership after 1979 and most recently with the new Kinnock-Hattersley leadership. At each stage, it is the unions who have had to step in, substituting for a weak parliamentary leadership in imposing peace on the Party and bailing Labour out of its financial problems. The underlying tensions, however, remain, as is evident from the apprehension about the next round of reselections of MPs and from the confusion about whether to allow Arthur Scargill to lead the Movement into a general confrontation with the Government on ground of his choosing.

And the Prospect?

Before 1983, there were still those who believed that Labour merely needed to wait for unemployment and recession to sweep away the Thatcher Government and give Labour its inheritance. There can be no excuse now for such complacency. Conservative policies are producing changes in the political and economic landscape of a scale greater than any contemplated by Labour. The union movement is being undermined, divided and reduced. The very assumptions of the Welfare State are being openly questioned. The political levy, Labour's lifeline and link with the unions, is in jeopardy.

Space does not permit us to detail our ideas for the future, but we would urge a transformation of Labour's message and an adaptation to the new social and economic realities. We cannot reinvent the old 'Labour Movement'. Labour must rather seek out new bases of support beyond its traditional constituency, even if this means weakening its ties with the unions. It must seek to shed its statist, bureaucratic image, seeking new forms of democratic control over economic and social life — the Co-operative tradition has been unwarrantably neglected here. Above all, it must accept that the days of politics as the clash of two monolithic forces are gone for ever and accept the reality of a pluralistic and rapidly changing society in which it is but one element. This implies learning quite new political games, of coalition-making, negotiation and compromise.

Unfortunately, while the new leadership does appear to be aware of these problems and is seeking at least to recast the Party's image, we see little evidence of the other elements of the Movement coming to terms with the needs of the contemporary age.

Notes:

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3. Gregory McLennan, 'Class Conundrum', *Marxism Today*, May 1984; *Economic Progress Report*, 165, February 1984 (HMSO); R. Parry, 'United Kingdom Public Employment; Patterns of Change 1951-71', *Studies in Public Policy*, 62, University of Strathclyde, 1980.
4. P. Dunleavy, 'The Political Implications of Sectoral Cleavages and the Growth of State Employment: Part 1: The Analysis of Production Cleavages', *Political Studies*, XXVIII.3 (1980).
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7. *Sunday Times*, 12 June 1983; *Labour Weekly*, 17 June 1983; *New Statesman*, 17 June 1983; *The Economist*, 15 October 1983.
8. *The Economist*, 15 December 1979, p. 27.
9. *Labour Weekly*, 4 May 1984; D. Hayter, *The Labour Party: Crisis and prospects* (London, 1977), p. 14; *New Statesman*, 28 March 1980; P. Seyd and L. Minkin, 'The Labour Party and its Members', *New Society*, 29 September 1979.
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