

FIVE YEARS AGO the question was raised in this journal whether 'the forward march of Labour' had been halted. This led to a long debate, later elaborated into a book. Looking back on this debate from late 1983, two things strike me about it: *first*, the sheer refusal of some of the Left to look unwelcome facts in the face, even though they were already obvious to any unblinkered observer, and *second*, the failure of even the gloomiest among us to appreciate the rate and distance of Labour's imminent retreat. The Labour vote, while slowly eroding over the years, had not usually dropped by more than a couple of hundred thousand between elections, win or lose. There was no reason to suppose that it would suddenly collapse.

Yet this is exactly what has happened. And before some of us have quite managed to retreat into an imaginary world behind the screens which self-delusion is already erecting to shelter us from the grim sight of reality, it is important to remind ourselves just how terrible a beating the labour movement took at the 1983 election. It is not just that Labour lost *one in five* of its already low number of votes. It is the massive defection of supporters of *all* classes, ages and genders.

In 1983 Labour is larger than other parties only among unskilled/semi-skilled workers, the unemployed and trade unionists, *but had majority support among none of these groups*, not even the unskilled/semi-skilled workers and the unemployed. They had lost support since 1979 among all three. Only 35% of skilled workers voted Labour: down by more than a quarter. Only 39% of trade unionists supported the party they had founded: a similar drop. Women had shown a slight swing to Labour in 1979, but in 1983 they abandoned the party at a greater rate than men. 41% of the young (first-time voters aged 18-22) had chosen Labour in 1979, a modest enough result for a party which ought to be able to inspire young people. But in 1983 the situation is quite disastrous. Only 17% of first-time voters chose Labour, 3% less than chose the Alliance, 11% less than the Tories — while almost *half* did not bother to vote at all. Of those who bothered to vote only 29% put their cross against Labour candidates.

Declining assets

In short, there is not a glimmer of comfort in the results of this election. As has been

Labour's collapse in June was worse than anyone expected: but what can we do about it?

Eric Hobsbawm

Labour's Lost Millions

correctly said: 'The Labour vote remains largely working class; but the working class has ceased to be largely Labour.' The surviving stock of Labour voters consists largely of people living in Scotland and the North (but Wales is no longer the stronghold it was), or in decaying inner cities, of people employed in the traditional and rapidly declining industries of Britain's past and/or in the public sector, and is more apt than not to be elderly, or black, and council tenants. The most that can be said is that the geographical concentration of the Labour vote makes it likely that the party will continue to send a substantial block of members into the Commons even if it sinks further, and that it will still be in a position to control a number of important local authorities. If this were not so, it could *already* have been reduced to a couple of dozen or so seats, like the Liberal-SDP Alliance, which, after all, has a comparable, if slightly smaller number of votes. In any case, on present showing, Labour is living on declining assets.

The disaster which has struck the party is underlined by the fact that Thatcherite Toryism has done quite poorly itself. True, it has held far more of its 1979 support than it could have been expected to do, but it lost ground nevertheless. The Tory vote is lower than 1979, much lower than under Heath, and it has mobilised just under 31% of the total electorate, counting those who did not want or bother to vote at all. This is a smaller share of voters than at any time since 1923. The triumph of Thatcher is the by-product of the defeat of Labour.

That is the measure of the task which now confronts us.

The long-term reasons for Labour's decline, discussed at length in the debate on *The Forward March of Labour Halted*, are clear enough. But while they suggested that Labour's decline would continue, unless the party did some drastic re-thinking, they did not suggest an imminent catastrophe. Arguments rage about why Labour fell apart so dramatically, but unfortunately most of them are superficial, and a lot of them are self-serving wishful dreams, and quite unverifiable. There is not much point in arguing the toss about the precise importance of the redistribution of seats, the anti-Labour bias in the media, or the effect of polls, about the lack of money and the competence of our campaign propaganda, the image of the party leadership, the weakness of constituency organisation, or the visibly growing despair and demoralisation of Labour's national spokesmen as the campaign advanced. Actually some of these weaknesses were not so much contributory causes as symptoms of the party's impending defeat. There is no point at all in arguing whether candidates of the right or left did significantly better or worse. So far as one can tell, whether candidates did (relatively) well depended overwhelmingly on the location and social composition of the constituency. The chances of any Labour candidate, right or left, in the industrial towns of southern England, which we had once won and should have won, proved to be virtually zero. The chances of a Labour candidate in Strathclyde were good, whether or not he/she supported Tony Benn. The party looked like losing before the campaign started, and it was clobbered.

Lost in advance

Only two things can and must be said about the election, and said very firmly.

The first is that far too many people in the opposition parties were not seriously trying to defeat Thatcher, whatever their official rhetoric. Perhaps initially, after 1979, many believed that the combination of mass unemployment on so vast a scale and an economic policy which looked as though it simply could not work, was automatically bound to put paid to a government that was widely disliked and distrusted even within the Tory establishment. But as time went on, it became

increasingly clear that the opposition parties were engaged in a civil war rather than in fighting the Right. They acted as though the next election was already lost in advance, and indeed I have heard people on the Left privately say as much. The fight was about the nature of the opposition to the second Thatcher government, or the next-but-one election.

On the right wing of the opposition, the SDP knew quite well that its foundation weakened the major force of anti-Thatcherism, the Labour Party. That, after all, was its primary intention. The SDP-Liberal Alliance did not seriously expect to form a government, or aim to. Its major strategic object was and is to hold the balance between Tory and Labour, and then sell its support to a government for the price of proportional representation, which would give it a permanent and substantial parliamentary presence and decisive bargaining strength. As it happens, its very success in weakening Labour has made this impossible for the time being: governments with huge majorities don't need to bargain.

But it also became more and more evident that the main question at issue on the Left was not: what government? but: what Labour Party? To put it brutally, for many, a Thatcher government was preferable to a reformist Labour government. Since very few, even on the wilder fringes of the Left, genuinely believe that Denis Healey is actually worse than Norman Tebbit, various theories were invented to delude ourselves. The old-style Labour Party could not win. A proper socialist Labour Party could win, because somewhere out there, millions of radical left-wing voters were abstaining, waiting only to flock to candidates and programmes of the Left. The election was lost anyway, so it didn't much matter that potential Labour voters were puzzled and demoralised by the sight of party leaders and activists tearing each others' guts out in public for years on issues difficult to see the point of. And so on. However, the basic fact cannot be denied, that a large body of the Left acted as though another Labour government like the ones we have had before from time to time since 1945, was not just unsatisfactory, but *worse than no Labour government*. And this means that it would be worse than the only alternative government on offer, which was Mrs Thatcher's.

The new Toryism

This attitude raises grave problems of political judgment. Not only did it (as is now totally obvious) grossly misread the attitude of the voters to the Labour Party, but it also, and more dangerously, underestimates the historical novelty of Thatcherism and the seriousness of the

threat it represents. Past Tory governments were based on the principle of avoiding class confrontation in order to prevent a radicalisation of the working class, which represented the substantial majority of the British people. Therefore, with occasional, mainly verbal, concessions to their backwoodspeople, they shared a basic approach

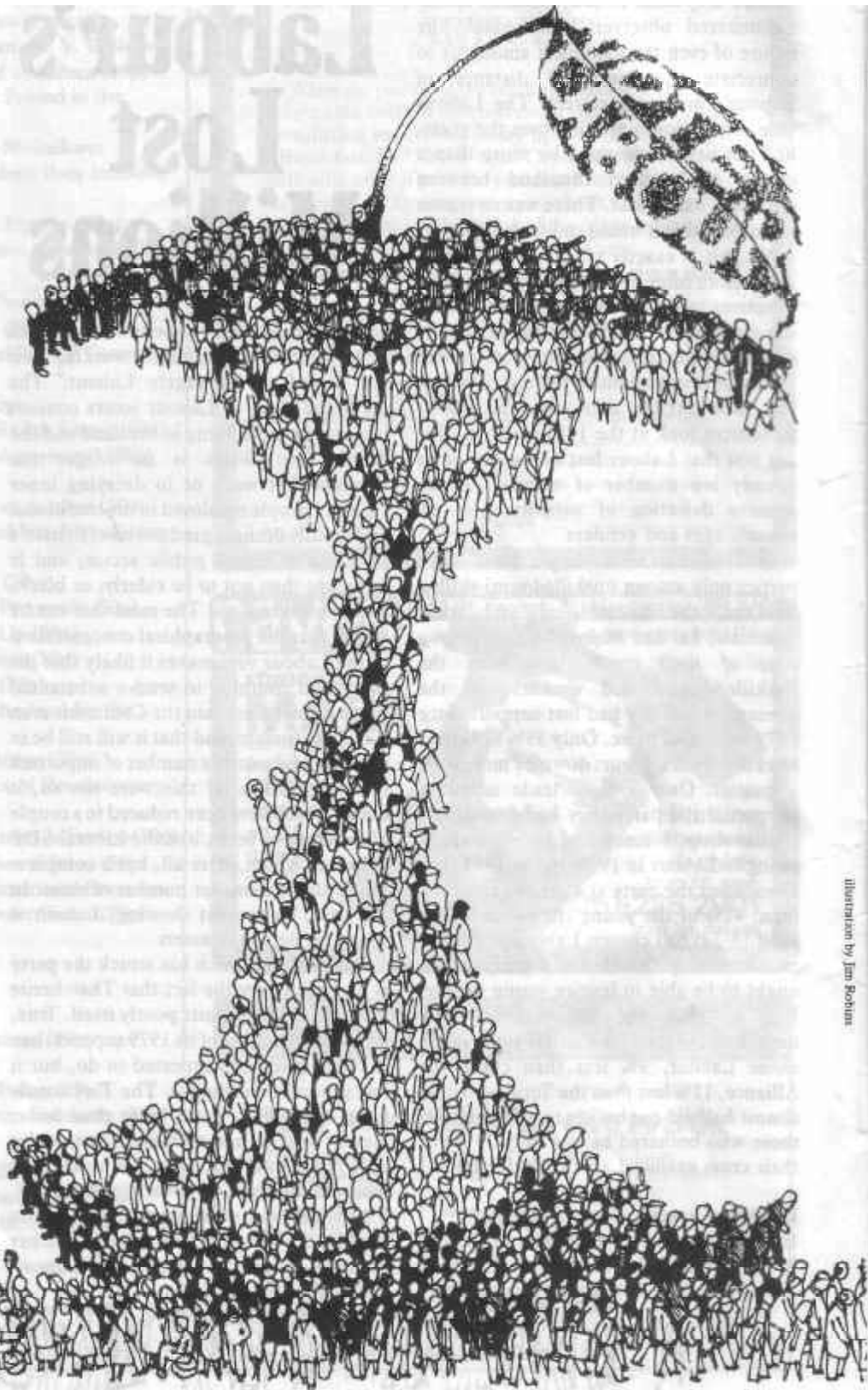


Illustration by Ian Robinson

to policy with the 'moderate' reformist leadership of Labour ('Butskellism'). Give or take a few changes in emphasis, and allowing for the growing problems of the British economy, and the gradual obsolescence of the reformist structures built in 1944-1948, until Thatcher intervals of Conservative government did not make any serious difference to the prospects of Labour governments.

This is no longer so. Thatcherism is committed to a radical and reactionary change in British capitalism, and indeed in the British political system. It is pushing ahead with this new, militant, and formidable policy of class struggle from above, and the dismantling of the past reformist consensus with all the more confidence, because it has discovered that the weakening of and divisions within the working class and the self-ruination of the Labour Party make it apparently much less risky than the old Toryism had supposed. Thatcherism aims to transform Britain irreversibly in its own way, not just to keep the system on an even keel. To defeat it, is therefore more than the routine demand of any opposition when it happens not to be in government. It is the condition of survival for a decent Britain, and of such chances as exist of advancing to a better society.

The split in the anti-Tory vote

The second point which must be hammered home is that Thatcherism won because the anti-Thatcher majority was split. And it was split because great masses of people who had previously voted Labour, who would have found it inconceivable *not* to vote Labour, or who might have been confidently expected to vote Labour chose, on grounds which seemed good to them, not only to stay at home but to vote for other parties. For the first time since the original decline of the Liberal Party, from which Labour benefited, British workers think they have a choice between rival anti-Tory parties or political alignments. The anti-Tory vote is roughly split down the middle (28%, 26%).

So long as this is so, the chances of defeating Thatcherism must be remote, unless there is a really spectacular collapse of the Tory vote in favour of one opposition group to the left of Conservatism. For, given the approximately even split between the two parts of the anti-Tory vote, the

Conservatives could drop about a quarter of their total vote, and still come first past the post.

It is vital to keep this point in mind for the next five years, because the prospect of defeating Thatcher hinges on it, whatever else the labour movement does to recover. If, at the next election, Thatcherism is everywhere opposed by two or more candidates competing for each other's votes, the Tories can look forward to being in power well into the 1990s. Some way of uniting the majority of the British people which is opposed to Thatcherism, must be found.

This will be difficult, both for subjective and objective reasons. The mere suggestion that Labour and Social Democrats/Alliance might come to an electoral arrangement is likely to produce apoplexy on both sides, whether or not it is today a realistic proposition. That is natural enough. Relations between the two sides are unlikely to become more relaxed, since both will spend much of the next years fighting for each other's supporters. Moreover, it is already clear that each side will have trouble maintaining effective unity — of right and left within the Labour Party, between Liberals and Social Democrats, as well as within each of these far from united parties. But the issue of electoral unity will have to be faced nevertheless.

More seriously, it may be misleading to assume that all anti-Tory opinion, whatever

Attlee had the charisma of an average building society branch manager

the differences, is at least objectively united by anti-Thatcherism. This is to underestimate the basic shift in British politics which Thatcherism has systematically set out to achieve — and has already gone some way to achieving. Take John Maynard Keynes, whose ideas symbolised for a generation the underlying reformist consensus of British big business and the leadership of the Tory, Liberal and Labour Parties. In this year, the centenary of his birth, he is almost a forgotten man. The mixed economy, the welfare state, economic management through a large public sector, the 'acceptable face of capitalism', stability through arrangements between

state, business and official Labour, are out. This does not mean that there is much sympathy outside the Thatcherite sector of the Tory Party for what Andrew Gamble has called 'the blooming of a thousand exotic ideological flowers and rank weeds' which flourish on the radical Right, and find know-nothing tycoons, ambitious intellectuals, and media hacks to cultivate them. But it does mean that much of what started as a purely Thatcherite speciality, is now widely shared outside the Tory Party: for instance hostility to public bureaucracy, to state economic management (identified with 'state socialism'), to unions, a rabid anti-Marxism, as well as a reversion to pseudo-imperial flag-waving. From now on there is a Thatcherite element in the opposition (one thinks of David Owen), as well as a Thatcherite government. To this extent it is not enough to say: all we need to do is to unite the 57% who voted against the Government. Nevertheless, the problem of uniting the majority remains fundamental.

GIVING LABOUR A CHANCE

What must be done to give Labour a chance of making a comeback?

Two things. Labour must, of course, recover the support of the working class as a whole, but Labour must also become, once again, the party of *all* who want democracy, a better and fairer society, irrespective of the class pigeon-hole into which pollsters and market researchers put them: in short, to use the old Labour phrase, 'all workers by hand and brain' — and that includes not only the vast majority of Britons who earn wages and salaries. It is an error to see this as a matter of making opportunistic concessions to win votes. There is nothing opportunistic about the belief that a nuclear arms race is the way to disaster, and in saying so Labour is already appealing for support across class lines. It is not opportunistic to believe that we can and should appeal to *all* women and *all* young people, even if we may not expect much success today among the ladies who attend Ascot or among the Sloane Rangers. (But some of us remember that in the days of the 1930s, anti-fascism had a mass base in such strongholds of the ruling class as Oxbridge). It is not even opportunistic to take account of quite reasonable demands of bodies of people who are not satisfied that at present they are adequately met by Labour — of

home-owners, people who are dissatisfied with their children's schooling, or worried about law and order. For one thing, they include a lot of workers.

More than a class party

Anyway, Labour was never *only* a class party. Britain in the past was so overwhelmingly a country of manual workers, that it is often forgotten that Labour marched forward by mobilising not only the proletariat as a proletariat, but a wide coalition of forces. It mobilised the women, the minority nations and ethnic minorities of the United Kingdom (except in Ulster): the Welsh, the Scots, the Irish in Britain, the Jews. It mobilised the intellectuals, academic or otherwise. It took over most of the heritage of nineteenth century Liberalism, which had exercised a similar wide appeal in its day. And until quite recently it has shown a continued capacity to win non-workers. For instance, as late as 1979, the minority among the higher managerial and professional, and the lower managerial and administrative groups which supported Labour (about 20% and 25% respectively), was still distinctly on the increase. We cannot abandon this tradition of being a broad people's party, for if Labour were to recover *only* the support of the manual working class, it would probably no longer be enough to give it victory, given the decline in its numbers and the rate of deindustrialisation.

Nevertheless, unless Labour can once again become the party of the majority of the working class it has no future, except as a coalition of minority pressure groups and interests. There is only a modest future for a party which represents only such groups, and social forces on the decline. If Labour cannot get back the sort of communities represented by Stevenage, or Harlow, or Swindon, or Slough, we can forget about the British or any other realistic road to socialism.

Why has Labour lost these and many other places? Certainly not simply because of the numerical decline of the working class and the growing sectionalism which, as Thatcher realised, can divide its votes. The long-term erosion of Labour's traditional position as *the* workers' party, cannot explain the spectacular loss of 20% of Labour's vote in four years. Nor will it do to blame the workers, or any one or more sections of them. Millions of people who might have been expected to vote Labour, abandoned the party in 1983, not because they suddenly ceased to see themselves as workers, but because they felt the party did not represent their interests and aspirations

adequately or effectively. The solution lies not in changing the workers, but the party.

The loyalty syndrome

The body of party activists and more or less fully engaged politicians (which is now very different in social composition from the body of Labour voters), has been slow to recognise what is implied by the need for the party to change. For, in spite of what historians, sociologists and political scientists were already saying in the 1970s, they still assumed that for most workers the party was 'our team', which they supported the way one supports Arsenal or Spurs, ie, irrespective of what happens on the pitch. 60% or so of workers identified with Labour, and until the late 1960s almost all of them would vote Labour, rain or shine — though of course that wasn't enough. Naturally this meant that these workers assumed that Labour, broadly speaking, stood for what they wanted and would act in their interests when in government, but they were little bothered about the details of the programme, which few of them read, or about the embittered divisions, purges and personal rivalries which have plagued the party almost since its foundation, or about the image and charisma of its leaders. Labour's greatest triumph was scored under Attlee, who had the charisma of an average building society branch manager, against Churchill, who had star quality to give away.

While this was so, it did not seem to matter too much in the short run what happened among the few hundred Labour politicians and the few tens of thousands of Labour activists and militants¹, who fought over party constitution, policy and strategy, since at least ten million supporters would cheer on the team, never mind who was appointed as manager. In the long run, of course, it mattered a great deal, since reversing Labour's retreat and the prospects of a better Britain, depended on the outcome. But until the 1980s few seriously believed that the usual solid minimum support would not line up behind any candidate, any leadership, or any programme that carried the label of the workers' party. After all, as R H Tawney had once said, solidarity was the name of the working class game. The question was not whether this basic support could be relied on, but whether it was enough.

The widening gulf

It was not enough. And, above all, it can no longer be relied on. The working class has changed. The country has changed. The situation has changed. And, let us not

forget, the party too has changed and quite a few of its old supporters do not recognise themselves so readily in it. If these changes were not very substantial, Labour could still hope to poll 60% of the vote in Wales and win all but four seats, as it did in 1966. Instead of being down to 37% of the vote and 12 seats out of 38 in 1983. And Wales, let us remember, was a country in which everything combined to create a Labour and socialist stronghold: a massive, organised and militant working class, national sentiment, almost universal anti-Toryism and democratic egalitarianism. a tradition of peace movements, a passion for education, and, not least, an inspiring roll-call of great names, socialist and communist, which belonged to the valleys: Keir Hardie, A J Cook, Arthur Horner, Aneurin Bevan, Michael Foot. But all this has not been enough.

Because Labour activists have been reluctant to admit this, a widening gap has developed between them and the supporters who can still be mobilised by the call of the old bugles, and those who no longer can be. During the election campaign enthusiastic meetings of one lot cheered a party manifesto designed for them — it was, in fact, practically unreadable for anyone else — and failed to notice that the other lot, which consisted of millions of workers, were simply not convinced of Labour's case. They needed reasons for voting which persuaded *them*, not just flags behind which to rally.

How to convince

Concretely, they needed convincing under four heads.

First, that they actually wanted what Labour stood for. The old words are no longer enough. Thus for convinced socialists it is enough to call for socialism, but not for men and women who associate the word, no doubt with the enthusiastic assistance of the media, with more state power and public bureaucracy, which they have learned to distrust, with more nationalisation, of which we already seem to have plenty, and — let us admit it — with countries in which workers are less well-off and less free than in the non-socialist countries with which they are most familiar. We have to show once again how and why the kind of fair, free, socially just and prosperous society they want requires socialism.

Second, that Labour's policy is not only desirable, but realistic. Like it or not, we must answer Thatcherite and similar arguments which have by now spread widely ('who is to pay for it all?' etc.) in

terms which they understand. We cannot afford to promise to create a few million jobs in five years, if we cannot convince people, however much they would love to see it happen, that any government is capable of achieving this under present world conditions. And in fact, we did not convince them.

Third that Labour is the party of all workers, not merely of some sections of them. No doubt we had a policy which appealed to tenants, but the many workers who are buying their own homes or want to also need to feel that Labour has a policy for them. And the party, in turn, must be as aware as the workers themselves are, that the sectional interests of some groups are not merely different from others, but sometimes in conflict. This creates genuinely knotty problems which cannot simply be waved away.

Finally, and this is perhaps the most difficult task, that Labour has a chance. If workers were to stop seeing Labour as the alternative to Thatcherism, even more of them would vote, with or without regret,

too many people in the opposition parties were not seriously trying to defeat Thatcher

for candidates or parties who seem to have the best chance of beating the Tories. Already there are too many seats where Labour is the third party, and often a rather poor third. But the future of the party cannot rest on this or any other tactical or pragmatic appeal. The Liberal Party has survived, in spite of its negligible electoral prospects over many years, because it never lost a substantial body of people who would vote Liberal regardless of practical considerations or advantage: because they believed in Liberalism. The most dangerous symptom of Labour's sickness is that in 1983 its vote went to pieces in many parts, notably of England, where it had never had much chance of electing more than the odd councillor, but where men and women nevertheless voted Labour out of conviction: because they thought Labour was right. But if they are to do so again, the party must be such that they can believe in it again.

The danger of isolation

All this requires some fundamental rethinking of Labour's struggle and objectives, for the situation is desperately serious.

The danger, especially on the Left, is not

only that the activists may be unaware of their and the party's isolation from ordinary people, but that they may not care. They may actually give up the struggle for the workers as a whole, not to mention other sections of the people who do not happen to agree with the 'correct' policy or the way the party is run. They may choose their supporters to fit their convictions, in which case it is likely that the others will look elsewhere. For instance, they may see their most congenial constituency as 'the dispossessed', in 'the centre of a big decaying city', cosmopolitan and racially mixed, and look for a parliamentary seat in preference in such a place. 'It would be a mistake to stand in a safe seat with a solid white skilled working class . . . I wouldn't be happy there anyway' (Ken Livingstone). Would it be surprising if the sort of people who have formed 'the historic spine of the Labour Party' (Bea Campbell) would not be happy with such a candidate either? The strength of the labour movement has always been that it could represent *all* parts of the working class — both Stepney and the Fife coalfield — and did not discriminate against any. If Ken Livingstone, who is one of the ablest, most prominent, most attractive and strategically placed figures in the party, feels really at ease with only some kinds of the inhabitants of Greater London — is it not reasonable to fear that it will be difficult for him to realise his own and his party's political potential in Britain's greatest city?²

Or again, how can we say: 'Though it would be foolish to ignore *wholly* (my emphasis — EJH) the view of the electorate, it would be fatal if the Labour Party now started to fish around for a set of policies that upset no one and thus changed nothing.'? (Tony Banks MP in *The Guardian* 17 Aug 1983). Are we going to be in a position to change anything if we do not pay attention to the 16% of trade unionists who have stopped voting Labour since 1974, to the 71% of youngsters who voted, but refused to choose Labour, to the 72% of women who voted Tory or Alliance? To pay attention to them is not to betray socialism, but an essential condition of any likely socialist advance in this country. May there not be good as well as bad reasons why they have stopped looking to Labour?

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES

Every traditional labour and socialist mass movement in the West has seen a certain erosion of its traditional support since the 1950s, and for very similar reasons. The Labour Party is a particularly dramatic case, but not the only one. All have been

faced with the task of doing something about it. Much the worst option is that proposed in some quarters of the Labour Left (or the ultra-left which has colonised the empty spaces in the organisations of the movement left by the withdrawal of the masses from the party). This is to establish a 'correct' position and wait for the British people to recognise how wrong they are in not agreeing with it. As for those who show their disagreement by voting with their feet or the ballot-papers, good riddance to bad rubbish. History is full of sects, both religious and political, who have taken such a view, and are still waiting — even if they haven't, like the old ILP after the 1930s, practically disappeared from sight. There is no future in turning the Labour Party into a body of this kind. It will just go on declining, until in the end it will risk even that unique asset of the British labour movement, a single trade union movement affiliated to a single political party. It will not even turn into the clear-headed and unified socialist party we would all want, because its various left components, now united against the right, will quite surely go on battling each other to the death over their various, and conflicting ideas of what constitutes the 'correct' positions.

Neo-socialist parties.

Two other strategies have been tried, with greater prospects of success. The first is what may be called 'neo-socialism', as in France and Spain. This implies abandoning the traditional character of such parties as mass parties, based on mass organisations, especially those of the working class, and turns them into common electoral fronts of all who are, for one reason or another, opposed to reaction, interested in reforms, and prepared to sympathise with progressive appeals. This strategy has certainly succeeded in restoring the fortunes of parties which had fallen much lower than the Labour Party, eg, the French Socialist Party, which was in steep decline fifteen years ago, and the Spanish Socialist Party, which was virtually a shell company ten years ago. It has proved capable of striking electoral triumphs, some of them with strong left-wing programmes, as in France and Greece. Moreover, such a government

¹ P Whiteley, 'The decline of Labour's Local Party Membership and Electoral Base, 1945-79', in D Kavanagh ed *The Politics of The Labour Party* (London 1982), p 115, estimates the real number of party activists in the whole of Britain at around 55,000 in 1978.

² The quotations in this paragraph are from his interview with Bea Campbell in *City Limits* 1-7 July 1983, p 10.

as Mitterrand's in France has done much to carry out its programme, so far as this was within its power.

The weakness of this strategy lies in the instability of the political support gained in this manner — this also is evident in France — the lack of activity and feedback from the citizens, the undoubted temptations of opportunism it encourages, and the lack of any organic base for the policies of such parties. They may sometimes be radical, but they do not have to be, and are not even very likely to be. If socialists can welcome, and sympathise with, Mitterrand

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in France, they can at best still keep an open mind about the government of Felipe Gonzalez in Spain, but they will almost certainly take a dim view of the (mainly anti-left) manoeuvres of the Portuguese Socialist Party of Mario Soares, and an even dimmer view of the combination of backstairs dealing, corruption, mafia tactics, demagoguery and opportunism by which the Italian Socialist Party of Bettino Craxi has tried to rebuild itself. The Labour Party can certainly learn *something* from the experience of neo-socialist parties, notably how elections can be won without necessarily compromising one's programme, and that comebacks are possible — but this is not a model which invites uncritical imitation.

The example of the PCI

The other strategy has no equally striking triumphs (unless we count the splendid comeback of the Swedish Socialist Party under Palme, in alliance with the Communists and with a good programme), but is more immediately relevant. For the Italian Communist Party, which can serve as illustration, is and wishes to remain a classical mass socialist labour party, attempting to rally the widest range of forces around its essential core of the organised working class. It has tried to do so through an era when Italian society has been spectacularly transformed — including the working class — against powerful competition from both Left and Right, not to mention under conditions of systematic exclusion from national government. And yet it has gained ground over the decades, and, while it dropped back a little between 1976 and 1980, it has been stronger, since the middle 70s than ever before. It has long been the unquestioned second party in the country, and is today running the Christian

Democrats, the party of government since the war, closer than ever before (30% against 33%). This is not an unimpressive record.

It has succeeded, not because its basic body of support has been unswervingly solid, but because it has known how to hold it, win back some or all of its losses, and extend its support to new social strata and groups, in new conditions. During the years since 1950 it has from time to time lost, and recovered, much working class support in the Northern industrial cities. In recent decades it lost quite heavily in the more backward South, and though it has only partly recovered, recently it has advanced again — and very strikingly in the region of Naples, where it has also recaptured the industrial zones it had lost. It is today the first party, ahead of the Christian Democrats, in almost all the major cities of Italy, North and South. Its most solid stronghold, Central Italy (Tuscany, Emilia, Umbria) has changed out of recognition socially and economically. It is today a prosperous belt of dynamic small and medium industrial enterprise as well as commercial farming, and probably the spearhead of Italy's economic development: the sort of area to which, if it were in California, Thatcherite propaganda would be pointing as a model of a go-ahead economy. If this zone is still as solid and red as ever, it is not because its inhabitants are blindly loyal, but because the party has shown, largely through its policy in local and regional government, which is recognised as a model — Bologna must be one of the best-administered cities in Europe — that the Left can have a policy for this kind of development. In Bologna and Florence even businessmen would be worried if the Christian Democrats took over: for one thing because they would be strikingly more inefficient and corrupt.

The contrast here is not only with the Labour Party, but also with some other mass communist parties which have failed to halt the recently accelerating erosion of their mass base among workers and intellectuals, as in France. The Italian CP has had its share of mistakes and poor analyses, and its own record of failing from time to time to keep in touch with changes in its own country, including in the working class. But it has not lived in and on its past, it has recognised realities and social changes, when they became inescapable, it has never written off its former supporters, and has avoided sectarianism above all. And it has never forgotten that the party of the working class must also be the party of the people. Its policy is certainly open to

serious criticism, which it has **not stifled** within its ranks and even within its leadership. But it has at least been able to demonstrate that the way of socialist labour party does not necessarily have to be downhill in the late twentieth century.

LABOUR'S ASSET

Yet the Italian Communist Party, and indeed practically all other socialist and communist parties in countries with real elections, have lost, or never had, the major asset enjoyed by the Labour Party in the past, namely the capacity to win an election and form a government single-handed. That is why the arguments about the policy of Labour governments and the British road to socialism, have had a unique urgency in this country. Parties which are incapable of winning single-party majorities if only because their electoral systems make this practically impossible) can speculate about the prospects of socialist transformation, but under conditions of democracy their governments will almost invariably beat the mercy of coalition partners who act as brakes on them.

The ability to form a single-handed socialist government is not, of course, enough. In the first place the best government today is at the mercy of the world situation — for instance in economic affairs. No single nation has any real control over this, except perhaps the USA which can unload its problems on other and weaker economies abroad. The transformation of society today, whatever its shape, must have an international dimension. In the second place, the best socialist government has to be re-elected. It must maintain support. The idea that socialism can be irreversibly installed in five years is a fantasy, and the idea that socialist governments, once established, should abolish genuine elections is, or should be, unacceptable. Still, the position of the Labour Party in the past was unusually favourable, and hence disappointment with the performance of Labour governments is understandably, and justifiably, sharp.

The immediate and crucial question before us is whether Labour, which seems to have lost this unique position, can regain it. If the party cannot do that, then it will be useless to console ourselves with the thought that a large permanent minority has voted for a sounder socialist programme than in the days of Wilson, or will stop that programme being betrayed if there is another Labour government. For there will be none. If a minority Labour Party gets into government, it will be on terms

negotiated with some other partner — Liberals, SDP or whoever — and by their consent. If Labour refuses to enter government on those terms, as it reasonably might, it will be a permanent opposition. The perspectives of such an opposition, like it or not, cannot be to change society, but only to make it less intolerable. It will have no option but to be, in practice, 'reformist', or to make noise, or to wait for a near-miracle.

This means that, like it or not, Labour will either have to win back those who switched from Labour to the Alliance, those who stayed at home, and a lot of

those who are increasingly opting out of politics. Or alternately, it will have to learn how to lead a broad front of other parties or their supporters into backing Labour's policy. This is not impossible. But it means, first of all, understanding why the people who left us or stayed away did not wish to vote Labour, and if we are to lead them forward we have to get them to vote or support Labour for reasons which seem good to *them*, even if we do not like their reasons. That, by the way, is how socialists once built the Labour Party and eventually got it committed to a socialist objective, starting with a working class and others

who were Liberals, Conservatives or something else and who did not vote for Labour because no more than a small minority were attracted by socialism or knew what it was. They learned as they struggled — but the socialists were with them to help the learning. Rebuilding Labour, or building a broad front around Labour, will once again be like that. We think the masses need Labour, but if we ask them to come to us on our terms, they won't. Not any more. Then the chances are they will never find out what Labour could do for them.

And neither will we.

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