

## LABOUR'S BLACK SECTIONS

One of the problems for Labour's broad church is that every now and again, a section of the congregation will leap to its feet and shout for a place at the altar. This year it's Labour's black members, who, bruised and aggrieved by what they see as the party's indifference to them and their needs, are campaigning for constitutional reforms that would ensure them a voice at all levels of the party.

Most blacks have always seen the Labour Party as their natural political home, partly because of its claim to represent the poor, and partly because the Conservatives of the past carried the whiff of cork hatted colonialism, and those of today the stench of suppressed racism. For the past 25 years up to last year, four out of every five black or Asian voters who went to the polls plumped for Labour. Most of those who got involved in the Labour Party itself have always seen themselves as good soldiers, who would turn out the vote and in the fullness of time find themselves a part of a party with a multiracial leadership that would then proceed to do, in government, all the things that have become emotional symbols of political good faith with Britain's black communities.

But somewhere along the line the vision wavered. Repeal of discriminatory immigration laws always proved impossible; the racial equality programmes were never quite strong enough; and Labour's own leadership remained resolutely monochrome. However, some hoped that the most potent political symbol of all - a black MP - might have come out of last year's general election. It might have marked the accession of black people to a permanent place in British society.

Unfortunately, once again this proved just beyond the horizon. No black candidate was selected to fight a winnable seat. And the man who came closest to being selected for one found himself the victim of a cruel humiliation.

Russell Profit!, councillor, ex-National Union of Students vice president, regular media performer and party stalwart is probably pretty close to the model of the modern Labour candidate. He won selection in Battersea North, but lost the selection to sitting MP Alf Dubs when the boundaries were changed. It wasn't defeat that infuriated Profit and his black colleagues; it was the desertion of almost everyone who had previously voted for him in Battersea North. He lost the selection by 60 votes to three (two of whom

were black). Most blacks saw this as proof that even the relatively leftish local parties weren't to be relied upon to help satisfy black demands. And worse still they could see the beginnings of a disillusioned drift away from Labour in the 1983 election. Some observers believe that it was blacks' lack of enthusiasm that led to the defeat of luminaries like Joan Lester and Patricia Hewitt, both of whom lost narrowly in seats with large black populations.

To the black activists the reason for the decline is clear; a lack of black influence in the party and an absence of black figures in its leadership. The solution is equally simple. According to one Birmingham councillor, James Hunte, as long as blacks are 'nice boys, the Labour Party would just take them for granted. We're not nice boys anymore'.

Hunte showed what he meant by recruiting several hundred black members to his Birmingham Ladywood constituency to form a voting block that gave him effective control, until the party's NEC instituted an inquiry into his running of the party. A similar drive in Brent produced the largest single group of non-white councillors anywhere in the country by the simple expedient of signing up new members, deselecting sitting white councillors and replacing them with black and Asian candidates.

In the aftermath of the general election, a group of the black activists met to try to work out how this type of black organisation could be used to strengthen their position in the party. They came up with the idea of 'black sections'. The sections would operate like the youth or women's

sections of the pTty, with closed meetings and the right to elect members from within the section to the party's top bodies. At the last count more than a dozen local parties had set up black sections.

None of this had been greeted favourably by the Labour leadership. In the space of one week no less than three senior Labour spokesmen - Kinnock, Hattersley, and Kaufman - had condemned the black sections as 'retrograde' and 'divisive'. They clearly have a vision of yet another damaging internal struggle, gloated over by the Fleet Street press, and more importantly hastening the drift away from Labour towards a centrist alliance so far untainted by the need to satisfy interest groups within the party.

Behind the concern for party unity lies a deeper anxiety that has dogged Labour for 20 years. It is that any suspicion of the party being too nice to blacks would provoke an electoral backlash amongst whites. According to one of the campaign's leaders, the party has 'done its sums': the number of black votes it might forfeit by disappointing the activists are massively outweighed by the number of white votes it would lose by conceding the demand for black sections. Kinnock's public opposition especially annoyed the black caucus. The gradualism that both he and Kaufman counselled in television interviews, was precisely what they felt had allowed Labour to ignore blacks. In response, they have organised enough resolutions in support of their view to ensure that the issue is debated at October's conference. Several resolutions call for the setting up of black sections locally, and instruct the NEC to

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bring forward constitutional changes to create a national black section.

That debate is sure to produce some embarrassment for the NEC. Its own working party on race, besides meeting only infrequently, has found it difficult to get a response from most constituencies. Consequently, it seems unlikely that it will have much of significance to report to conference.

The trade union delegations, always nervous when debates about race stray off the safe territory of bashing the Tories, may also find the black caucus' approach too hard to take. Any decision to support black sections in principle might lead to two problems. First, the relative weakening of trade union influence at local level; and second, demands for the right to independent caucusses within the unions. Such a debate could be explosive, as one non-Labour Party union, NALGO, has already found out. On the other hand several of the large unions have significant numbers of black members, who might just become restive if their leaders vote against a resolution that appears to be in their interests. The National Union of Public Employees is certain to back the call for black sections, but where others with large numbers of black members will fall is anybody's guess. The response at the TUG to NALGO's motion calling for black members' groups may provide a pointer.

Whichever way the Labour Conference jumps will present problems for Neil Kinnock. If the black sections resolution falls there is little doubt that several local Labour Parties will defy the national party, and set up unofficial black sections. If it is passed, not only will the vote now be represented as a personal defeat for Kinnock; it will also be viewed by many of Labour's traditional supporters as another example of Labour's leaders giving in to yet one more minority grouping.

It is likely that conference will agree to allow local parties to set up black sections at a constituency level. It may also instruct the party's leaders to consider the possibility of a national black section with a right to places on the national executive. This will almost certainly provide the black activists with the tactical victory they want: an unofficial network of local sections offers a convenient mechanism through which they can agitate for even more radical reform in 1985.

Whichever way the vote goes, Labour's black activists seem to have guaranteed another long running rumpus in the best Labour tradition.

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