

LABOUR PARTY STRATEGY PAPER

The Task Confronting the Labour Party

In any analysis of the present state of the Labour Party, it is necessary to appreciate the size of the defeat suffered by the party in June 1983 and the sheer scale of the task that faces it if it is ever to win a majority in a future election.

In the 1983 election, the Labour vote fell by 9.3 per cent, the sharpest fall incurred by a major party at a single election since the war. The party gained 27.6 per cent of the vote, its lowest share since 1918, and if the party's performance is judged by the average share of the constituency vote going to Labour candidates, then this was the party's poorest showing since it was founded in 1900. Geographically, the 1983 election left Labour with no seats south of a line from London to Bristol, and only 30 out of 260 seats south of a line from the Severn to the Wash. If London is excluded, Labour has only three seats south of the Severn-Wash - Ipswich, Thurrock and Bristol South.

Labour's strategy of constructing majority support through the attraction of minorities, such as trade unionists, unilateralists, women, environmentalists, the young and ethnic groups, palpably failed. The party is now facing up to this fact and attempting to attract back the ordinary supporters that it has lost. The leadership is very much aware that to do this, it must first destroy the credibility of the Liberal/SDP Alliance and establish itself once again as the only alternative to the Conservative Government. To do so, the party must appear to be united, competent and responsible - three things it was patently not at the time of the election. Given that less than nine months have elapsed since the election, the party has already made enormous progress towards these objectives. Opinion polls show that Labour have transformed the Conservative lead of 14.8 per cent at the election to a Labour lead around 3 per cent at the time of writing. This has been achieved mostly at the expense of the Alliance whose drop in support since the election (according to opinion poll evidence) roughly matches the gain by Labour. To ever stand a chance of forming a Government, the Labour Party must eliminate the Alliance as a credible force in British politics and then win back support from the Conservative Party. It has made a good start towards achieving the former but, despite the Government's recent self-inflicted wounds, appears to be making only small progress on the latter.

The Election Post-Mortem

Both wings of the Labour Party have not sought to conceal the scale of Labour's defeat - however, each diagnosed a different cause. The left blamed the right-wing leadership of the party and the obvious half-heartedness of certain members of the Shadow Cabinet in espousing Labour policies on such subjects as defence, Europe, housing and nationalisation. The right placed the blame firmly on the policies themselves and the divisions which had split the party over the previous four years. Both sides also acknowledged privately that Michael Foot had not been an electoral asset.

Although the leadership of the party, both old and new, declared after the election that the party stood by the policies of the manifesto, nevertheless, on several crucial issues, shifts have occurred (these will be examined later).

Meek 17/5.

John Whitehead

- (a) Council
- (b) T.V. Bill - big bang vs. Gardner
- (c) reselection - star in Sept 84

The Leadership Campaign

It was to be expected that the leadership election, which occupied the whole of the summer up until the Party Conference, would open up all the old wounds in the party once more. In the event, this did not occur. It quickly became apparent that Neil Kinnock's lead was unassailable and public interest in the election focused on the battle for the deputy leadership between Roy Hattersley and Michael Meacher. Despite Mr Hattersley and Mr Meacher occupying opposite ends of the Labour spectrum, the contest had none of the bitterness of Tony Benn's campaign for the deputy leadership in 1981.

The result was an overwhelming victory for Mr Hattersley, who beat Mr Meacher not only in the parliamentary party and the trade union section but also in the constituency Labour Party section. The latter fact shows the strength of the desire for the unity in the party. The CLPs had always been thought to be the powerbase of the hard left; while this is still true, nevertheless, less than half voted for Michael Meacher, and only 6 per cent voted for Eric Heffer for the leadership. The conclusion from this is not so much that the CLPs are moderate after all - rather that the left were prepared to support the 'dream ticket' to promote party unity.

Uniting behind the 'Dream Ticket'

On the surface, little in the party has changed - it still has a left-wing leader and a right-wing deputy leader. The crucial difference is the personalities involved. Neil Kinnock's greatest advantage is that he is not Michael Foot; indeed, he has everything that Foot lacked - youth, good looks, energy, and above all 'a television personality'. His policy position is hardly any different from Michael Foot's, particularly on defence. But, because he looks good, he is the party's strongest asset and at present is able to impose his own views on the party.

Roy Hattersley is intelligent and has the experience which Kinnock so obviously lacks. He is on the right of the party and on many issues is known to be in complete disagreement with both Kinnock and the official party line. So far, he has managed to conceal his differences through a series of fudges; however, unless he is prepared to do a complete volte-face, sooner or later the cracks must show.

The leadership is desperate to give the party a new image. While policy changes have been made, Kinnock is more concerned about presentation. He continually talks of 'modernising' the party, and the party's campaigning certainly looks more professional. This carefully constructed image is dependent on the tolerance of the left. Although the left has been weakened, it could still wreck Kinnock's strategy by reopening Labour's divisions; so far it has chosen not to.

The Left

The left of the Labour Party is not a coherent group; rather, it is a multitude of factions who spend most of the time fighting each other. In general, these can be separated into three broad groups: the soft left, the parliamentary hard left and the extra-parliamentary hard left,

The soft left, which is generally represented by the Tribune Group of MPs, is now part of the establishment of the Labour Party. This group is now the largest grouping in the Parliamentary Labour Party and is likely to be broadly supportive of Neil Kinnock (who can himself be considered a member of this group). In general, the

soft left will support the line taken by Mr Kinnock on policy - unilateral nuclear disarmament, reflation and massive reform of the EEC or withdrawal. The Labour Coordinating Committee, which used to be on the hard left, has now shifted towards Mr Kinnock and can be regarded as the think-tank of the soft left; leading lights in the LCC include Peter Hain, Robin Cook and Harriet Harman.

The hard left are now represented in the House by the Campaign Group of Labour MPs, and have replaced the Tribune Group as the awkward squad in the Parliamentary Labour Party. Currently numbering 36, the Campaign Group is chiefly concerned to 'defend conference policies' and ensure that there is no retreat from the manifesto. Up until now, the Group has maintained a low profile and this can probably be explained by the lack of leadership of the hard left on the Labour benches. The return of Tony Benn completely alters this situation. Benn remained an honorary member of the Campaign Group even while outside Parliament; now that he is back, Benn can be expected to use the Campaign Group as his powerbase and to act as an ideological guardian of the Party's conscience. It is not yet clear whether Benn will stand for the Shadow Cabinet in the autumn, although he may represent a greater danger to the Labour leadership if he remains on the back benches.

The hard left outside Parliament is still deeply divided. As in the past, more time is spent in factional in-fighting than promoting policy, and it is this that still prevents the hard left from extending their influence. There are three main Trotskyist groupings inside the party, all of which are based around newspapers. The three newspapers are Militant, Socialist Organiser and Socialist Action and each claim 'supporters' who are infiltrating the constituency parties. Although only minimal disagreement exists, they are still separated by bitter rivalry. Militant is now the subject of what the left see as a 'witch-hunt' and the five members of the papers' editorial board have been expelled from the party. Nevertheless, Militant is the most tightly disciplined and organised of the three groups and can claim the support of two Labour MPs.

The left outside Parliament have also established a powerbase in local government. Sheffield, Liverpool and many of the London councils are now firmly controlled by the hard left. Given the major developments in Government Policy towards local Government, the left have taken this opportunity to take the initiative from the party leadership and lead the campaign against the Government. This has taken its most extreme form in Liverpool where the Council is attempting to bring in an illegal budget. However, many other councils are also organising campaigns opposing, in particular, abolition of the GLC and the metropolitan county councils. Chief architects of these campaigns are Ken Livingstone and David Blunkett, both of whom are gaining influence within the party.

The hard left is also attempting to gain more power within the trade union movement. An umbrella body, the Broad Left Organising Committee, is trying to co-ordinate the left in the unions; however, the movement is still in its infancy and, for the moment, the unions are likely to remain within the mainstream of the party.

Challenging the Government

Immediately after the election, several figures on the left (notably Arthur Scargill and Ken Livingstone) recognised that Labour would be unable to achieve its aims in Parliament and so called for extra-parliamentary action to challenge the Government's right to rule. On several occasions since then, situations have arisen when some on the left have advocated breaking the law to challenge the Government. This happened during the NGA dispute and at Brent council, and is currently occurring at Liverpool

City Council and in the miners dispute. In each case, the Labour leadership has backed off from this course of action and has refused to countenance law-breaking. This has happened partially because of the failure to get backing from the TUC and also because such a course is likely to be unpopular with the electorate. It cannot be guaranteed, however, that Labour will not adopt this policy as Labour realise their impotence in the House of Commons.

Policies

Since the election, several shifts have occurred in Labour policy. Such is Neil Kinnock's dominance in the party that he has been able effectively to dictate policy without challenge. Whilst publicly proclaiming his allegiance to the election manifesto, Kinnock has moved away from it in several areas. So far, this has been achieved with little complaint from the left - this is unlikely to continue for long.

Europe: The EEC is the one issue where party policy has been officially changed and ratified by conference. Labour has abandoned its commitment to immediate withdrawal and has substituted a long list of demands for radical change, retaining withdrawal as a last resort if its demands are not met. In fact, Labour's demands, set out by Kinnock in New Socialist, would transform the Community from an organisation dedicated to free trade, to a Socialist paradise. As Labour stands no chance of achieving its demands, it is still effectively committed to withdrawal. In any case, many in the party (especially among those selected to fight the Euro-elections) are still totally opposed to the EEC in any form.

The Economy: Labour remains committed to a massive reflation of the economy, although Mr Hattersley's 'alternative budget' did not give any figures. The one change in policy that has taken place concerns unemployment. In an interview with Brian Walden, Mr Kinnock abandoned Labour's pledge to reduce unemployment to one million within five years. Whilst claiming that the pledge was realistic for the 1983 election, Kinnock said that after a further four years of Conservative Government, Labour might be able to create four million new jobs and still have two million unemployed.

The other weakness in Labour's economic policy is still the question of wage restraint. The Shadow Chancellor, Roy Hattersley, remains a firm believer in incomes policy, although it was noticeably absent from his budget. Mr Kinnock and the trade unions, on the other hand, are totally opposed. This is a weakness that can still be exploited.

Defence: Defence is the one area where Mr Kinnock has, if anything, hardened Labour's attitude. He has repeatedly stated his commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament and has gone further than the manifesto, which called for a non-nuclear defence policy within five years, by saying that the only constraint on carrying out the party's policy would be the sheer time it took to dismantle the missiles. This is Labour's most vulnerable point. A substantial number of Labour MPs, including Roy Hattersley are opposed to this policy and all the evidence continues to suggest that it would be extremely unpopular with the electorate

One important development in Labour's defence policy concerns conventional weapons. In an interview with Brian Walden, Neil Kinnock emphasised that Labour had a credible defence policy based on conventional forces. He admitted that this switch to conventional defences would not save money and could even lead to a slightly greater total defence budget. Not only is this a clear abandonment of a manifesto pledge ("Labour will reduce the proportion of the nation's resources devoted to defence") but also clearly defeats Labour's argument that more could be spent on the NHS by saving money by scrapping the Trident missile.

Links with the Trade Unions

Following Labour's disastrous election result, a number of moderate trade union leaders began to question the continued close links between the union movement and the Labour Party. Predictably, these calls were led by Frank Chapple of EEPTU. The Trade Union Congress in September 1983 passed a motion from the CPSA (which is not affiliated to the Labour Party) which recognised that Congress could not "ignore the lessons of the 1983 General Election for the trade union movement". This was widely interpreted as the first sign of a weakening of the link. Further evidence of the new moderate stand of the unions came when the TUC, to the fury of the far left, refused to back the NGA's unlawful dispute with the Stockport Messenger Group. Unfortunately, trade union opinion has since hardened again as a result of the GCHQ affair.

Any serious split between the unions and the Labour Party is not likely to happen for a considerable time. The unions are still the dominant influence in the Labour Party - they hold 90% of the votes at the party conference, 40% of the votes in the electoral college and elect 12 of the NEC's 29 members directly. A more significant threat to the Labour Party is likely to come as a result of the Government's legislation on trade unions. It may be assumed that the voluntary agreement reached with the trade unions to publicise the right of union members to contract out of the political levy is unlikely to lead to large numbers of trade unionists suddenly contracting out. A far greater threat to the Labour Party is posed by the provisions of the Trade Union Bill which requires unions wishing to maintain a political fund to ballot their members at least every ten years. This could lead to a large number of unions disaffiliating from the Labour Party, including ASTMS, APEX, NGA, ISTC, and even the NUM and AUEW. This would pose a very serious threat to the whole future of the party.

Labour Party Finances

It has long been the case that the Labour Party has been inches away from bankruptcy. At the 1983 Party Conference, the General Secretary, Jim Mortimer, said that the biggest single shadow over the Party was its acute financial problems, which were 'a nightmare'. The party ended 1982 with a balance sheet bank overdraft of £525,000 and the total deficit for 1982 was £141,000. The party has now raised its subscription from £6 to £7 for individual members but the trade unions refused to raise their affiliation fee. As almost 80% of Labour's finances come from trade union political funds, it is the Trade Union Bill which may drive the party over the edge. Polls have shown that even in the larger unions, a majority of members are opposed to affiliation. The Bill requires that ballots be held within 12 months and a major campaign is likely to be launched in favour of affiliation. The loss of just one of the four biggest contributors (TGWU, GMBU, AUEW and NUPE) would be a crippling blow to the Party. It is possible that the unions may decide to hold all the ballots on

the same day; even if they do not, the ballots are of crucial importance and we should consider now the implications and our reactions if the Labour Party does go bankrupt.

Mandatory Reselection

Another looming problem for the Labour Party is that of mandatory reselection. Under the rules adopted at the 1980 Party Conference, Labour members must submit themselves to the GMCs of their constituency parties between 18 months and three years after an election, and the GMCs will then decide whether they wish the MP to stand again as the Labour candidate. Already two Labour Euro-MPs have been deselected in favour of left-wingers and a number of prominent MPs are thought to be in danger, including Gerald Kaufman, Peter Shore and John Silkin.

Mr Kinnock is now coming under pressure to support an amendment to the party constitution allowing constituencies to reselect on the basis of one-member-one-vote rather than restricting the decision to the GMCs. This is likely to be opposed by the unions as it would lead to a decline in the influence of local trade union branches. Whatever the outcome, mandatory reselection is almost certain to expose the left-right split once more and cause serious problems for the Party leadership.

Conclusion: Fighting the Labour Party

At the moment, the Labour Party is personified by Neil Kinnock. All the Party's recent PPBs have been devoted almost exclusively to Kinnock and he is undoubtedly the Party's strongest asset. We should thus be trying to undermine Kinnock's credibility. Kinnock's weakness is that he tends to speak before he thinks and often shows a lack of knowledge of the subject he is addressing. On several recent occasions, he has made wild policy pronouncements off the top of his head. There is considerable scope for a campaign to consistently demolish Kinnock's arguments each time he opens his mouth.

A second area for attack is Labour policy. Many of the arguments that we used during the election campaign are still valid, (especially on defence). Kinnock is trying to give the impression that the Party has moderated its policies. This is not the case and we must ensure that this is exposed.

A third vulnerable point is the extremism of the Party. Kinnock is a man of the left and there are a large number of Labour activists, inside and outside Parliament, who are to the left of him. Mandatory reselection should provide a golden opportunity for us to expose the power of the far left; the Labour Party Conference is likely to provide similar opportunities. The return of Benn should lead to the left in Parliament taking a higher profile and may allow us to exploit divisions between him and the leadership.

In conclusion, one must recognise that the Labour Party has bounced back to a remarkable extent. The Alliance are likely to continue to be the major threat in by-elections in Tory-held seats while the Labour Party still has a long way to go before it is in a position to defeat us in a General Election. Nevertheless, we must be aware of the danger and act on it now.