

# MAJOR

## *Setback*

*The sudden departure of Margaret Thatcher has stopped British Labour's revival in its tracks. Its desire to rid itself of the past has left Labour's policy cupboard bare, argues Mike Ticher.*

**E**leven years in opposition have done extraordinary things to the British Labour Party. Following the bitter splits of the early 1980s and electoral humiliation in 1983 and 1987, Neil Kinnock has imposed internal discipline, overhauled the party's marketing strategies and jettisoned many of the Left's most cherished policies. Unilateral nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from the European Community are well and truly off the agenda. With the debacle of the 1979 'Winter of Discontent' in mind, Labour's union links are no longer stressed.

Until Mrs Thatcher's demise, the leadership concentrated on keeping its head down, not making mistakes, and relying on the unpopularity of the government to see them through to a victory which the polls suggested was not entirely improbable. The party's image was fundamentally negative. It was decidedly not the old Labour Party. It was obviously not Mrs Thatcher. But few people could say with any confidence what the essence of the new party was, or how it would behave once in power.

This essentially reactive strategy was undone by the tumultuous events in the Conservative Party in November. Labour's lead in the opinion polls was shown to have been

a chimera, a reaction against Thatcher rather than for Kinnock. Now the realisation has dawned, with less than 18 months to go before the next election, that the party has to define and explain its policies and values if it is to convince a sceptical electorate that it is a credible alternative to a Major-led government. "We need no longer to be the party of negation and can take the occasional risk of a party on the offensive", said Shadow Health spokesperson Robin Cook.

During the Tory leadership election, the opinion was expressed on many occasions that a victory for Michael Heseltine would be a disaster for Labour, because his outlook would be perceived to be too close to the Labour agenda. Since his 'policies' amounted to not much more than a half-baked commitment to review the poll tax, and a vague espousal of intervention in the economy, this did not say a great deal for Labour's own clarity of thought or presentation.

Labour's dilemma, however, is not simply a question of 'left or right'. It has unambiguously rejected the old dogmas of the Left, but needs to find a radicalism of a different hue if it is to escape incorporation into a new, essentially Thatcherite consensus, not to mention further ignominy at the polls. The most concise expression of the form this radicalism might take is the aspiration to be a modern, European, social democratic party. But of course this means different things to different people.



Ken Livingstone

The proposals contained in Labour's most recent policy document, 'Looking To The Future', reflect some recognition within the party that Britain has become at best a thoroughly second-rate European state, at worst an embarrassing anachronism to its EC partners. Its strong emphasis on education and training is one example - the participation of British 16-18 year olds in the education system stands at 35%, compared to the European Community average of 85%.

However, it is constitutional reform which is shaping up to be the biggest battleground within the party as it works out the meaning of being 'modern, European and social democratic'. The salience of the issue has been dictated by two factors; firstly, the growing significance of Britain's relationship to the EC; secondly, by Mrs Thatcher's fiercely centralising administrations, which allowed her to strangle local government (or, in some cases, simply abolish it), ignore regional dissension (most notably in Scotland) and trample opposition within the parliamentary system.

The fundamental question for a Labour Party contemplating power in the 90s is whether it should seek to exploit this huge power of the centralised executive to force through its own reform program, or whether it should aim to change the very nature of British government—through decentralisation, devolution, a written constitution, the introduction of a second elected chamber to replace the

House of Lords, commitment to institutionalise individual rights and the introduction of a proportional voting system. Put simply, the first option takes a confrontational approach; the second seeks a new consensus, economically between management and labour, and politically through a new centre-left alliance.

The pressure for such reforms has come largely not from the parliamentary party, but from such quarters as the cross-party organisation, Charter 88, the liberal intellectual journal *Samizdat* and the pages of the *New Statesman & Society* and *Marxism Today*. Their efforts have been reflected to a certain extent within the new Labour program. A parliament for Scotland and assemblies with lesser powers for Wales and the English regions are now firmly on the agenda. The House of Lords will go. In comes a Freedom of Information Act, although no general Bill of Rights, largely because of fears of giving too many powers to the judges in Britain's antiquated legal system. Proportional representation, despite a large move in favour of it at the 1990 Party Conference, is still shunned by the leadership.

One of Labour's fiercest critics on these issues is Paul Hirst, Professor of Social Theory at Birkbeck College in London. He firmly links Labour's half-hearted approach to constitutional reform with its ambivalence over Europe: "There is an ideological vacuum at the heart of Labour's program, and therefore their approach to policy is piecemeal. Labour has now committed itself to European Monetary Union, but if it's going to do that it should also commit itself to a program of political union. One of the reasons why Labour is pulling its punches on this is that it's obsessed with power at Westminster. Despite the proposals for devolution and regional government, it really doesn't have a strategy in which greater regional autonomy, greater European political integration and the powers and functions of Westminster are meshed together."

Certainly many Labour MPs do retain their faith in the power of the central executive to push through a radical Labour agenda. Left-winger Chris Mullin sees no need even for a second chamber of parliament: "The trouble is that the more democratic you make [any replacement for the House of Lords], the more you take power away from the House of Commons, which we've struggled for the last 11 years to get control of." He decries the fact that "control of a part of the economy has been surrendered to the EC", and is equally lukewarm about power moving away from Westminster in the other direction, to local and regional government: "There is a commitment to decentralisation, but history does record that when people inherit power, they rarely give it away voluntarily. The only example I can think of from recent history is Mr Gorbachev, and some would argue that it hasn't done him much good."

Where Labour has adopted measures which would mitigate central power to some extent, its attitude towards them has been characterised by grudging acceptance of the inevitable rather than any urgency to push the debate forward themselves. So while the leadership's position on European integration has essentially been to stay one jump ahead of the Tories, there has been no real debate in the



David Blunkett

party on the principles underlying Britain's long-term involvement in Europe, despite widespread dissension from a fully integrationist stance. Hence Chris Mullin's rather reluctant pragmatism on Europe, an attitude which is by no means confined to the Left: "The party as a whole was against entry into Europe, but that's a fait accompli now, people accept that, like it or not, we've got to work out how to live with it, but I mustn't pretend that I'm happy with the way things are going."

Scottish devolution is another prime example of how the party has had to be prodded into action, rather than taking the initiative. With Labour holding some 49 of the 72 seats in Scotland, it is clearly a vital area to them electorally. Yet their very dominance becomes a problem when Scots persistently vote overwhelmingly Labour, only to find themselves subject to a succession of Tory governments. The disillusion with Labour has occasionally surfaced in spectacular fashion, such as at the by-election in the Glasgow seat of Govan, which the Scottish National Party (SNP) took with a 33% swing against Labour in November 1988.

Paul Hirst sees the issue as a microcosm of Labour's general unwillingness to embrace wholesale reform: "It's quite clear that the Scots are absolutely determined to secure a large measure of national autonomy. If Labour fails to deliver, they'll try to find somebody who can, and that somebody will probably be the SNP. So even from the most narrow point of view, bankrupt party self-interest, they ought to see the need to put constitutional reform

upfront. But Labour is *scared* about Scotland. Scotland is well to the Left of Britain, and it's now solidly nationalist. From a Westminster perspective this just appears as a problem, rather than a bonus. Scotland hasn't sunk into being a declining province of Westminster, dominated by a dependency culture and low aspirations, which would have guaranteed it as a Labour bailiwick for ever. It's actually undergone a political and cultural renaissance. Labour cannot see that as a positive thing, they can only react to it."

Those who share the 'Westminster perspective' of Chris Mullin have been tagged by David Marquand (author of *The Unprincipled Society* and a former member of the SDP) as the "power-hoggers" of the Labour Party. Marquand maintains that "the party as a whole may be social-democratic in aspiration, but it is not yet social-democratic in mentality...It does not yet realise what support for further European integration entails [nor] has it abandoned the traditional Labour reverence for the bankrupt institutions of the central British state."

One who might be expected to show less reverence than most, is Labour's spokesperson on Local Government, David Blunkett, a former leader of Sheffield City Council. He takes a historical view of the current tension: "The first majority Labour government in 1945 inherited highly-centralised war-footing powers, and that was quite a contrast to Labour's program prior to the Second World War, when its strength lay in building from the bottom through the development of constituency parties, trade unions and local councils. The party was diverted from its historic roots in local institutions when people felt there was a necessity for speed of action to create the welfare state, to overcome the impact of poverty and degradation by acting from the centre. With the resurgence of local government as an issue in the last ten years — ironically because of Mrs Thatcher's assault on it — has come an enormous fear from some parliamentarians, a very great suspicion as to whether it can be trusted. I think at the moment we're on the very edge of whether a Labour government is willing to decentralise and whether it's willing to enter a new relationship with Europe."

Paul Hirst seizes on the "myth" of 1945 to berate the 'power-hoggers': "[Deputy leader] Roy Hattersley's arguments, for example, are that constitutional reform, and proportional representation in particular, would prevent 'the great reforming Labour administration, like 1945'. Now, what the Labour Party did in 1945 is interesting, precisely because it had been prepared in a *bi-partisan* manner. It took on board the radical liberal ideas of Keynes and Beveridge and there was a broad, long-prepared social consensus in favour of certain changes. The idea that an ordinary Labour administration, without some massive sea-change of opinion in the country is going to act as a decisive government is sheer bloody baloney. So this argument for defending the existing structures depends absolutely either on traditional hard Left Labour illusions, or on an entirely cynical manipulation of the myth of decisive government by the Right."

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The fragmentation of opinion on both the Left and Right is interesting. Since the 1983 election catastrophe (when Labour, fighting on a manifesto heavily influenced by the Left polled just 29% of the vote), and the miners' strike, ideological conflict in the party has largely subsided, with most of the Left either reluctantly falling into line behind Kinnock or (like former Greater London Council leader Ken Livingstone) completely marginalised. Mullin: "Labour has been very cautious, but it's caution that has come about because a massive section of the electorate has been bribed, and they are not in the mood for radical change. One of the things the leadership has been trying to convey is that if we are allowed back into office, we won't move the furniture around too much, and if there's any silver left, we'll leave it in the sideboard. Personally I don't think that's the right approach, but I understand it. Nobody wants to rock the boat."

With the Left in this mood, divisions within the party have become increasingly and intriguingly cross-factional, particularly over the very issues of Europe and constitutional reform. Nowhere is the fault-line more jagged than on proportional representation. David Blunkett and Chris Mullin both reject it, though for slightly different reasons: Blunkett: "I think multi-member constituencies muddy the issue of accountability, democracy and identity very strongly indeed. I'm more against it on those grounds than I am about the question of coalition, although that too implies that there's never a government with a clear mandate, and everything's a fix."

Mullin's view is classically instrumental: "As far as I'm concerned it means permanent coalition government. Now if the alternative is permanent conservative government, then obviously that's attractive. But I'm not yet ready to admit that the possibility of a Labour government is so remote; in fact I think it's likely that we'll win a clear majority at the next election. As regards the principle, I don't think there's any particular principle that I can think of which says that the Liberal Democrats with maybe 30 seats should be in government and should be able to choose which of the other two parties should be in government."

But it's precisely this idea of coalition and consensus, and not just in parliamentary terms, which is the very principle underlying much of the agenda of Charter 88 and other would-be reformers. They argue that any credible Labour program must have broad-based support, and not just the 40% or so which has sustained the Tories for the past ten years. Hirst: "Commitment to PR is an indication that you mean serious business in terms of political change, and the failure to endorse it means that you're relying on this idea of a traditional Westminster style of government."

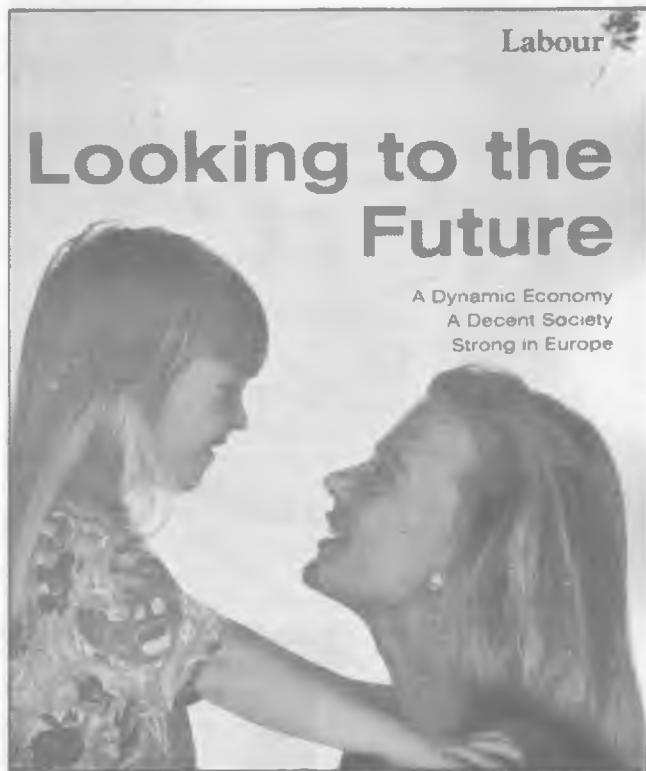
For all their recalcitrance on PR, the policy shifts pushed through by the Labour leadership in other areas have been substantial and in many ways remarkable. On Scotland and Wales, for example, the debates seemed to be dead and buried after the failure of the 1978 referenda, while the abolition of the House of Lords had long been considered



Christopher Mullin

a pipedream of the Left. What is striking about this change, is that it has been largely unaccompanied by any thorough or wide-ranging intellectual debate within the party - so much so that David Marquand has characterised Labour's approach as 'the silent road to power'. The explanation is that Labour remembers only too well the disastrous effects of the infighting of the early 80s, and has no desire to wash any more dirty linen in public. Nevertheless, the absence of an intellectually rigorous grounding for Labour's policies bodes ill for their coherence and stability if and when they finally get into office. As Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques noted in the December 1990 issue of *Marxism Today*: "intellectual revolutions are normally characterised by enormous energy... modes of thinking are transformed overnight accompanied by enormous excitement, a ferment of ideas. All of this is missing from the Labour Party."

It's a view shared by David Blunkett: "I don't think it's in any way undermining unity to say that we should debate values and ideology much more, not as an alternative to saying and doing the right things to win votes, but as a method of underpinning that, so that we were more clear ourselves how our policies relate to each other and how they could be built on each other." Paul Hirst goes further: "It's fascinating if you think about it, that the old Communist Party of the 1970s and 80s was in a way far more of a thinking party of the centre-Left than Labour ever could be. The Labour Left just didn't want to think, they had decided on what they were doing and that was it. And



Labour

# Looking to the Future

A Dynamic Economy  
A Decent Society  
Strong in Europe

it's still true, the Labour Party simply isn't an intellectual party."

What Hirst and others fear is that even if Labour were to win power at the next election (which is very far from certain), a Kinnock government would very quickly founder, not because its individual policies were ridiculous — in fact many of them are eminently sensible — but because it lacks a vision of the sort of society it wants to create, not to mention a broad base of support for working towards that vision.

It's in the realm of economic policy, of course, that Labour will primarily be judged by the electorate — perhaps more accurately, by the small group of skilled and semi-skilled workers in key marginal constituencies who will effectively decide the election. What has Labour learned from its last experience of government? The short answer seems to be that it has ditched any thought of a statutory incomes policy ("it simply would not work", according to 'Looking To The Future') in favour of credit controls as its primary anti-inflation measure. What it has not learned is how it might go about creating the kind of industrial consensus which exists in other European countries (Germany being the obvious example) and which demands the re-education of both management and trade unions. For example, Labour's program for vastly improving the education and training of Britain's workforce depends crucially on the support of management, yet little thought seems to have gone into creating mechanisms for consultations between government, management and unions without going back to a style of corporatism involving only the peak bodies.

The failure to foster consensus on the economic front (huge task though it is) is absolutely in tune with Labour's timid

stance on constitutional reform, which displays a gaping hole where there should be an overarching vision of new forms of co-operation in society. Labour talks a lot about the divisions caused by Thatcherism, but in reality the divisions are part of Britain's outdated political and industrial structure, and will not be healed by a party clinging to those confrontationist institutions and methods.

When asked what it is about Labour's program which is now genuinely radical, MPs tend to respond with specific individual policies, rather than an overall thrust of the agenda which might fundamentally reshape society. Chris Mullin highlights measures to control media ownership, to reform the judiciary and on the funding of political parties. David Blunkett singles out the proposal for a national minimum wage (another indication of the yawning chasm between Britain and the rest of Europe); measures which recognise people as consumers as well as workers; moves towards preventive medicine. "What I would like us to do," he says, "is to be much more radical on the industrial and manufacturing front. What's happened in Eastern Europe shows that there's no going back, we've got to look at new ways of social ownership and social involvement, ways of diverting resources into productive economic activity and not just service and financial centres."

But time is running out for this sort of new thinking to take root. Paul Hirst believes that Labour is too hidebound by its traditions to be genuinely radical: "What's crucial about the party is not that it be centre-Left, but that it be *radical*. Labour is not seized by a radical spirit. One of the reasons for this is fairly obvious: that the existing Labour Party had to get over the kind of Left sectarianism which by disengaging with the mass of ordinary people, condemned itself to be irrelevant. But having walked away from that kind of disengaged radicalism, it hasn't been able to revive itself as a radical party."

Labour has a huge responsibility not only to arrest the changes wrought by Thatcher if elected, but also to build a credible and cohesive agenda which will have a good chance of seeing it through to at least a second term of office. Expectations are currently low, and Kinnock himself commands no great respect outside the party. Few believe that Labour in power would be much more than a holding operation, dissipating some of the worst effects of what by then could be nearly 13 years of Tory rule, but unable to drag Britain into the European mainstream, where it so clearly needs to be if it is not to become even poorer, dirtier, worse educated and more insular than it already is. As David Blunkett puts it: "there is no doubt whatsoever that the decision was taken by the leadership of the party to approach things in a softly softly manner, to make sure that people are no longer scared of the Labour party. The consequence of that is that we are now seen in some circles as not having the kind of clarity and conviction which certainly I would like us to display." Certainly no-one is scared of the Labour Party. But the important question now is, is anyone inspired by it?

MIKE TICHER, a member of ALR's editorial collective, recently returned to Britain for several months.