Britain: Don Quixote's Last Charge

Tony Benn is 63, and has served under six British Labour leaders since he was elected to the House of Commons in 1950. In September, the Grand Old Man of British socialism will contest his party's leadership in an election that he is bound to lose. It would also appear that no one knows this better than Benn himself.

Benn may be seen as the leftwing conscience of the Labour Party by some but he is also seen as hopelessly out of touch by others. His bid to lead a party which has recently warmed to the Australian trend of "win at all costs" may appear to those people as further evidence of his place in the wilderness.

Not that this concerns Benn.

"This is a long-term battle," he said. "If we only contested elections to win them, we wouldn't have fought the last general election, or the one before, or the one before that."

If opinion polls inside and outside the party are to be trusted, Benn has no chance whatsoever of wresting the party leadership from Neil Kinnock. A recent Harris Poll quoted by Benn himself, put his support among the British electorate at just fourteen percent.

Nor does the party's rightward shift under Kinnock show any sign of abating. And in the minds of many MPs, an electorate unwilling to vote for a Kinnock government would be even more unwilling to vote for a Benn government bound to withdraw from NATO, the European Community, and supporting unilateral disarmament.

But Benn believes that the leadership election presents the party's left with a vital opportunity to bring debate back to its own ground.

"Many of the policies I'm advocating are policies which already have been endorsed by successive Labour conferences but have not been put forward by successive Labour leaderships," he said.

"There is an anxiety that if the Labour Party throws overboard policies it has advocated for a long time, people will say, 'Well what do you believe in? Are you prepared to say just anything to get elected?' And if they thought that was the case it may be harder to get elected anyway."

Under Kinnock's leadership, the party launched a campaign "Labour Listens", where party officials consulted electors on their policy preferences. Benn was unimpressed by this. "You can't come forward with a pencil and paper and pollster at your elbow and say, "Tell us what you think and we'll say it", because that undermines credibility, not only in the Labour Party but in democratic politics as well."

Benn says he does not believe that people are necessarily automatically antagonistic to the left, but fears that the success of the Thatcherite agenda has left many in the Labour Party unwilling to defend and argue socialist policies.

"People are very frightened," he says. "They're frightened of being told that Russia's going to invade, of being told that they're going to lose..."
their jobs and be out on the street, and that extremists are trying to seize power and so on.

"When people are frightened that does tend to move them to the right. Historically that was true in Germany and Italy in the ’20s and ’30s, and what we need now is a dose of hope."

Is he saying that British politics of the 1980s are a reflection of Europe in the ’30s? “Thatcherism really is the policy of Mussolini,” he said. “If you read the life of Mussolini — I’m talking now of Italy in the ’twenties — all the speeches that Mrs. Thatcher makes are in that early form of Italian fascism. “I know the word fascism has come to mean gas chambers and all that, but I’m talking about the structure of the state — the crushing of trade unions, the crushing of democracy, the very, very strong anti-Soviet policies, the development of military control; all these things are reappearing.”

David Greason

Benn’s challenge underlines a poor year for Labour since its demoralising third defeat at the polls last June — and particularly for the “dream ticket” of Neil Kinnock and deputy leader Roy Hattersley. Kinnock is under no serious threat, but Hattersley is being challenged for the deputy’s spot by the soft left’s John Prescott, as well as the fundamentalist Eric Heffer — an indication of Labour’s continued factional fragmentation.

On the one hand, the “soft left” — the Tribune Group and Labour Co-ordinating Committee (LCC) [as well as the CP’s journal Marxism Today] — has divided over how to cope with the current “revisionist” drift in Labour policy. Former LCC chair Peter Hain argued publicly last year for a mending of fences with the “hard left” to lead an assault on the right and, by implication, the leadership. And he accused much of the soft left of accommodating itself to Kinnock’s “rightward drift”.

Meanwhile, Benn’s candidacy has dismayed many in his own hard left constituency, the Campaign Group, with Campaign Group MP Clare Short eschewing the “macho” politics of the futile challenge. It has now to be wondered whether the Grand Old Man is not at the end of the line.

All of this has accentuated Labour’s navel-gazing, and attempts by the likes of Marxism Today and, to some extent, the New Statesman to turn the debate outwards have so far borne little fruit. Part of the problem lies in Labour’s continued refusal to countenance any sort of electoral pact with the centrist Democrats (as the LSDP, the merged SDP and Liberals, tends to be known). In the absence of such a pact, Thatcherism seems assured of continued power until perhaps the end of the century — something which is progressively eroding the morale of an already decimated left. Indeed, Eric Hobsbawm has argued that Thatcherism has now become (in the PM’s own slip of the tongue), a “regime”. And Thatcher herself has hardened her already chilling political vision with the observation that there is “no such thing” as society — “only individuals and families”.

More recently, Kinnock’s position — a year ago apparently unassailable — has been weakened dramatically by a gaffe in July when he appeared to repudiate the party’s (to the left almost sacred) unilateralist defence policy; and then rapidly reversed his views. Shadow defence spokesperson Denzil Davies (not a member of the left by any means) resigned in a blaze of publicity, citing lack of consultation. If change to the defence policy was what Kinnock had intended, it is now further away than ever.

In the absence of internal solutions to the party’s problems, the easiest outlet for the left’s frustrations is undoubtedly to undermine Kinnock. However, without a credible successor, this would only further weaken Labour’s poor showing in the polls. Clearly, Labour’s long night is still far from over.

David Burchell

David Greason is a journalist on The Age. DAVID BURCHELL is ALR’s co-ordinator.

Professional Foul

The Bicentennial Gold Cup of Soccer in mid-July was the stage of Australia’s greatest soccer feat, the defeat of world champions, Argentina. It told us a lot about both the state of the sport and the complex of nationalist logic and illogic which underpins the celebration of white invasion.

Association Football’s ruling international body, FIFA, insists that competitions sanctioned as “Gold Cups” must involve at least two former World Cup-winning national teams. This marginalises countries which have been major donors of soccer-playing migrants to Australia (e.g. Greece, Malta, Yugoslavia and Hungary). And various glamorous sides (England, Italy, the Federal Republic of Germany) which were both former winners and local donors were over-committed after the recently completed European championships.

So who should join Australia in the Cup? The current world champions, Argentina, and former winners Brazil were obvious choices, despite their comparative lack of an Australian cultural link. But Saudi Arabia as the fourth and final nation? Of course: because of the oil money made available to an allegedly bankrupt Australian Soccer Federation.

What of the federation itself? The ASF’s long and dearly-held claim that soccer is the most played football code in Australia has never