

LABOUR IN POWER?**David Coates**

Longman 1980 304pp pb £4.95

BRITISH SOCIAL DEMOCRACY**David Howell**

Croom Helm rev edn 1980 243pp pb £5.95

**A SHORT HISTORY OF THE
LABOUR PARTY****Henry Pelting**

Macmillan 6th ed 1978 184pp pb £3.95

Michael Foot's election as Leader of the Labour Party strikingly symbolises the strengths and weaknesses of today's Labour Left. After decades of being in a permanent minority within the Party, defeated in both the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary Party and confronted with harassment in the form of proscriptions and expulsions, the Labour Left is now in a position to win majorities, even in that bastion of the Labour Right — the Parliamentary Labour Party. Michael Foot has himself been a victim in the past of the Right's intolerance and the liberal atmosphere which now exists within the Party is, in part, a reflection of his own persuasive influence. The Party's programme of public ownership and control of the economy, rejection of a defence policy based upon nuclear weapons, and withdrawal from the EEC, is one which reflects this Left majority.

For many the Party appears to be a much more convincing instrument for radical socialist change in Britain and as a consequence is able to attract to its ranks individuals who have, or would have in the past, belonged to one of the smaller socialist groupings. Whereas in the past the Party conceded the initiative on major political issues (eg, race) to other Left groups it is now more willing to take a lead (eg, nuclear weapons) rather than tag along behind. It is

also tentatively considering the mobilisation of Labour's industrial strength for more explicit political purposes (eg, opposition to cuts in public expenditure at local government level). But the Labour Left also has a weakness for picking 'lost Labour leaders' by succumbing to sentimental rhetoric (Ramsay Macdonald) or technocratic collectivism (Harold Wilson) and has been weakened in the past by this over reliance on personalities. Furthermore the Labour Left is stronger on sentiment than strategy, having the better slogans (eg, 'peace', 'disarmament', 'equality') but limited ideas on how they should be put into practice. Finally the Labour Left has displayed a devotion to Party loyalty going, at times, beyond the call of duty which has been exploited to great effect by Labour's Right.

Both David Howell and David Coates are intent on showing that the Labour Party will never be the agent of socialist transformation in Britain and both are concerned therefore to illuminate the Labour Left's weaknesses and to question its importance during the past decade.

Howell's interpretation of Labour's history is one in which the Party's commitment to parliamentarianism has undermined any socialist intentions. But Howell never defines the nature of this albatross. Surely winning majorities in assemblies, national or local, is an important part of democratic socialist strategy? To win such majorities the socialist needs to create a mass movement involved in the community and then in order to translate majorities into power the socialist needs to mobilise the support of that community, especially organised labour, in the ensuing struggles. Certainly 'the parliamentary embrace' diminishes the radicalism of the labour movement: the bureaucracy also will act as a conservative influence. But today's Labour Left is well aware of such constraints and for the first time since the

days of Harold Laski and Douglas Cole is devising a strategy which involves shifting the balance of power within British institutions. But Howell is unimpressed by the advance of the Labour Left believing it lacks a coherent programme or an educated base, displays doctrinal sterility, is dependent upon a sectional and defensive trade union movement, as well as being wedded to parliamentarianism. Some of his criticisms are pertinent: the Labour Left does need to create a mass Labour Party with strong community bases, it does need to reexamine and rethink its own programme constantly, and it does need to generate greater socialist thought within the trade union movement. But today the Labour Left is more receptive to socialist ideas than at any time in the postwar years, the vitality of its libertarian tradition has been reasserted, and it has begun to develop an alternative economic programme relevant to the present economic disasters.

Howell's pessimistic and defeatist interpretation of left wing politics sometimes clouds his judgement. For example, he describes the recent debates within the Labour Party over constitutional matters as more pertinent for their symbolism than substance. Such aloof academicism ignores the reality namely that there has been a distinct shift in power within the Labour Party irrespective of the outcome of individual reselection conferences. Michael Foot's election by the PLP is, in part, an indication of the shift that is now beginning to occur. Nevertheless Howell's use of the Labour Party archives ensures that this remains a valuable account of intra-party politics since 1931 and a far better history of the Party than the sixth edition of *A Short History of the Labour Party*. Henry Pelling's account of the Labour Party is labour history at its worst — all leaders, PLP votes, NEC decisions and Annual Conference votes but no members, supporters or voters. The publishers blurb claims that the book deals with the Party's rank and file but in fact they never emerge in this formal and institutional history which deals with the 1970s in a perfunctory manner and stops abruptly in 1978 with no justification except presumably a publisher's deadline.

David Coates' study of the Labour governments of the 1970s is in a class of its own. To begin with it is very well written; refreshingly the language used is understandable and he describes the events of the 1970s with style. This strength should not be underestimated because it makes a pleasant change from some of the gobbledygook which is allowed to pass for political commitment. The book is likely to become a

standard text on the period which I regret for reasons of interpretation but I hope that I dispute Coates' interpretation in the same fraternal spirit to which he appeals in his Preface.

Coates employs an impeccable logic in describing the decline of Labour's radical purpose and in doing so enters an intellectual hall of mirrors. He argues that the constraints on the Labour government were not solely those of parliamentarianism or of political elitism but, more importantly, of international capitalism. British socialists are trapped, on the one hand, by the political need to reduce the exploitation of labour and, on the other hand, by the capitalist need to increase that exploitation. International



capitalism determines that Labour governments will follow the second course. Thus the Labour government was 'helpless' and its failure was 'guaranteed'. Furthermore it no longer remains an option for a future Labour government to reflate the economy through increased public expenditure.

In 1931 Aneurin Bevan wrote of the Labour Party's 'fundamental and fatal contradiction', namely that in order to win office it had to raise popular expectations of radical reform but in order to maintain office it had to work with private enterprise and thus betray its radical promise. Bevan believed those constraints could be surmounted and acted out his belief in the post-war Labour government. Similarly, with political will and the active support of organised labour some of the constraints were surmounted between 1974 and 1979. Coates deals with the failures of the Labour government but does not consider such

successes as the considerable amount of labour legislation, which included legalising the closed shop and establishing important rights at work, or the nationalisation of the shipbuilding industry neither of which fitted into the economic logic of capital at that time.

The Labour Left certainly suffered some defeats in this period and these deserve examination. But the Labour Left itself developed new strategies as a consequence of its own critical reexamination, one of which was to launch a campaign to redistribute power within the Party. This campaign has taken time, organisation, and perseverance in the face of bitter opposition but as such effort begins to succeed Coates adopts a lofty tone of international determinism consigning such struggle to the national waste-bin. It was so much easier for Coates and others of similar persuasion when the Labour Party was in the hands of the Right but now that the balance of power is shifting the critics of the Labour Left discover further constraints and move into the higher levels of abstraction. Coates argues that a new grouping on the Left is necessary, this to be drawn from the ranks of the various existing Trotskyist groupings, with a political strategy aiming at 'the entire replacement of a world system of property relationships' by concerted international action between labour movements, based upon a network of socialist militants in all major national and international companies and provided with their socialist skills by socialist intellectuals.

The Labour Left is stronger today than at any other time in the postwar period. Neither Coates nor Howell give serious consideration to this strength because both wish to undermine the Labour Party's socialist claims. Nevertheless examination of the contemporary Labour Party must also point out the Labour Left's weaknesses. Its organisational victories have been gained at a time of doctrinal ambiguities, its political determination could be undermined by appeals for party unity from the new Party Leader, its political base within the trade union movement is being threatened by a deradicalisation engendered by fear of unemployment, and its electoral support is so fragile that a right wing breakaway led by the 'gang of three' could have very serious consequences. Furthermore, the constraints upon any future left wing Labour government — both international and national — will be considerable. Organised struggle will be necessary in order to maintain the gains made in the 1970s but regrettably Coates and Howell will remain in their hall of mirrors predicting (and hoping for) the demise of the Labour Left.