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LABOUR'S BATTLES

The special Labour Party conference at Wembley on 24 January consolidated the constitutional reforms made at the 1980 Blackpool conference. By agreeing after an exhaustive ballot to an electoral college divided 40% to the trade unions, 30% to the Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs), and 30% to the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) the conference thwarted the attempts by the Centre and Right to assert PLP domination within the new college. This somewhat unexpected outcome arose from a combination of shrewd, tactical manoeuvring



by the Left inside the conference and the maverick, abstentionist position adopted by the AUEW. However, it appears unlikely that this will be the end of Labour's internal debate as the shifting alignments within (and outside) the party continue apace.

The defeats suffered by the Right at Blackpool have been followed by Foot's victory over Healey in the election for party leader. This undoubtedly represented a shift in the political centre of gravity within the PLP. However the axis of the PLP and even more the Shadow Cabinet remains firmly Centre-Right. Indeed Foot's electoral success partly arose from the way his backers presented him as the candidate most likely to stop Tony Benn. Since his election he has been very conciliatory to the Centre-Right and sought to overcome the party's internal divisions by focusing attention on the Tories.

Yet traditional Tory-bashing cannot

conceal Labour's internal divisions. Major controversies continue, while the 'Gang of Four', joined by maybe a dozen further Labour MPs, hurriedly prepare the ground for a new Social Democratic party. Whatever the headline writers are making of this venture — and that's certainly a lot — the shrewder political commentators are doubtful of the chances of the enterprise. This is despite their sympathy with the Council for Social Democracy's 'establishment' credentials and the conservative record of its leading protagonists and main associates. We have still to see the actual content of their programme, but on present evidence its radical appeal will be scant: it could not be otherwise given the forces and personalities involved in the project. Will they have the organisation, cash and active supporters to build and sustain themselves? What relationship will be struck up with the Liberals? While representing the most significant collective defection from Labour since 1931 do they have the calibre and charisma to force their way into the parliamentary arena, given the present electoral system? Here Williams is the key figure and she is hampered from her project by no longer being an MP. Given these considerations it is no wonder that even avowed media supporters like Peter Jenkins think 'the odds have to be against their success'. (*Guardian* 26 January).

However, the Left would be mistaken to



think such defections are of little consequence. It is already evident that the forthcoming Boundary Commission changes will cost Labour around 15 seats at the next election. It is not unreasonable to foresee Social Democrat challengers able to take a few thousand votes from Labour candidates

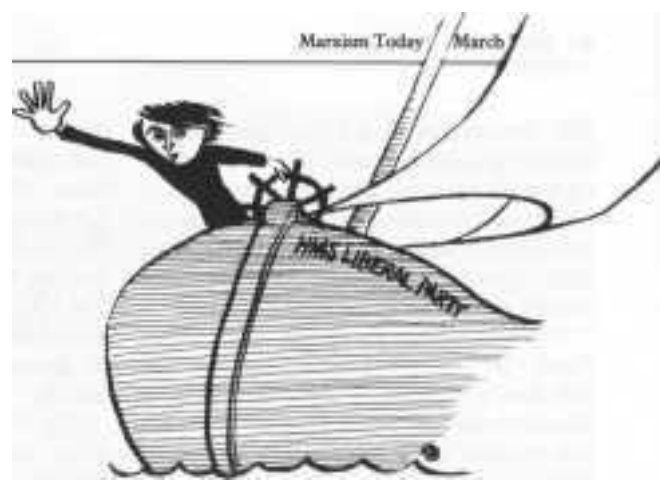


at that election including in marginal seats. This could prove fatal to Labour's chances. In other words there is a real danger that a Social Democratic grouping may fail to establish itself as a parliamentary force but could ensure a Conservative government for the rest of the 1980s.

It is that prospect that is concentrating the mind of the Centre-Right in the party and trade unions. Fear of the constitutional headway made by the Left and fear of the effect of a breakaway on the party's electoral fortunes could well galvanise them in a way which all Wilson's and Callaghan's 'fixing' failed to do. Thus the irony may well be that the short term effect of the 'Gang of Four's' defection will be to strengthen Labour's Centre-Right.

The first signs are already there in the determined attempt to reverse the Wembley decision on the electoral college, 3 year rule notwithstanding. Centrist figures like Shore and Basnett, along with Foot, have joined with the Right to demand the overturn of the Wembley vote. They are confident this can be done at this autumn's conference, by shifting the AUEW from its idiosyncratic

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Wembley position and by restoring the normal right-wing stance of USDAW. Developments here in the next few months will indicate the strength and cohesion of the Centre-Right. If their campaign to reverse the Wembley vote is successful, it would signal an important realignment in Labour's internal struggle. They would undoubtedly follow it by a campaign to prune the Left's base on the party's National Executive.

Thus Labour's Left has a difficult task fending off these manoeuvres. It also has to turn its energies outwards. Mass politics and a rejuvenated socialist movement are the best antidote to the politics of Shore, Hattersley and Williams. Can the Labour Co-ordinating Committee and Tribune generalise the momentum which has been built up around the constitutional reforms to radicalise Labour's traditional political practices? That remains an unanswered question. Big opportunities exist for it to do so. The response to the unemployment demonstration in Liverpool illustrates the point. The forthcoming initiatives on this issue, above all the People's March for Jobs in May, are occasions where the Labour Left in unity with others can present their politics in a popular and imaginative way. It is largely up to the Left to carry through the decision to set up factory branches and to make a success of the projected quarterly socialist journal.

There is no doubt that the energy-sapping, time-consuming internal struggles will con-

tinue. But the Left must link those battles with their wider political initiatives. Successful mass politics will make easier the defeat of the social democratic Right inside, as well as outside, Labour's ranks.

