

**The Labour Left has made great advances. That progress now seems to have been halted. And one of the reasons is the Labour Left's own weaknesses.**

Sam Aaronovitch

# Recipe for Defeat

Within a relatively short time, major changes have taken place in British politics. We have seen the victory of Thatcherism within the Tory Party and then its force unleashed on the people and the economy since 1979; the rise of a major new political formation in the shape of the SDP in alliance with the Liberals; and, not unconnected, substantial changes in the Labour Party. A new and difficult phase has opened up in the struggle for left advance in the Labour Party and this article is concerned with the perspectives of the Left in that context.

Let us briefly outline the balance sheet as it can now be set out. There have been major gains on *policy* (such as unilateral disarmament, clear position for withdrawal from the EEC); on *democratising the constitution* (compulsory reselection of candidates, NEC involvement in the election manifesto, an electoral college which requires the participation of the trade unions, constituency parties and the Parliamentary Labour Party in the election of the leader); on *winning positions of leadership* and authority in the organisations of the Labour Party (especially constituency and ward branches). The speed of the victories astonished even the Left itself. But of course there have also been the recent defeats. Progress has in certain respects been halted with signs of possible reverses. Benn was defeated, albeit marginally, in the contest for Deputy Leader; the PLP has kept the major influence on the content of the election manifesto; the composition of the National Executive shifted to the disadvantage of the left at the last Conference; among the unions, the three-year rule for constitutional issues was reimposed.

The atmosphere within the Labour Party is now very fraught and the truce agreed at Bishop Stortford is clearly fragile. No-one can be sure whether it will hold to any degree. What is certain however, is that the future of the Labour Party in terms of its ability to play a major role in British politics is in question. The Left itself is confronted with different perspectives and strategies and the future of the party will depend on which ones are adopted.

## Four competing strategic conceptions

I am aware that setting out these strategies involves a great deal of oversimplification. Nonetheless, the essence of them can be conveyed as follows.

The first, held primarily by the Right and some part of the Centre, is to argue for the *status quo*, regarding even the recent limited reforms as unwelcome. This is the 'broad church' in which the ministers and the hymn-books are to remain in the tradition of Attlee, Gaitskell, Wilson and Callaghan. The desire is to purge the Left and cement an essentially Right and Centre-Right leadership.

The second, held by some sections of the Left within and outside the party, is for the Labour Party to become, in the shortest possible time, a thorough-going socialist party with a bold and uncompromising socialist programme pursuing the socialist transformation of Britain and organised to accomplish this. But what further characterises this perspective, explicitly or implicitly, is the view that

winning the battle for leadership within the Party is the crucial issue which decides everything.

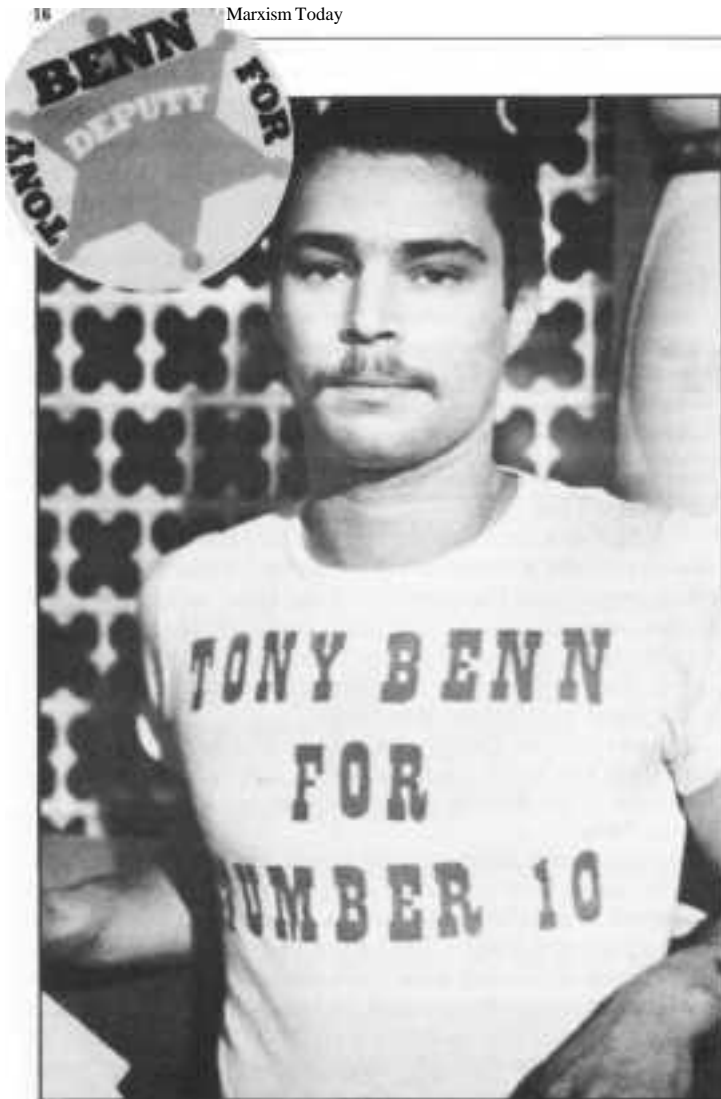
The third view essentially believes that the Labour Party must be transformed into a revolutionary party of a 'vanguard type', completely purged of its Right and Centre and of the 'soft' left, able in a revolutionary situation to seize power and proceed swiftly to the construction of socialism. If at some stage, this requires a split in the Labour Party so that a large revolutionary party can be carved from it, this would be an important possibility.

It should be added that there are some holding both the second and third views who would also argue that the link with the trade union movement is an obstacle to the socialist transformation of the Labour Party.

The fourth view shares with the second, the general proposition that the Labour Party must move along the path of becoming a party committed to socialist transformation. It recognises however that this is a prolonged process. The Labour Party has been constructed as an alliance of class and social forces involving trade union affiliation. Such an alliance has provided the Labour Party with a substantial electoral base and connected it with the most powerful class organisations of the workers, namely, the trade union movement. The perspective is not to lose these assets but to shift the centre of

*Stan Pemberton casts the T&GWU card vote at the Labour Party Conference, Brighton 1981.*





gravity of the alliance to the left as part of the struggle to shift the centre of gravity of British politics as a whole.

I do not intend to spend much time on the first conception since most readers of *Marxism Today* will agree that it is precisely this leadership which has contributed to the steady decline of the Labour Party and its almost total failure to lift popular political consciousness. To accept such a 'freeze' would mean in practice, to go backwards; it would demoralise the body of members and supporters who have acquired new hope from the fight to change the party; and it threatens any possibility of the party becoming, even in a limited way, an effective campaigning body.

In essence, this is also what is involved in the 'Tatchell case'. The so-called 'defence of parliamentary democracy' is essentially Labour *electoralism*: the view that elections decide everything; that power resides only in the legislature; that it is the responsibility of voters to elect their representatives and the job of the party to bring the voters to the poll. It is precisely this which has crippled the constituency and ward parties, turned them into mere adjuncts of Labour groups on councils or the PLP. It is true that those who hold this view show a not misplaced concern about Labour's vote, but the fact is they have presided over a major decline in Labour's share of the electorate as well as party membership and activity.

### The components of the Labour Left

So I turn now to the other three strategic perspectives which are supported by varying groups within the Left. For this reason, it is well to look first at the different trends within the Left which are now being expressed in a growing internal debate. Anyone closely

observing or involved in the Labour Left will understand that it is difficult to disentangle all the tendencies but, once again conscious that the lines are not all clear cut, I distinguish them in the following ways.

First, there is the 'traditional' Left often associated with the core in the *Tribune* group of MPs. It draws on the radical democratic and liberal tradition in British politics; it is committed to the vision of socialism and is motivated by a strong moral sense. However, its socialist commitment has not traditionally been equally matched by an understanding of the struggle for a shift in power — either within the Labour Party or the country — and the campaigning strategy that this involves.

The second tendency is the expression of the new left forces within the party including those recently joining it. It is a product of the gathering crisis of the Labour Party and its 1974-79 government. It has been very concerned with making the Left a credible and powerful alternative to the Right within the Party. And in this context it is committed to pursuing policies which in the words of the 1973 Labour Party programme will bring about a 'fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth, in favour of working people and their families.' Benn has made himself the main personification of this 'new left' and indeed can be said to have been a major inspiration in its development.

The third tendency comprises those involved in campaigning groups linked with the socialist feminist movement and community politics who have come to see the Labour Party as a possible instrument of radical change which could win support for their objectives. Like the second tendency it has also recruited from groups of intellectuals who were the product of 1968 and its aftermath.

The fourth tendency consists of essentially Trotskyist groups like Militant and the Socialist Labour Group.

### A united fight

Virtually all these tendencies came together in the fight to advance radical policies and democratic constitutional changes within the Labour Party. The fact that the campaign was so focussed allowed it to win broad support within the party and in some sections of the trade union movement. And in addition, it was able to rally behind a 'leader' who personified that fight and who had come *from* the 'seat of power' *to* the left and strong socialist commitment, reversing the

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more usual trend of entering the seat of power and losing socialist commitment. Benn understood the meaning of power and was willing to help lead the struggle to achieve it.

But the defeat of Benn in the Deputy Leadership contest and the other setbacks suffered by the Left has brought out into the open the differences between the previously largely united tendencies. It is worth noting that the first tendency (ie, the Tribune left) is poorly organised with no base in the localities; the second and third tendencies are not organised within the Labour Party in any unified way around a given strategic view; and only the last is strongly organised around a committed and specific strategy. The differences now emerging on the Left are therefore tending to take the form of a contest between well organised Trotskyist groups and relatively disorganised members of the 'broad left' who now find themselves, reluctantly, drawn into factional battles.

Now let us return to the strategic scenarios outlined earlier. What

has linked the second and third perspectives over the recent period is their preoccupation with the battle for leadership of the Labour Party and control of its organisations. As a result the broad left and the ultra-left perspective were conflated. To win the leadership of the Labour Party became the central and crucial question, the key to all further advance. To make a powerful and swift bid for leadership became the priority to which all else must be subordinated. Though it may be a crude way of presenting it, the idea implicit or explicit was that such a changed and socialist leadership could then boldly present a socialist programme to the electorate and that, as some plainly said, would then meet with a massive response from the voters.

This is perhaps a useful point, when we are discussing the 'capture' of the Labour Party, to keep in mind the state of its organisation and membership. Official membership is now only around 300,000 and that is probably an overstatement. In large numbers of working class areas, it barely exists. Many party organisations were and are in practice run by caucuses centred on the Labour groups on councils. In such circumstances, groups organised for the purpose of gaining control have been able to make rapid advances in a number of wards and constituencies. This very rapidity has also been a source of misunderstanding and miscalculation by many on the Left.

### Basic misconceptions

Those who hold the second strategic conception are surely right in their broad general desire to transform the Labour Party. But they are wrong in their political judgement about *how* the party must change. *Desire* for change does not constitute a *strategy* for change. The process by which this can happen is no less vital than the objective and this process must take into account the present balance of political forces, and the need to maintain the broad alliance character of the party and its mass electoral support.

Put differently, the Left has to consider not only the nature of the alliances which make up the structure of the party but also of those which make up the party's actual and potential electoral support.

We are in a situation where the Tory government is on the rampage; where the SDP/Liberal alliance has won considerable public support; in which Labour Party membership and electoral support has fallen and where the trade union movement itself faces a degree of isolation.

There is, in this context, a real danger of a widening gulf opening up between left activists in the constituencies and the mass of affiliated members and even more so between these left activists and Labour voters, actual and potential.

The danger then arises that the Labour Party may lose the next general election, or find itself with no workable majority, or (through the freakishness of the electoral system) have a parliamentary majority but a distinctly minority vote; and in addition, enter the election with a Parliamentary Labour Party which will still be predominantly Centre-Right.

Those who believe that the leadership battle is over-riding may also be inclined to believe that therefore the coming general election is not critical. They argue that the leadership battle should be pressed forward at all costs and by all means (a view held most strongly by Trotskyist groups and an issue currently dividing left groups in the Labour Party). Their argument is that only if the leadership is won can the party fight on a completely different basis in the future; and there is indeed, past experience that coming elections have been used by the right wing to drown the battle over policies and leadership. Those who follow the third (and ultra-left perspective) go further and argue that it is not only necessary to get rid of the Right and Centre elements but that the 'soft left' is an even greater danger and in fact is the main enemy (just as, at a much



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earlier stage in the history of Communist Parties, left wing social democracy was regarded in this way).

### Electoral prospects

The left could make no bigger mistake than to write off the significance of the coming general election. Failure to defeat Thatcherism and the Tory Party and register large gains for the Labour Party will open the way to measures which will weaken the labour and trade union movement and inflict further defeats on the people in all areas of life. The labour movement could be set back not for one parliamentary term but for decades. To miscalculate the political level not only of the electorate generally but of actual and potential Labour voters will destroy Labour's electoral base. The assumption some make, that the people will automatically support the left policies put forward by a changed leadership is mistaken.

If therefore the second strategic view is pursued without grasping the real nature of the problems now faced by the Labour Party, the party itself will be destroyed as an alliance or coalition of broad forces and so too will its mass support, even that which it now has. Instead of demonstrating its ability to become a major force challenging Thatcherism it will be reduced to a small minority party (with 10-20% of the votes, or perhaps less).

Some who share the second strategic view may seek support from the experience of the French Socialist Party's electoral victory, but there is no real comparison. The forces of the Left within Britain are very small compared with those in France. A mass Communist Party has been operating for decades; within the Socialist Party the forces of the Left are numerous and well entrenched. The Mitterrand victory was the outcome of a prolonged and gathering struggle against the domination of French politics by bourgeois parties for most of the post war period, whereas the Labour Party has formed governments for about half the years since 1945. And of course, the political traditions and culture of Britain and France are entirely different.

The point I am trying to make is that the Left must understand that 'capturing' the leadership and putting forward the most socialist policies the Left can come up with, is not itself a strategy but a recipe for failure.

**Labour and the unions**

I stated earlier that some who support the second strategic view also believe that the trade unions are an obstacle to the socialist transformation of the Labour Party and it is to this point I wish now to return. Yes, it is true that trade unions in pursuing their functions, cannot and should not be themselves political parties. Nevertheless, it is worth at this stage making two points. One is that the broad lefts within the unions have been an important factor in the fight to democratise the Labour Party (a point well understood by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy). And in an even more basic way, the crisis that has been building up for the right wing in the Labour Party arises from the fact that their trade union base, which was their main support, had become insecure. The radical character of the 1973 Labour Party programme, for instance, owed much to the ability of the Left within the party to win support from powerful circles in sections of the trade union leadership.

The British trade union movement is almost unique in that it is organised around a single centre (the TUC), and that the political affiliations of unions are, where they have them, entirely to the Labour Party and to no other political party, and that the TUC as the central body representing the unions, has important organised liaison with the Labour Party executive as in the TUC-Labour Party Liaison Committee. The Labour Party is thus uniquely connected with organised workers in a way which does not exist within its individual membership. Such a structure creates a powerful transmission mechanism. Of course, what is transmitted and in which direction is critical but that will be determined by struggle. Some of those who hold to the second strategic view also believe that trade union affiliation is an obstacle to the rapid transformation of the Labour Party and want to sever the organised connection. To dismantle the transmission mechanism is surely in British condi-

tions, an act of political irresponsibility.

Indeed, the trade unions connect the Labour Party with the working class in a way which, the party's individual membership could not begin to do as an analysis of the social composition of that membership would surely show.

If the connections between the Labour Party and the unions change, all else in British politics will change. As it is, there are changes in the composition of the labour force with corresponding changes in trade union organisation. The balance between white collar and other unions is shifting and in the case of the former, whilst the TUC has grown in attractiveness, the Labour Party has not. Far reaching and swift changes within the party not accompanied by shifts in consciousness amongst masses of trade unionists must automatically contribute to the danger that it will cease to appear capable of forming an alternative government. In these circumstances, political divisions amongst unions will grow; organised power blocks of right-wing led unions (already visible) will develop more strongly; the TUC, not now very robust, would be further weakened and the possibility exists of some unions rethinking their Labour Party affiliation and weakening their links.

Of course, the current reaction of the leadership in the trade union movement is to see that the Labour Party acts in a way which they believe will allow the party to have the chance of electoral victory, especially in the light of the SDP attitude to trade union law reform. But if they fail we must not assume they will all carry on in the same old way.

It is true that the links between the party and the unions present many problems and anomalies, especially those thrown up in the contest for the Deputy Leadership and I, for one, have no neat answer. But the Left must have, as part of its strategy, a corresponding one for shifting the direction of the trade union movement,

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enabling it to play a more leading role amongst working people, overcoming its relative isolation. I believe that the political and ideological battle for change in the unions is better fought in the context of organic links between the unions and the Labour Party, involving the unions in policy formation and the selection and reselection of Parliamentary candidates.

My criticism of the second strategic view is not meant to detract in any way from the positive achievements and contribution made by those sections of the Labour Left holding this view. Indeed the entire Left is deeply indebted to them. But the weaknesses of this second view threatens to undermine not only future advances but existing achievements.

The criticisms I have made are even more true of the third and ultra-left view. Such a view, if it prevailed, would completely marginalise the Labour Party in British politics.

#### The fourth view

I think it is also the case that through this critique the argument has at the same time been presented for the fourth view. I wrote earlier that the *status quo* cannot and must not be maintained; the advances can only be defended by developing and deepening them. However, the transformation of the Labour Party and of political consciousness cannot be accomplished 'overnight'; no political paratroopers can capture it for the Left. The task is not to destroy the alliances which constitute the Labour Party and its electoral base but to shift their centres of gravity to the left as part of a combined struggle to change popular and working class consciousness.' That also imposes on the Labour Party the need to create a powerful mass movement for the defeat of Thatcherism and the Tory government and for the radical policies adopted by recent Labour Party Conferences.

In a more general sense one could put the tasks of the Left in the following way. First, to develop its struggle for leadership within the party in a way which establishes and extends alliances and recognises the existing levels of understanding. This must mean beginning to formulate a coherent strategic perspective which can defeat not only the perspective of the Right but also that of Militant and other Trotskyist groupings.

Second, to recognise and work on the basis that this struggle can only be carried forward in cooperation with forces in the trade union movement. And third, that the left must assist the Labour Party to develop mass politics and campaigning as Peter Hain and others continually and correctly insist.

But this approach is also too narrow. For one thing, significant movements exist outside of the Labour Party (the women's movement and CND are two of the most important); and there is a capacity for other democratic and popular movements. Unfortu-

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nately, there is a deeply held and dangerous idea even amongst large sections of the Labour Left, that the Labour Party possesses some kind of monopoly-role in relation to such movements. The Labour Party will grow by serving such movements as well as by expressing their demands. The autonomy of such movements is crucial to their development.

But it is surely also clear from the experience of the Left in the past and now, that the task of formulating and working for a valid strategic perspective cannot be carried out by or within the Labour Party alone. The possibility of other forces contributing (apart from those movements already mentioned earlier) can be seen in the response to the formation of the Socialist Society which involves Labour Party members and many who are non-aligned. Much more critical is the position of the Communist Party itself, its theoretical journal and daily paper. The Communist Party has made a major contribution to strategic thinking for the movement as a whole. Even though its programme *The British Road To Socialism* needs development because of further changes in British politics, it still contains the most fruitful approach to an overall socialist strategy. And in addition, the Communist Party has a concept of political action which is needed by the movement as a whole.

The Left must break with narrow and sectarian notions of what constitutes political leadership and to this the Communist Party can make a vital contribution.

The concept which the entire forces of the Left must get to grips with is the building of what Gramsci called an historic block; an alliance of forces in which the Labour Party would be a major component and which would be based not on the lowest common denominator but offer a dynamic prospect, shifting the entire structure towards socialist transformation.

Crucial problems now face the Left. The elements within it are now obliged to take stock of where they are and where they are going.

Vision must fuse with realism if we are to pluck victories from the jaws of defeat. •

<sup>1</sup> See also Perry Anderson's essay '*Problems of Socialist Strategy*' in *Towards Socialism* (Ed Anderson and Blackburn, Fontane, 1965) which looks towards a socialist party as having the capacity to build not a coalition which changes little, but in the Gramsci sense, a historic block the unity of which would rest on 'an ascending integration.'