



Peter Hain Prospects for Labour

Many thousands of socialists and progressives have hailed recent left breakthroughs in the Labour Party. Indeed, the success of the movement popularly identified with Tony Benn has been one of the few exciting features of a political landscape otherwise filled with gloom and defeat.

Yet that very success has masked fundamental weaknesses within Labour's 'new left' — weaknesses which have now given the Party's right an opening through which to go onto the offensive. Suddenly, all the advances since the late 1970s look rather precarious.

How has this happened and what must be done to regain the initiative?

First of all it is important to recognise that the comparatively recent swing to the left had its roots in the disenchantment with the performance of Labour in office, going right back to the 1960s. It was in reaction to the failures of the 1964-70 Wilson years that the Party began shifting leftwards, adopting in 1973 a programme that was probably the most radical in its history. Propelled by Party activists determined to have socialist policies for a change and by a trade union movement blooded on the anti-Tory militancy of the early 1970s, Labour came back

into office in 1974 with the ruling class in retreat.

But the policy advances made whilst in opposition were soon blocked and there was the familiar tale of compromise and sell-out, ending with the 1979 election being fought on a centrist manifesto after relations with the unions had been soured by the winter confrontation over pay.

The cumulative effect of all this was to push Party members to make increasingly uncompromising demands. Already, the pressure for mandatory reselection had built up and now the left concentrated on pressing for accountability of the leadership. What amounted to a coalition between left constituency parties and trade unions still embittered by rigid pay restraint, carried the historic reforms on reselection and electing the leader. It was this combination of *political* disillusion in the constituencies and *economic* disillusion in the unions that enabled the left to achieve success.

The sheer breadth of support overcame bitter intransigence from the right, the tactical brilliance and hard work of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy giving the necessary cutting edge.

In one sense these victories did have solid

foundations in the rank and file, defined as constituency and union *activists*. Without their pressure on Party and union leaders the reforms could not have been won.

But in another sense the reforms were less firmly based. The 'real' rank and file of the labour movement had not necessarily been won to the left's cause. Even the extent of support amongst shop stewards and branch officials was exaggerated in the heady days following the 1979 and 1980 conferences.

What the Labour left had done was to exploit to the full the democratic machinery of the Party and to do so with relentless energy. Essential as this was — it is hard to see how else the reforms could have been won — the strategy was entirely within the tradition of British 'labourism'. That is to say, the left's campaign hardly engaged at all with wider class and group forces outside the official structures of the labour movement.

It was a characteristically inward-looking campaign. Even sympathetic outsiders could be forgiven for interpreting it as just another bureaucratic power battle amongst competing elites remote from ordinary workers and voters.

As a result the foundations of the left's advances were a great deal more fragile than many were prepared to admit. Just to rub home the point, the conference majorities for the reforms were very narrow and some of them came only after the right had been outwitted on the day by the left's greater tactical acumen. They were also produced by the swings of a few union block votes that could so easily have gone the other way.

The situation in the country

Moreover, the left may have been winning in the *Party* but right wing ideas were meanwhile winning in the *country*, the ideological lurch rightwards under Thatcherism being symptomatic of this.

Such is the nub of our present predicament and the reason why Labour's left could so easily be marginalised.

For instance, extravagant claims were made just a year or two back for the way the unions were swinging leftwards. That may have been true for a layer of union *activists*. But it was emphatically not true of ordinary union members who were demoralised by Thatcherism and remained ripe for plucking by right wing union leaders and now — as has happened over the register — by the Party establishment.

Even the Deputy Leader campaign — the focus for the left's activity in 1981 as the next stage on from winning the reforms — contained more salutary lessons than many were willing to acknowledge in the after-

math of Tony Benn's extraordinary achievement in coming so desperately close to winning. Failing by just 0.952%, some of his closest supporters argued immediately afterwards that the left had now won 'half the movement. In fact the result showed just how tenuous the left's position was, particularly in the unions. The manoeuvres around the T&GWU vote were bad enough. But the real gulf between left activists and the rank and file was dramatically shown in the NUPE vote for Denis Healey which went against the whole policy and practice of the union.

Moreover, in the big wide world outside the hothouse of Labour Party politics the left was losing and we were losing badly. It is too simplistic to say that all the energy put into Tony Benn's campaign for Deputy could, if directed into the industrial arena, have won the battles for jobs going on in the summer and autumn of 1981. But while those marvellous fringe meetings at union conferences were preoccupied with the battle for Labour's leadership, they were ignoring the critical struggles in the workplaces, at Laurence Scotts and elsewhere up and down the country, where workers fought redundancies through occupations.

The fact that most of those struggles ended in defeat highlighted the serious erosion of working class industrial strength: strength upon which ultimately the power of a socialist movement rests. In truth, the labour movement's industrial base has been withering badly.

Extra parliamentary action

And it is too easy to place the blame for this on the right for its pitiful leadership of the Party and some of the unions. Of course that has been a major contribution to sapping the morale of workers and their confidence in a socialist alternative. Of course the right's latest drive for expulsions can only play into the hands of the media and the Tories. Of course the right has little original or coherent to say about policy. But the Labour left has done little to rebuild the sinews of the movement. It has concentrated on winning positions *within*, and now finds itself having shifted significantly towards the left the centre of gravity of a movement drifting towards the wilderness.

If the 'old' Labour left of Michael Foot and the Tribune group can be indicted for its narrow parliamentarianism that helped to sever the Party from its grass roots, the new Labour left can be criticised for paying only lip service to extra parliamentary action in its preoccupation with internal Party conflict. For instance, one left London Constituency Party has issued press releases over

the past year repeatedly attacking the Party leadership without once taking up local issues such as the dampness afflicting council estates in the area.

This is not a plea for trimming, for populism or for accepting bad national leadership. It is to argue for a more activist role in the community, going outwards and involving people rather than preaching down at them and pretending that their interests are automatically catered for by the left. There is a sense of tautology in the way many Party activists think and operate: Labour is the 'Party of the working class', therefore it must be 'representing the working class'. QED. Even if the first part of this were true, the second part does not follow if the relationship with ordinary people is entirely passive.

Neglect of this extra parliamentary dimension and of the need to go out and actively win backing for radical policies has in part allowed the Party's right to take the initiative recently. The right has also been assisted by the fact that the leaders of the left have overplayed their hands this past year.

Power-stalemate

By and large the view taken has been to push on regardless, to fight to the last over Party positions, in the hope that the tactics which won the democratic reforms could also win final control of the Party.

But in the absence of positive support outside in the working class, the shortcomings of this approach have been exposed. The Labour Party has historically been a coalition between its left and right. And despite the SDP breakaway, it remains such a coalition. Indeed defections to the SDP have made it harder for the left to operate since our opponents are not so vulnerable to charges of disloyalty. What is more, the left, based in the constituencies and distanced as it largely is from the workplaces, is in great danger of driving the unions back into the arms of the right. This danger would increase if union leaders — understandably desperate to prevent a second Tory term of office that could see their organisations severely weakened — got the impression that the left was more interested in defeating the right in the Party than in winning the next election.

There is now a power stalemate in the Party, and the stark choice for Labour's left is not between what we have now and the more thoroughly socialist Party we want to see. The balance of forces inside and outside the labour movement preclude the latter development during this pre-election period. Instead the choice is between what

we have now and continual internal wrangles which can only push the Party into the political periphery, and weaken the left in the process. It is simply not possible to shift the centre of gravity of the Party further leftwards without beforehand rebuilding the left's grass roots base.

That means revitalising Labour politics at constituency level, so that CLPs are transformed from the 'resolutionary' bodies they still tend to be, into active campaigning groups, linking with tenants, building workplace branches, working with the women's movement, ethnic minorities and community groups.

A new thrust

It also means giving rather more attention to the detail of policy. Much Labour left policy thinking is correct in general but woolly in practice. Moreover it should be remembered that unilateralism is the only major policy advance that has been won during this time of general left gains. And it was not won by lobbying for model resolutions in a political vacuum. It occurred because of the massive extra parliamentary movement for disarmament under the revived CND. Similarly, demands for equality for women have at last begun to make headway in the Party because of the upsurge in the women's movement outside.

Doubtless it will be argued that to press for a total re-orientation of the left's priorities, to call for a strategy of mass politics' as the Labour Coordinating Committee has done, is to dodge the here and now of the fight against the right and its so-called 'purge'.

But whilst it is crucial to stand firm against any expulsions, the central problem with which Labour's left will sooner or later have to come to grips is whether it continues to be bogged down in the all-consuming internal battles of the moment; or whether it recognises that we have a long term project of socialist transformation to tackle.

Unless we lift our eyes above the dust of the present conflict that project will continue to be neglected. And unless we go for bust (which will effectively mean jettisoning the link with the unions), the Party will remain for the foreseeable future a coalition between left and right — with the continuing objective of shifting control and policy further to the left.

The momentous gains of recent years now need to be built upon in a new thrust to win the whole of the labour movement and the working class beyond to the alternative economic strategy and the other Party policies which alone offer an escape from the present crisis.