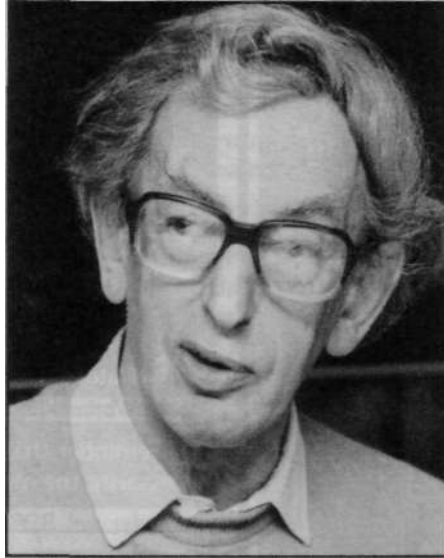


Eric Hobsbawm's 'Labour's Lost Millions' which we published last October, has led to a major debate in our columns and elsewhere. In this article, he responds to the argument.

LABOUR: Rump or Rebirth?

Eric Hobsbawm



MARXISTS AND OTHER left-wing socialists — for many of them can hardly be regarded as Marxists, even when, as today, they advertise themselves as such — have never been happy about the Labour Party. Before 1918 it did not claim to be socialist at all. Since then it has, but many will agree that 'it is reasonable to see (labourism) as an ideology of social reform, within the framework of capitalism, with no serious ambitions of transcending that framework, whatever ritual obeisances to 'socialism' might be performed by party leaders on suitable occasions.' (R Miliband in *Socialist Register* 1983 p 109). Or, to be more polite, that what most Labour leaders have meant by 'socialism' is rather different from what is in the minds of socialists.

Consequently the Left has, historically, had two views about the Labour Party. Some have written it off and attempted, from time to time, to form another, truly socialist, party of the working class in competition with it. This appears still to be the position of some Marxist groups such as the WRP and SWP, and was that of independent socialists like Miliband who argued that the 'hope of the Left to transform the Labour Party . . . was illusory, and that, far from representing a short cut to the creation of a mass socialist party in Britain (which has never existed), it was in fact a dead end in which British socialists had been trapped for many decades — in fact since the Labour Party came into being.' (*ibid* 116)

History has shown this to be a non-starter. None of the organisations which have followed this line between 1900 and 1983, from the Social Democratic Federation via the Communist Party at some periods of its history and the ILP in the 1930s, has got anywhere, nor do the present advocates of an independent

socialist/marxist mass party look promising. In Britain there has been only one genuine mass party of the Left, based on the working class and its movement, the Labour Party.

Most socialists, and today the great majority of Marxists, have accepted this as a fact of life. Like it or not, the future of socialism is through the Labour Party. This has been the basis of Communist Party policy since its programme *The British Road to Socialism* in the early 1950s, and was implicit in its policy since the middle 1930s. Other Marxists have moved into the Labour Party either as individuals or, like the Militant Tendency, as collective 'entrists', thus incidentally making the Communist Party's long-held hope of winning collective and open affiliation to the Labour Party difficult to the point of impracticability. A great body of socialists have always regarded the Labour Party as their natural home and operated as a Left within it.

A truly socialist mass party

However, there is a fundamental distinction within this body of Labour-oriented socialists, and it lies at the root of the arguments about the Forward March of

Labour, which have lately clustered around my article 'Labour's Lost Millions' in *Marxism Today* Oct 1983, being conducted with much passion and some bad temper. Some on the Left — probably a majority — believe that the time has come when the Labour Party itself can be transformed into the truly socialist mass party which we would all prefer. Their scenario — to quote the admirably lucid Ralph Miliband again — is

'the continuation of the struggles in which the Left has been engaged, with the purpose of achieving predominance and turning the Labour Party into a socialist party free from the constriction hitherto imposed on it by its leaders. It must be presumed that many leading figures in the Labour Party would then want to leave it and seek political homes elsewhere . . . In fact it would be essential that such people *should* leave the Labour Party, for just as the Left makes life difficult for a leadership which is opposed to it, so could determined Right and Centre parliamentarians make life difficult for a party in which the Left had acquired predominance.' (P 116)

The Labour Party might lose some members but would gain others. It might even lose unions which wished to disaffiliate from a party that went beyond labourism, but only in some cases, (p 116)

The other view — which I share — holds that this is a dangerous day-dream. Certainly the future lies in a Labour Party which moves to the left, not only under the influence of the socialists within and outside it, but because its members and supporters recognise the need for it to do so — just as formerly Liberal and non-political Labour supporters came to see themselves as socialists earlier this century. But Marxists must begin by taking the Labour Party as it has actually come into

being and developed to be the mass party of the British Left. In the first place, it has not developed as an ideologically homogeneous or unified party, but as a broad class and progressive front, containing a wide range of views from the Centre to the revolutionary Left. In fact, Lenin (whose *'Leftwing Communism, an Infantile Disorder'* repays careful reading even today), stressed 'the unique character of the British Labour Party the very structure of which is so unlike the ordinary political party on the

Workers as well as leaders

In the second place, and even more to the point, it has unfortunately *never* been true that the only thing which has prevented the Labour Party from being the party of our dreams, was the 'constriction hitherto imposed on it by its leaders'. The British workers, even the workers politically advanced enough to join a party committed to socialism and to defend its commitment against the Gaitskellite attacks on 'Clause IV, were never an army of left-wing socialists held back only by blind loyalty to right-wing leaders who betrayed their faith at every opportunity, and the millions of Labour voters fitted this image even less. They have indeed often been misled and betrayed by those they trusted — not least by Attlee and Bevin who committed them to a cold-war policy they would certainly not have chosen in 1945-7 and British nuclear weapons they would not have wanted, had they known about them. They have certainly often been disappointed by their party — more than ever since the disastrous 1960s — and by many of its

Like it or not, the future of socialism is through the Labour Party

leaders. They have, bitterly, seen a succession of men and women whom they trusted as people devoted to their cause, abandon them for the anti-Labour parties or revealed as ambitious or money-hungry careerists. But, by and large, they have been content with a 'labourism' which stood for something much more modest than socialism in practice, even if it held out the hope of a socialist society. That is still the case.

To accept this is not opportunism, but realism. Still less does it mean that the Labour Party cannot move to the left. Indeed, it has done so to a notable extent since the days of Gaitskell and Wilson. What it does mean is that the political

evolution of the party will fail, if it takes place without considering the masses, without whose support it is lost. To quote Lenin again: 'Change is brought about by the political experience of the masses; never is it brought about by propaganda alone. To march forward without compromise, without turning from the path' — if this is said by an obviously impotent minority of the workers ... then the slogan is obviously mistaken. It is like 10,000 soldiers going into battle against 50,000 enemy soldiers — when it would be wise to 'stop', to 'turn from the road' and even 'enter into a compromise' in order to gain time until the arrival of the reinforcements of 100,000.¹²

FACING UP TO THE CRISIS

How 'impotent' is the movement today? How fundamental are the changes it needs to undertake? Where-must it look for its 'reinforcements'? The debate on my article has concentrated on the third question, because, after the June 1983 elections, not even the most blinkered of sectarians were prepared to claim in public that Labour had not suffered a disastrous defeat or that nothing was wrong with the conduct of the party which finished four years of Thatcherism by losing a fifth of its supporters. Yet the debate shows that in fact the depth of Labour's crisis has not sunk in. People like me, say some, are just indulging in pessimism and 'the Left's current passion for slinging mud at itself' (Massey, Segal and Wainwright in *New Socialist* Jan-Feb 1984). They echo, say others, the Labour Centre and Right of the 1950s, which thought there was no future for a working class-based party, and look how wrong they were (Westergaard in *New Socialist Jan-Feb 1984, Miliband in Socialist Register* 1983, pp 104-5). Hobsbawm can only think that Labour's forward march has been reversed, because he overlooks the 'wonderful, painful, indispensable, transition from mere Labourism to Socialism' which has been taking place within the Labour Party, though it is not yet complete (Royden Harrison in *Labour Herald* Oct 28 1983), a statement which reminds me of the oarsmen in a boat which is being swept towards the rapids who congratulate themselves, no doubt correctly on rowing much better than they had ever done before.

A different working class

As for the changes which have to be made, everybody agrees in principle that there is a lot to be done. Yet in practice it is denied that the profound changes in the social and economic structure and situation of Britain

since the 1950s, to which I have tried to draw attention for the past five years, make a corresponding re-thinking of the movement's political approach necessary. It is argued that the 'working class', the traditional base of the party, is not declining, though the decline of 'the manual working class based on heavy engineering, the mines, shipyards, the docks etc,' is not denied. 'It is not true to say the working class has overall diminished. It is a different working class' (Eric Heffer *Marxism Today* Dec 83). 'The working class is the overwhelming majority of the population' (*Socialist Worker* 15 Oct 83: 'Eric Hobsbawm: Guru on the wrong road') It is obviously true that the bulk of the population of working age, insofar as they are not unemployed, are in one way or another employed for wages/salaries, though it would be interesting to penetrate the statistically undocumented and almost certainly growing cloud of the 'black' or 'unofficial' economy, in which the differ-

the party which finished four years of Thatcherism by losing a fifth of its supporters

ence between bosses, workers and what historians of the Victorian era call 'penny capitalism' are much less clear-cut. If a study of the changes within the working class aims to discover the new ways of mobilising this mixture of old and new, but in all cases transformed, sections of the employed, then it is useful. Westergaard, who agrees that 'a labour movement dedicated to radical and constructive opposition to inequality can no longer hope to swing a majority behind it by appealing to class loyalties', has done a very good job of this kind in his 'Class of '84' (*New Socialist* Jan-Feb 1984). But if it merely asserts that the transformation of the working class proves that we should go plugging on in the old way, then it is not helpful. Of course there is also the view, recently expressed by Tony Benn, that 'all this analysis of a fundamental change which means that everything is different is designed to demoralise and defeat', (*City Limits* Jan 20-26 1984) which I record without comment.

The question arises why, if the Labour Party has basically been on the right lines (give or take a failure here and there) it suffered such a spectacular defeat in June 1983. And why those who believed it was,

¹Lenin *Selected Works* Vol X p131.

²Lenin *Selected Works* Vol X pi27.

did not predict what was going to happen, as the realists did, being labelled as 'pessimists' for having been patently right. Or, for that matter, why all the participants in this debate are arguing so furiously about the future of Labour.

Feminism

I need say little about contributors who divert attention from the problems at issue by criticising me for not discussing the problems of the Communist Party and the revolutionary Left (Eric Heffer in *Marxism Today* Dec 1983, Royden Harrison in *Labour Herald* Oct 28 1983) or for a bias against women (Anna Coote, *Marxism Today* Jan 1984, Doreen Massey, Lynne Segal, Hilary Wainwright, *New Socialist* Jan-Feb 1984). As for the question of feminism, what was said on the subject in 'Labour's Lost Millions' can only be read as meaning that the women's movement and the problem of mobilising women can

I am probably now known... simply as 'the man who wants a coalition of Labour and the SDP/Liberal Alliance'

not be treated as a mere sub-department of the working-class struggle, but that women and their movement are forces in their own right. It is in no sense anti-feminist. No doubt 'there may be a problem involved in appealing to the interests of women and men at the same time' (Coote), though in the past labour movements have nevertheless succeeded in appealing to both with fair success. (In the 1930s a consistent 41-42% of the individual members of the Labour Party were women.)

As socialists we simply have no option but to believe as a minimum that socialism is consistent with the aspirations of women, as Tricia Davis obviously does in the important article to which Coote rightly draws attention. (Feminism is Dead? Long Live Feminism' *Marxism Today* Oct 1983). If we thought it could not satisfy half the human race, how could we be socialists? In the meantime the task is enormous: 72% of voting women in June 1983 chose Alliance and the Tories, whose feminist record is hardly impressive. As for my article, I have genuine difficulty in understanding how it can be read as an example of male bias, or part of a 'Great Male Moving Right Show',

even assuming it recommends a move to the right, which it does not. It is, of course, undeniable that, for reasons beyond my control, it is written by a man.

Up-dated Popular Front

The Communist Party was not the subject of 'Labour's Lost Millions', though its problems are inseparable from the prospects of Labour, as are those of the rest of the socialist Left, Marxist or not. However, critics are right in pointing out that the views expressed about Labour's future prospects by me and others in *Marxism Today* are in a way, 'an up-to-date version of the Poplar Front' (Heffer) and that, in my own case, 'Popular Frontism, in one form or another (has) characterise(d) his politics over five decades' (Norah Carlin and Ian Birchall, 'Kinnock's Favourite Marxist: Eric Hobsbawm and the Working Class' *International Socialism* 21, autumn 1983 p 90). This is not only the nostalgia of someone formed in the anti-fascist 1930s for the period which, after all, achieved the greatest advances of the Left in Europe since the Russian Revolution, ranging from Labour triumph in Britain to, in some countries, autonomous social revolutions. It is because we were able to discover in practice how right Dimitrov was to tell us:

'We want to find a common *language* with the broadest masses for the purpose of struggling against the class enemy, to find ways of finally overcoming *the isolation of the revolutionary vanguard* from the masses of the proletariat and all working people, as well as overcoming the fatal *isolation of the working class itself* from its natural allies in the struggle against the bourgeoisie, against fascism.' (G Dimitrov, *Selected Speeches and Articles*, London 1951, p 113)

Situations change, and so do the styles of political discourse. But what Dimitrov said and what we learned in the school of politics, not least that the masses 'must be taken as they are, not as we should like to have them', made sense then and still makes sense.

BUILDING SUPPORT

So what changes have to be made? The debate about 'Labour's Lost Millions' has concentrated so overwhelmingly on one incidental suggestion, namely that under certain circumstances an electoral arrangement among anti-Thatcher forces might have to be envisaged, that I am probably now known to the large part of the Left

which has never read a word of *Marxism Today* simply as 'the man who wants a coalition of Labour and the Liberal/SDP Alliance.' Just to have it on the record, let me say, once again, that I did *not* recommend either an electoral coalition or a coalition government, and still less that the Labour Party 'must abandon in advance the goal of forming a majority government' and seek a coalition instead (A Freeman and D Minns, *Guardian* Oct 1983). I have *never* said that Labour 'can only really make progress if it makes some electoral or other arrangements with the . . .

Alliance' (Eric Heffer). I have simply raised the question what happens at the next election if Labour's recovery is not sufficient to beat Thatcher single-handed. However we answer this question, someone has to ask it, because it does not go away if we shut our eyes. My own answer, in print, is that I regard 'the need to unite the anti-Thatcher forces by electoral arrangements in four years' time as the second-worst outcome in British politics', but nevertheless as 'preferable to the worst outcome, another Thatcher victory.' (*Guardian* Nov 2 1983). But that was *not* what my article was about. It was about the ways to avoid either of these two outcomes.

Not just policies but supporters

Why the debate has homed in so overwhelmingly on this one point, brings us back to the basic attitudes of the Left to the Labour Party. Most of the critics who reject the suggestion, merely express an understandable outrage. But behind it, I think, there lies an approach similar to Miliband's, and which Raymond Williams has put into the form of a careful argument in his article 'Socialists and Coalitionists'



New Socialist March-April 1984). He accepts that those who take a similar view **to myself do** not want a coalition, but a Labour government. But, he argues, they are prepared to entertain the idea of a common front of Centre and Left, because they see even the Labour Party itself, as it has developed, as such a coalition, and so they find a wider common front acceptable, if by any chance a victory of Labour

the prospect of rallying a minority of convinced socialists who hope against hope that sometime something will turn up

(the 'narrow coalition') is impossible. But, he argues, this side-steps the crucial question of the *socialist* character of its policies. So indeed, he agrees, do others on the Left, who have accepted the Labour policies of 1983 as 'left' and 'socialist', though there is actually nothing specifically socialist about most of them. Nor does such a programme become more socialist by being combined with 'a bold announcement of a commitment to socialism,' or by assuming that we only need to follow 'the answers . . . already known and advanced by the Left in the Party . . . (which) is the way to a repetition of a merely divisive factionalism.' All the same, the so-called 'coalitionists' (little or big) are basically content with another version of the old social-democratic policies, and socialists cannot be.

This undoubtedly puts its finger on a crucial question: what policies the labour movement and Labour governments should

pursue if they want to do more than make the best of a bad job, and give capitalism 'a human face' — which, of course, many non-socialists also want to do. And behind this lies the even more crucial question, just how we envisage a British socialism. But these questions have two sides. They certainly require 'in the next four years . . . the radical reconstruction of all the main directions of policy in the light of the most open and informed socialist analysis.' But we also have to face the problem of how people whose interest in politics, or for that matter unions, is not socialist, and not necessarily identified in their minds with the struggle for socialism, can be convinced that socialism, and a socialist Labour Party, is for them. This is the wider problem of the politics of Labour, which includes, but is not the same as, the narrower problem of its programme and policies.

Against sectarian radicalism

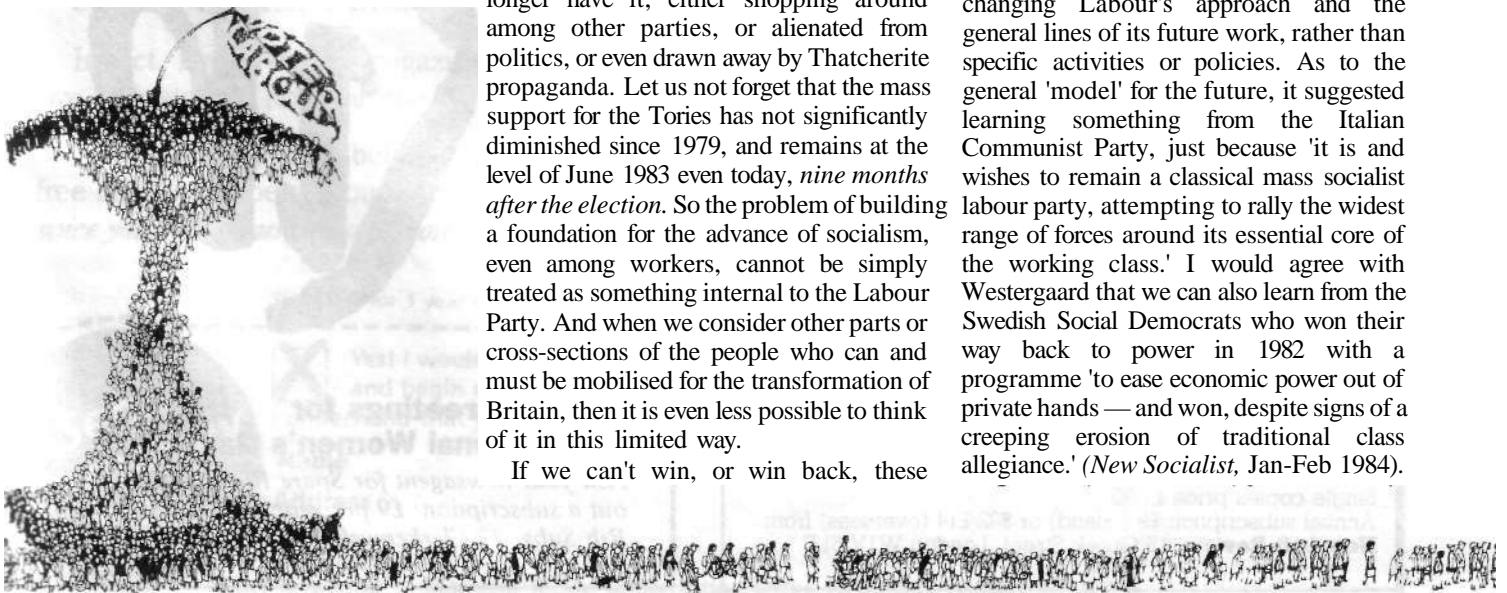
It is not a new problem, though it is today very much more difficult than during Labour's 'forward march' in the first half of the century, when we could rely on a growing number of workers accepting the equation: class=support for the workers' party=being against capitalism=for socialism. Even that was not enough, as the history of the Labour Party shows. But today we can't rely on the automatic growth of class consciousness with these implications any more. We can no longer even rely on the skilled workers, the traditional 'spine' of the labour movement, staying unconditionally loyal to Labour as 'their team'. And even where we can still rely on such loyalty which automatically identifies class, party and (more doubtfully) socialism, we cannot overlook the masses who no longer have it, either shopping around among other parties, or alienated from politics, or even drawn away by Thatcherite propaganda. Let us not forget that the mass support for the Tories has not significantly diminished since 1979, and remains at the level of June 1983 even today, *nine months after the election*. So the problem of building a foundation for the advance of socialism, even among workers, cannot be simply treated as something internal to the Labour Party. And when we consider other parts or cross-sections of the people who can and must be mobilised for the transformation of Britain, then it is even less possible to think of it in this limited way.

If we can't win, or win back, these

masses, then there is no foreseeable way forward. There is only the prospect of rallying a minority of convinced socialists who hope against hope that sometime something will turn up. In fact, of writing off the hope of making Labour a force for socialist advance. Raymond Williams, it seems, is close to such pessimism — but then, he sees the past history of the Labour Party, in the very period when it became a party committed to socialism and millions rallied to it as such, namely 'during the generations of Liberal decline,' simply as 'the only realistic Left-of-Tory coalition.' 'Labour's Lost Millions', which rejects this view, was not a call for retreat into opportunism making the best of a bad job, but a call for advance. It did not even see the broad anti-Thatcherite front which is surely quite essential today, as a mere defence against encroaching reaction. It is that, certainly — but the history of the anti-fascist struggles shows that those purely defensive struggles were the foundation of major advances of the Left — not least in Britain. It was not a call for a more moderate approach against the 'more radical tactics' of Williams and others, but against the sort of short-sighted and sectarian 'radicalism' which Lenin, for one, criticised, and which, to put it mildly, has done the Labour Party no good. *And which therefore has weakened the Left*. For it is a historical fact that, since 1917, the Left (including notably the Marxist Left) and support for the Labour Party have tended to grow and fall *together*, and not at each other's expense.

FOR UNITY AND AGAINST COMPLACENCY

'Labour's Lost Millions' was about changing Labour's approach and the general lines of its future work, rather than specific activities or policies. As to the general 'model' for the future, it suggested learning something from the Italian Communist Party, just because 'it is and wishes to remain a classical mass socialist labour party, attempting to rally the widest range of forces around its essential core of the working class.' I would agree with Westergaard that we can also learn from the Swedish Social Democrats who won their way back to power in 1982 with a programme 'to ease economic power out of private hands — and won, despite signs of a creeping erosion of traditional class allegiance.' (*New Socialist*, Jan-Feb 1984).



Various relevant points have been made by Michael Meacher (with whom I entirely agree) and Robin Cook (with whom I almost entirely agree) (*Marxism Today* Nov 1983) as well as other contributors in *Marxism Today* (Bert Munro, Des Walshe *Marxism Today* Jan 1984; Roger Poole, Dave Cook, *Marxism Today* Feb 1984) and elsewhere (Stuart Hall, *New Socialist* Jan-Feb 1984) whom I take to be broadly in agreement with 'Labour's Lost Millions'. There is no disagreement either with the proposals of what could and should be done made by Heffer and Massey/Segal/Wainwright, but unfortunately most of them could have been made, or were made and acted upon before June 1983, by the activists of the movement who did not spend too much of their time on what Robin Cook calls 'committee politics, of which the battlefield was the branch meeting victory was the mandating of delegates.' So they are not, by themselves, enough.

This is not the place to discuss further what Labour should and can do concretely. But it is certainly essential in conclusion to remind ourselves of two things which must *not* happen.

The first is the resumption, *from any side*, of the suicidal civil war within the

Labour Party. It isn't likely that the existing leadership of the party will be directly challenged at present, since the 1983 Conference so clearly reflected the party's desire for unity and an end to fratricide, and since the new leadership has so obviously increased the party's support — as registered in the polls — by a third. But it is more than likely that local committee room battles to select and de-select delegates and candidates will have

millions demoralised by the sight of Labour aiming to score own goals

the same effect. This would be a disaster. The Right must not indulge in scandalous wangles such as the attempt to keep Tony Benn off the shortlist for Chesterfield, which fortunately failed. Benn, quite apart from his personal qualifications, represents an important element in the Labour Party, which has the right to be represented in Parliament. Just so (like them or not) Healey and Hattersley represent something in the party, not to speak of MPs like, say, Frank Field who are not, and are not even regarded as, standard-bearers on the Labour Right, but who risk being

de-selected because some faction or current wants their seats. If the politics of civil war are allowed to re-enter the Labour Party by the back door, it is lost.

The second thing which must not happen, is complacency. True, as Michael Meacher says, 'a consistent presentation of unity and a new charismatic leadership suddenly propelled the party (after the 1983 Conference) from third place in recent polls to neck-and-neck with the Tories (*Marxism Today* Nov 1983). (Well, not quite . . .) But while this showed that millions demoralised by the sight of Labour aiming to score own goals, wanted nothing better than to support a credible Labour Party, it is not and will not be enough. It merely means that, if these people can be held — and they can go away as fast as they returned — the fight to recover and extend Labour's support does not have to start as far back as it looked in June 1983. It will still have to be won. It will be very difficult to win it. We cannot rely on automatic disillusionment with Thatcher or the Alliance to do the job for us. The Labour Party and all other parts of the labour movement have a very full agenda for the next four years. Now that the reasons for Labour's defeat have been debated, it is time to concentrate on it.

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