
ROBIN COOK MP
Looking over the edge

Last October I wrote an article for this journal in which I charted the depth of the hole in which Labour found itself after its electoral rout in the general election. One year on is a fitting time to pause and reflect on how far we have got in clambering back out of that hole.

It is possible to point to areas of clear advance. These are most marked in relation to the Alliance, who in the summer of 1983 looked poised to eclipse Labour as the second major force in British politics, but who are currently relegated to the backmarker. The European elections were particularly encouraging in this respect as Labour displaced the Alliance as the opposition party in no fewer than 19 Euro-constituencies where Labour ended bottom on the basis of votes cast in the general election. Half a dozen of the seats where Labour overhauled the Alliance were actually among the list published by Frank Field in the week before polling as instances where Labour voters could best defeat the Tories by voting for Alliance candidates. The lurch of the SDP to the right in the slipstream of David Owen's manic dash across the political spectrum gives us the opportunity to press home the attack on the Alliance parties, who do not offer an alternative to Thatcher but a



substitute for her.

Yet the evidence of recovery is patchy, and further effort is required before we can haul ourselves over the rim of the hole. Nor have we a leisurely three years left in which to complete the task. We can anticipate the normal revival of support for the governing party in the last year as they tug at all the levers of economic and social management to avert collision with the electorate, and therefore Labour must soon establish a commanding lead if we are to be confident of victory.

Two immediate objectives would contribute to this longer term goal. First we must restore to the political agenda those welfare issues which illustrate the case for collective solutions to social problems - notably poverty and housing, which have both been elbowed off the front pages by the priorities of Thatcher while her policies have been brewing a crisis on both fronts.

Secondly, as Thatcher's administration expands the power of the state at the expense of freedom - whether measured by local democracy, the right to association in a union, or the right of civil servants to dissent - Labour must pick up the banner of liberty as our very own. We are a party of democratic socialism, and there is ample evidence that currently the ideology of

democracy provokes greater resonance in the working class than we have yet achieved for the ideology of socialism.

I am not convinced that everyone in the party has grasped the magnitude of our task and the extent to which their own conduct has a bearing on whether we succeed. It is true that there is a heartfelt recognition that the party must avoid televised squabbles of the kind that destroyed our electoral challenge last time round, and the recent defence document has attracted broad support across the movement from Denis Healey to Fenner Brockway, securing for our non-nuclear defence strategy a measure of agreement that would have been unimaginable five years ago.

However these gains in unity have been more marked in respect of the formulation of policy than in the projection of policy, although last year the consensus held that it was the presentation of our case that let us down. Here I have to confess to powerful frustration. Despite a deep-rooted demand for change from the constituency parties, and some stimulating thinking by many of the party's staff, there has been little serious reform of our organisation - certainly nothing to compare with the improvements which the Conservatives

have continued to make to an electoral machine which was already streets ahead of us. I am particularly depressed that the programmes of reform offered by myself and others have been met with an entirely defensive reaction from certain members of the NEC whose revolutionary zeal for transforming British society is complemented by an alarming conservatism towards Labour's organisation.

This is particularly unfortunate as next year the capacity of the labour movement to organise successful mass campaigns will be tested to the full in the trade union ballots. I fear it is symptomatic of the wider failure of the movement to grasp the awesome significance of this challenge that they surface nowhere in the questions put to Neil Kinnock (*Marxism Today* October 1984). If these ballots go badly, the results could change the very nature of the labour movement as a partnership between the political and industrial struggle. If the opportunity which they represent is fully seized they could enable the Labour Party to reinvigorate support for its programme among the rank and file of the union membership. Either way they represent a crucial step in determining whether Labour will be in a position to escape from its hole before the next general election.

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