

• TOWARDS 1963?

The Labour Party is advancing towards 1963. Since the end of the miners' strike the party leadership has spruced up the modernisation theme expressed after Neil Kinnock's election, and the Jobs and Industry Campaign echoes both the style and substance of Harold Wilson's 'white heat of technology' speech of 1963.

In short, there is a new tempo about Labour politics since the end of the strike. The leadership sees the outcome as a vindication of its belief in the parliamentary and constitutional approach - pro-ballot and anti-violence, winning broad consent rather than narrow sectarian commitment, what Tony Benn has somewhat quaintly called the 'Gaitskell-Hobsbawm' thesis.

Of course, the hard Left has played into Mr Kinnock's hands. The weaknesses of the NUM leadership both during the strike (as was fully documented in the roundtable discussion in the April issue of *Marxism Today*) and the subsequent defeat over the levy has made it easier for the parliamentary leadership to distance itself from Mr Scargill. The strike is treated almost as if it were a nightmare best forgotten rather than as an example of the class struggle to be emulated.

Moreover, the disarray within the Labour groups in various London local councils about what to do about rate-capping has further discredited the 'confrontationalist' thesis. The vanguard has appeared to be leading nowhere, with Ken Livingstone being cast in the role of Kerensky, or Lenin, according to taste.

The result has been to give Neil Kinnock freedom of manoeuvre for the first time in over a year. He has been able to let the hard Left wallow in its problems while embracing

new adherents (if not converts) in the shape of Tom Sawyer of NUPE, Michael Meacher and *Tribune*, leaving Tony Benn increasingly isolated as a fading guru. Meanwhile, Militant has been thrown on the defensive, partly for internal reasons, and reselection has been less of a problem than earlier exaggerated fears.

So the yo/yo ratings of the political world have moved in Mr Kinnock's favour just as much as they were against him last December. But he can also point to solid evidence in the opinion polls showing that Labour has pulled ahead of the Tories.

Labour was clearly held back by the miners' strike, at least outside mining areas and other traditional Labour strongholds. But then opinions began to turn last November when scenes of violent picketing disappeared from the television screens every night and it looked inevitable that the NUM leadership would lose. Public attention then started to shift to other matters, the economy, the series of government mistakes over student loans and the like. The initial beneficiaries were the Alliance whose support climbed from the low 20s to the mid 20s during the late autumn and winter.

19-24 March MORI Poll of the Political Parties Popularity	
LABOUR	40%
CONSERVATIVE	36%
ALLIANCE	23%
OTHER	1%

The end of the strike has accelerated this process by removing a factor which was clearly a minus for Labour and by allowing voters to concentrate upon the Government's problems. So the combination of higher mortgage and water rates and an unexciting budget was just what Labour wanted to attack the Government. And there has been the added bonus of Mrs Thatcher's increased unpopularity. She has appeared more shrill and hectoring and more out of touch, preaching to people on the virtues of abroad but not travelling to the high unemployment regions of Britain.

The opinion polls have suggested that the public has become less worried about trade unions and strikes and more concerned about inflation, unemployment and law and order, all matters which are likely to damage

the Government's standing. Moreover, Labour has improved its position among 18 to 24 year olds, trade unions and C2 skilled workers, among whom it did badly in 1983.

The implication is that the Government is more vulnerable than it has been for nearly four years. The initiative which Mrs Thatcher regained in 1982-83 may have been lost as the public has grown impatient both with her failure to deliver the goods — tax cuts for the 87% in work and jobs for the 13% unemployed — and with her apparently hectoring and distant style of leadership.

Mrs Thatcher's appeal to the British to copy the US style of enterprise culture has also not gone down well. Doubters range from Euro-centrists like Ralf Dahrendorf through a populist sympathiser like Brian Walden to a High Tory like Peregrine Worsthorne, all of whom believe that the British do not want to embrace a go-getting free market system.

Both the opinion polls and events like Oxford University's rejection of an honorary degree for Mrs Thatcher suggest that the Prime Minister and the Government have begun to lose support among the professional middle classes, as well as among more traditional working class groups who deserted Labour in 1979. This latest switch may not be particularly significant numerically, but, in the past, opinion in the political world has shifted well before a government has been rejected by the electorate — such as in 1949-50, 1963 and 1976-77. And this message has been underlined by the erosion of the Conservatives' position in the opinion polls.

The message of the polls is very important to the current leadership. Mr Kinnock and his colleagues are close attenders to the messages brought to them by Bob Worcester of MORI. They are aware of the need to appeal to various target groups, to refine the message and to avoid over-ambitious promises to slash unemployment of the type which voters rejected in 1983.

Instead, the emphasis is on credibility, on winning support through practical sounding and realisable pledges to give unemployed bricklayers jobs by building houses. There is also much talk about wealth creation, about reviving manufacturing industry and accepting the need for technological change.

All this may be reminiscent of 1963 but it still amounts to a radical departure from the Thatcher administration's approach. And stealing at least some of Harold Wilson's - and David Owen's - clothes may be the only way Labour can aspire to repeat its 1964 and 1966 election successes.

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