

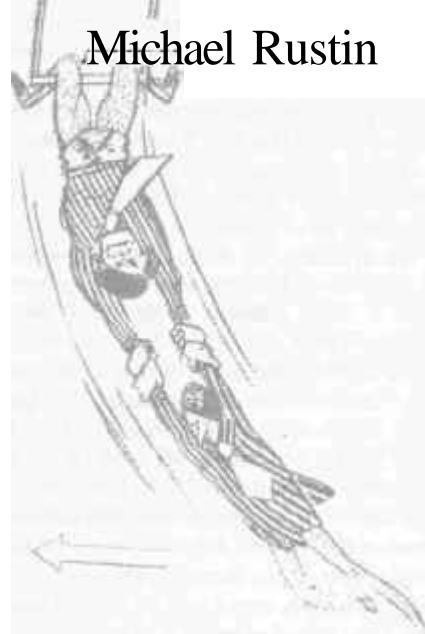
# HUNG PARLIAMENT: THE CHOICES FACING LABOUR

We all hope Labour will win a majority at the next general election. But what if it doesn't. Jr. what should it do faced with a hung parliament?

Michael Rustin

SOONER OR LATER, someone has to think about what Labour should do if it finds itself the largest single party after the next general election, but without a parliamentary majority. Especially since the state of the polls for some months has made this seem a more likely event than the outright majority Labour would like to have. It is understandable that Labour politicians don't like to talk about this in public, since admitting its possibility may cause supporters to lose hope and thus make an unwanted outcome more likely. There are already significant pressures for a coalition, and these will be amplified as the election draws nearer. Public repudiation of the prospect is therefore an understandable response, and we shouldn't perhaps expect much more at this stage. But the choices that would face Labour if there were a hung parliament are too important to leave until the day it happens. Off-camera, at least, it has to be carefully deliberated, and the options sorted out.

Let's imagine a situation following a general election in 1987 in which Labour is the largest party, and that its leader is therefore the first to be invited by the Queen to attempt to form a government. But, let's imagine also that it could do this only with the support of the Alliance parties. (For simplicity, assume that the Nationalists and Northern Irish parties can neither make a majority with Labour, nor break a Labour-Alliance majority.) What options does Labour then have?



## Splendid opposition

There seem to be three, and each of them can be given some coherent political justification. It is important at this stage that we should recognise each of them to be rational in its own way, and understand the logic even of positions we might not agree with. What may seem the most left wing of the three options is to remain in 'principled opposition', allowing either a minority Conservative government, or some Conservative-Alliance combination, to form a government. This would be on the grounds that Labour could not hope to implement its full election manifesto with-

out a parliamentary majority, and would not want to have responsibility without effective power. Labour in opposition would then continue to campaign for a left programme, and would hope for the early collapse of the right or centre right government, and for an election in which it would sweep back to power.

It seems unlikely that this would be the preference of the existing leadership. Kinnock's attempt to pull the party back from its experiments, as he sees it, with the ultra-leftism of Benn, Scargill, and Hutton, does not sit easily with the idea of a positive choice of an oppositional role, with the extra-parliamentary mobilisation which this would probably imply. The leadership's politics seem directed towards repairing Labour's fortunes by showing that Labour can succeed once in office. Don't ask us to be too specific before then, the message is we'll show our good faith once we've got power.

But in any case, the dangers of a politics of voluntary opposition are obvious. As Dunleavy and Husbands have shown in their recent book, *British Democracy at the Crossroads*, the Thatcher governments have used their power deliberately to undermine the social base of Labour support, and to build new constituencies for Toryism. This is the political purpose of council house sales, as Labour councils well know. It was the reason for the attempt to ballot away the unions' political funds, which failed. It is the reason for the

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general shift from universal conceptions of welfare which lead people to identify with each other in shared citizenship, to divisive private provision with a residual welfare net for the poor. This has been a dynamic attempt to reshape class identifications and political loyalties, both in ideological and material ways. Thatcherism is about destroying social democracy, and it has used government to this end. It would be a high risk to offer another five years of power to such adversaries. Since Labour supporters might well feel they had been abandoned unprotected by such a decision, a Labour party which seemed to be choosing virtuous opposition might pay heavily for it.

The new leadership might be made to pay especially heavily. Those with most to gain from such an outcome would be those who view the Left's renewal or capture of the party as the overriding objective, before any considerations of office. The risk is that by the time the party has been thus overhauled, there would not be much of it left. British politics might by then resemble those of France, with the Alliance in the ascendant role of the Socialists, and a rump of the Labour party resembling the PCF.

### Making the best of it

The second option is one which Neil Kinnock has already staked out, though it did not seem a weighty comment, and these are still early days. This option might seem to be his answer to the resolute approach of Mrs Thatcher, in which Labour would form a minority government and then challenge the opposition parties to bring it down. This, you will recall, was the tactic pursued by Harold Wilson between February and October 1974. All that he achieved by this was a majority of three in the second 1974 election. This then whittled away leaving Labour dependent on a shifting combination of Scottish and Welsh Nationalist, Liberal, and Ulster Unionist votes. In the end, it was the pressures exerted by the Ulster Unionists and the Scottish Nationalists which broke the government in 1979. That government lost all rapport with its supporters, and finally collapsed in misjudgements and ignominy. This most recent precedent of minority government

and informal pacts is a miserable one. Might it work out better another time?

It is difficult to see why it should. For one thing, Labour's position has eroded since 1974, and if Labour and the Alliance parties were at all close in their share of the poll, a 'go it alone' strategy by Labour might well lack popular support and appear to be merely arrogant. So long as Labour seemed to be strong in the opinion polls, the prime minister's power to recommend a dissolution could be used to intimidate the other parties. But if Labour fell behind, then the government would lose the power to carry its measures, since its one tactical weapon of a dissolution of parliament would seem suicidal. A government, especially a radical government, that can't afford to be unpopular at *any* time is in a vulnerable position. The Alliance in opposition, on the other hand, would retain complete freedom of initiative, to claim credit both for the measures which it supported in the Commons, and for the defeat of those which it stopped. A minority government could well become increasingly weak, and as a result be put under grave internal stresses. There seems a considerable risk in following this path of a repeat performance of 1974-79, from which disaster many of Labour's current problems have sprung.

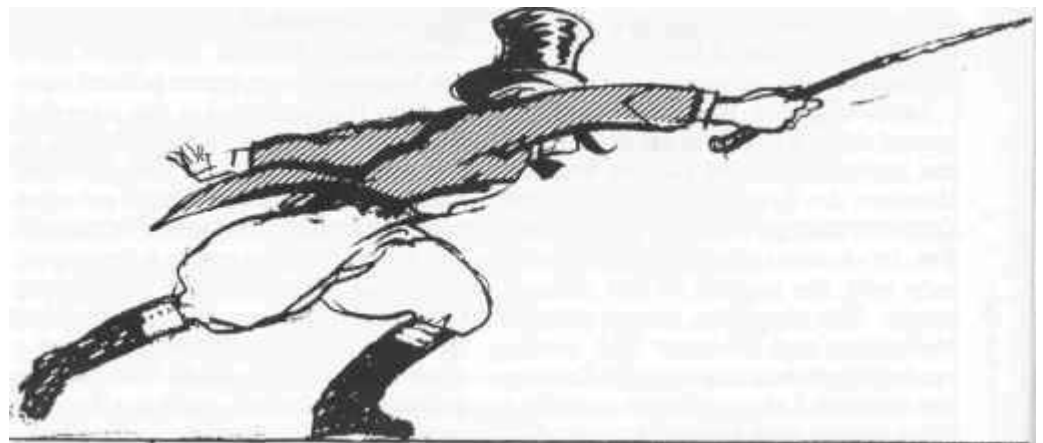
Nevertheless, in the confused days after an indecisive election, a minority government is what Labour would most likely choose. The Left would lack the confidence to force the party to stay in opposition. Coalition would be attacked as right wing anathema, 1931 revisited, etc. It could hardly be brought off unless Labour had prepared the ground for it beforehand. The delusions of Labourism that Labour remains the natural representative of the people, even in the inexplicable absence of a majority vote, could well be given a final run. The style of pragmatic improvisation, concerned with presentation more than

policy, to which the leadership now seems wedded, would as likely be followed after an election as before, Labour would defiantly set off with good intentions, few definite commitments, and not enough votes to carry them through.

### The unmentionable . . .

The third option would be to attempt to negotiate -a coalition with the Alliance parties for the whole duration of a parliament. (It might be more desirable to deal with the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists, or even the Liberals alone, but let's assume the more difficult case of a still intact Alliance holding the balance.) This option, unlike that of a minority Labour government, would remain even if the Tories were the largest party, if the others could combine together. The question to ask about this option is whether it might not strengthen rather than weaken Labour's position, compared with the alternatives we have considered? I want to argue that in certain circumstances it could.

A negotiated coalition might for one thing offer a reasonably firm prospect of a full term of office, in which Labour could restore the confidence of the electorate in its capacities. A coalition should also protect Labour from attack from the centre, which would certainly continue fiercely in any minority government position. It would have to be a condition, for Labour, of any coalition that all parties were bound to remain publicly loyal to it, except during election periods. The effect of this might be to reshape the dominant political debate on terms more favourable to Labour. The terms of argument might be, social reconstruction and democratic reform versus Thatcherism and private greed, whereas with both Alliance and Tories seeking to defeat a minority government, the issue is in danger of being



defined as Labour and trade union extremism versus Alliance moderation. The largest party in the Commons, if Labour is that, will have an initial bargaining strength, and Labour might do better to use this to make some long-term arrangement than expend it all at once in a bid to go it alone.

Of course, this all hangs on whether a compromise programme could in practice be hammered out. The arrangement has no advantages over an improvised minority government unless this can be done. The prospect at the least would enforce a closer attention to questions of programme than they now seem likely to get, given the Labour leadership's apparent desire to avoid the embarrassment of too many detailed policy commitments. But careful attention to programme is something all socialists should want. It is a positive virtue of multi-party coalitions that governments are formed through bargaining over issues as well as over ministries. This more formal and contractual basis of government might increase the leverage of the parties over their leaders, not reduce it, since in these conditions, party support could not be taken for granted. This is not always the case with governments in office. It would be important for the Left to exercise its full leverage in this situation, and define the minimum conditions which would justify giving support to such an arrangement. It is specific programmes, and not general prejudices, which should determine Labour attitudes to a coalition. Parliamentary politics, like politics outside, would become more openly factional and pluralist in these conditions, but as this would make for more debate and more accountable decisions, it might be no bad thing.

But developing a position on this is by no means simply a matter of comparing the

existing party programmes and looking for prospective deals. This is because judgments about the election are already shaping these programmes, and the climate in which post-election negotiations might take place. Labour's current tendency is to seek to raise its share of the poll by moderating its policies. It is thus in danger of throwing overboard some of the most important commitments around which negotiations should take place in the event of a hung parliament, in a probably unavailing attempt to avoid it. I'm thinking for example of commitments regarding full employment, and the resocialisation of privatised firms, on each of which Labour is becoming more and more vague. There is the risk that by the time the election comes there will be scarcely *any* substantive policy differences between the Labour and centre parties. Labour will be defiantly refusing to compromise, when its real retreats have long since been made.

I want to argue for an opposite strategy. This is to take up a firmer and more positive profile of programmatic commitments, so that Labour will be on stronger ground if and when it comes to multi-party negotiation (as, judging from current voter preferences, it may do). There is need to come to terms with the fact that Labour's old class alliance between workers and liberal professionals has broken down irretrievably, and cannot be restored by evasion and fudge. Labour needs to identify and differentiate its various constituencies, and develop more poly centric and diverse ways of speaking for them. We may have to accept that some class alliances may be better affected between Labour and other parties, rather than by unavailing efforts to reconstitute the broad

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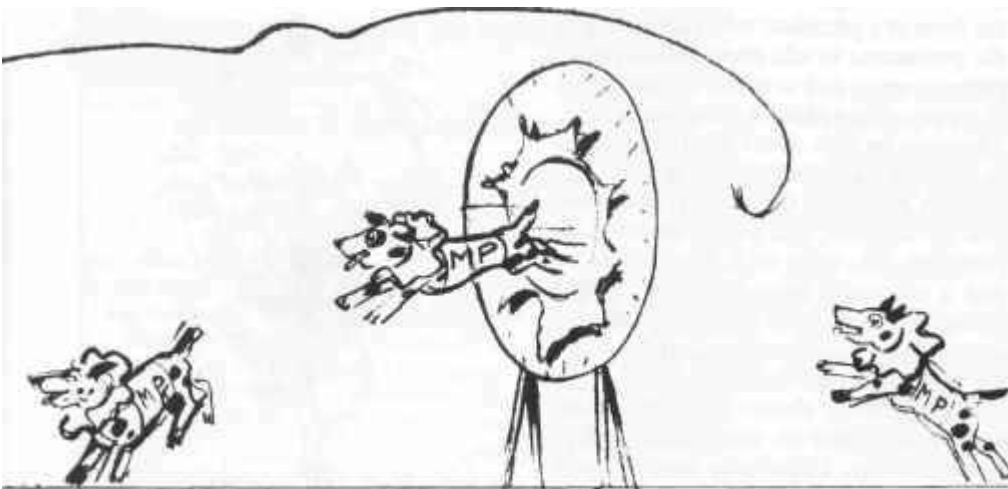
church. This being so, it is more important to take up strong positions on some issues and demonstrate support for them among crucial constituencies, than to aim from the beginning for the safe middle ground.

It is important not to compromise, for example, on full employment and the right to work, and on the need to maintain a strong public sector. Even though its core constituencies of class and region will not win Labour an election, they still represent a major presence in British society, and it is important that their claims should be forcefully asserted. Other approaches are needed for other sectors of the community. One reason for preferring coalition to the other minority options is that it may provide time in which the Labour party can evolve a more pluralist politics for this increasingly fragmented society.

### A new political world

Labour's great problem is that it cannot come to terms with the change that is being forced on it from politics as the competition of two great electoral blocs, each able to form parliamentary majorities on their own, gives way to a politics of fractions. The Labour party found itself unable to contain all the sectional, trade union, and extra-parliamentary pressures of the 1960s and 1970s, especially when it was in office. Now this fragmentation has led to the polarisation of political allegiance between viable, competing parties. This new situation may demand greater and not less ideological clarity, a party which speaks with more distinct regional voices, programmes clearly linked to the concerns of different constituencies, where the old favoured a generalised moralism and appeal to class loyalty. The hope of quickly regaining a simple electoral majority may now be an illusion which stands in the way of the most effective political strategy. The Labour leadership understands the need to regain mass appeal well enough, but they haven't yet recognised that there is no longer a single key whether based on memory, ethics, or ideology, which can unlock this.

Anthony Heath and his co-authors argued in January's *MT* that the Alliance vote is now concentrated among middling social strata who constituted the better-off



part of Labour's former constituency, and particularly that which Wilson made his main electoral target. They identify the salariat - salaried professional, administrative and managerial employees, semi-professional employees including technical experts, and routine non-manual workers, foremen and technicians - as their main support. This leads to an explicable range of political attitudes, which fall mid-way on many issues between Labour and Tory. Alliance programmes reflect these distinctive social interests. While they are favourable to economic growth, more equality as well as rationality in the welfare system, decentralisation, and 'consumer rights' (including the right to information), the Alliance is negative towards unions and public enterprise. While it is committed to employment creation (and is actually more specific about it than Labour), its employment strategy depends heavily on a compensatory incomes policy. While much more favourable to incomes from wages and salaries than from property, it seems likely that their main constituency would inhibit much redistribution from those with middling incomes.

Compromise with the Alliance, if forced on Labour by the voters, should not however mean that the Alliance largely defines the political agenda, as many in the Labour party seem instinctively to fear. The point is that in a hung parliament, neither Labour nor the Alliance will be in a position to implement its entire programme. Labour can easily combine unreasonable optimism about its prospects of getting an outright majority, with unreasonable pessimism about its bargaining strength if it should narrowly fail to do so. A coalition should not be seen merely as the enforced ditching of Labour's most important commitments under duress from the Alliance, but as a negotiated

compromise in which the Alliance would be constrained to accept some *Labour* measures, in regard for example, to employment, the public sector, the distribution of income and wealth, and defence and foreign policy.

Groups on the Left, who would no doubt be the most vocal guardians of party commitments, would need to establish minimum terms by which to judge whether a coalition deserved support. (After all, they have some votes in the Commons too.) A combination of realism about the prospects of a hung parliament, and a rather tough-minded attitude to policy is what is now called for. This is not on the Bennite grounds that the more left Labour's platform, the more votes will be won, which is not the case. The reason is rather that it is better to build and test support for adequate programmes before an election, and retreat on them if need be afterwards, than to abandon the ground of radical programmes without even trying to force them on to the public agenda. Labour might do better if it appeared publicly to be more realistic about the possible implications of voter choices, but remained outspoken on its programmes, rather than sounding grandiose about its ambitions for government, while defensive and weak on specifics.

### Electoral reform

One crucial issue in any such multi-party negotiation is electoral reform. This is because to change the voting system would greatly reinforce the recent tendencies towards political pluralism, and will make them more difficult to reverse. This is now one of the strongest commitments of the Alliance, who fear that without it they could still be returned to political oblivion. PR would be the Labour party's most powerful bargaining card in coalition discussions. It might be able to use it say in the form of a promised referendum late in the parliament to win more radical policy commitments and a more advantageous share of offices than it otherwise could. There can be little doubt that the prospect of PR would concentrate the mind of the Alliance parties on the survival of a coalition government, and greatly improve its prospects. The hope for Labour would be that a successful period of office would strengthen its position at the polls, so that it would continue to advance under more pluralist electoral conditions.

A judgement about electoral reform depends however on more than tactical considerations. The crucial issue is one's view of the shift towards fragmentation in

British politics and society. If one views it as an irreversible and probably beneficial development, then a more pluralist electoral system is for the best. It would probably finish off old Labourism as we know it, and the hopes or illusions of a 'natural majority' which have sustained many on both the Left and Right of the party. A more open system will give easier access and representation to minorities of various kinds, making it more productive to conduct some arguments outside the Labour party than within it. Governments are likely to change political direction more incrementally, and in less dramatic oscillations than at present. But this seems likely, from the experience of the last decade, to be more a benefit than otherwise. The new Right has been so much more virulent in Britain than elsewhere partly because of the power that the British system can confer on a government elected by a minority of voters. Electoral reform might be seen as an unwelcome cost of coalition. On the other hand, if one supports it, it seems illogical to reject the political arrangement that makes it most likely.

More consideration needs to be given to how Labour should go about maximising its prospects before an election, both in terms of winning votes and in shaping the agenda of political issues. But the least one can say is that these choices between alternative second-best options, may have to be made. Power seems unlikely to drop from the sky after election day, in the time-honoured manner, and unfamiliar skills in political manoeuvre will *be* needed. The most vital thing to say is that refusal to think about the alternatives which would face Labour after an indecisive election is a choice in itself, and one which makes failure in those conditions almost certain.

