

Labour's Pain, Alliance Pleasure

Greenwich was a traumatic setback for Labour, a reminder of the bad old days of 1983.

Sarah Benton asks where that leaves Labour now



The ecstasy of victory: David Owen and Rosie Barnes after Greenwich

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ell, was it the candidate or was it the party? Did the punters of Greenwich prefer the policies, the role of the Alliance or the fresh and determined manner of its candidate Rosie Barnes? Did they turn down battle-worn Deirdre Woods with her reputed left-wingery or a faltering Labour Party, with its odd mix of old-fashioned state management and its new 'extremist' ingredients most notably its policy on gays and lesbians?

In the current volatility of British politics, when bookies' odds are cited almost as often as opinion polls as auguries of the future, Greenwich alone cannot answer these questions. Even after Truro, by-elections cannot tell us whether the Alliance, having recovered from its nadir of the autumn, is now on the steady up and up. Nor can it tell us whether Thatcherism is now so thoroughly disliked outside the comfortable shires and suburbs that voters will flow down the most certain route to keeping a Tory out. But even taken on

its own, and not as part of a trend, Greenwich does point to one obvious thing: that Labour is neither poised to capture the 'middle ground' nor ready to pioneer a strong socialist populism which can withstand rightwing onslaughts and support vulnerable candidates.

Nudged and harried by the press and the revived Solidarity group, the Labour leadership is dithering over whether to take what seems the obvious way out: to insist that Labour parties stop selecting 'leftwing' candidates and to ensure that Labour nationally and locally gently lets slip any policy which suggests 'extremism'. These would appear to be any policies which are offensive to the conventional white, middle-income earning, heterosexual population.

This option is not principled; it should be equally obvious that it is not practicable. Policies that have emerged on racism, on homosexual rights, on women - to name the most pressing and contentious three - are not whims of fashion, to be picked up and dropped as



away are, literally, murderous and frequently violent. In the case of women and blacks, they certainly include persistent poverty. Labour came late to these constituencies and its relationship to them is etiolated by the delay, and the bureaucracies of party procedure. But it is to the credit of Labour and the socialist tradition that it has appeared to offer the best home for the politics of these constituencies.

The political implications of that relationship, between the guardians of Labour's mainstream tradition and its new claimants, are at the heart of socialism's dilemma. Socialism today means winning an electoral majority in order to form a government. It is a view which the 19th century originators of the socialist tradition, as well as the syndicalist inheritance, would have found quite foreign. But as an electoral majority and being in government today comprise the fulcrum for socialism's ambitions, so the Labour Party offers the only chance of getting there. And to win an electoral majority Labour, like all contesting parties, has to be seen to represent the aspirations of a majority; to be the best guardian of the interests of the nation as a whole.

It is perfectly true that any single part of Labour's mainstream tradition can be presented as a numerical minority, including its heartland nations of Scotland or Wales, including white heterosexual men. But this last 'minority' claims to speak on behalf of us all and none of the new claimants does that.

The statistical fact is that every social group can be defined as a minority (except women). Even if a straight class/party loyalty existed, ensuring that all the votes of the manual working class went to Labour, they too are now too much of a minority to provide Labour with an electoral majority. But as market researchers are discovering, the values people have snake through all social categories. Majorities are constructed in part through shared realities of class or income or race; but in large part through the ability of one political group to articulate policies and values that appear to speak for, if not all, at least a sizeable majority.

The refusal of the 'minorities', whether blacks, or gays, or even women or manual workers, to claim to speak for all ensures their 'minority' status. The fact that they have been lumped in with the hard Left as 'the loony Left' is partly because they do share a greater radicalism of approach; partly because the hard Left has made a tactical alliance with some of them inside the Labour Party; and partly because most Labour leaders refuse to take up their claims for representation, ensuring they remain defined as minorities.

Add together a lot of minorities and you get not a majority but minority status intensified; not the allure of a harmonious rainbow coalition, but the

clash of alien colours in an otherwise blended world. Indeed, it is the very assertion of 'difference' by political minorities who had hitherto been ignored - and to assert difference was to assert a right to be heard and to special measures to ensure that right would not be swamped - which has contributed to the new political sense of who 'the majority' are. They are not, by definition, black, or gay.

Since 1983, Labour has ducked the political implications of who and what it is trying to represent. And that is as true of those who hope that added minorities equals a colourful majority as of those in the leadership who ignored the problem. The promise of Labour's 'dream ticket' of Kinnock and Hattersley, was intended to open a new era of professional party management, one which had come to terms with tv and learned, like Mrs Thatcher, that you speak through it direct to the people and over the heads of your own unrepresentative party or, as Ken Livingstone learned, over the heads of a hostile press. The new leadership did produce an overhaul of Labour's party machine, a better grasp of the importance of public relations, a firm insistence that Militant does not lead the party by the edge of its ear. All profitable activities. But as the dream of Labour's swift return to represent the majority opposition to Thatcherism faded, so it became clear it was a dream. The organisational improvements do not face up to socialism's long term decline, to the popularity of the Alliance or to what strategy can take the initiative against the aggressive vigour of the Right.

The political question for Labour is what it has to offer that is popular which the Alliance has not also laid claim to. The majority is for more public spending, a programme to reduce unemployment, a commitment to a compassionate welfare state, a readiness to use state powers where necessary to make capitalism work more humanely, an acknowledgement that the free market cannot help the homeless; most members of the Alliance would be happy to put their names to such views. What differentiates Labour is precisely the strength of the claims of its constituent parts, most notably trade unions committed to nationalisation and a repeal of trade union law, but also the demands of its 'minorities' for political recognition.

This would be good news for the Alliance, and the death knell for Labour's hopes of forming a government, if it were not for that difference over unions. For the Alliance's hostility to trade unions means it is not going to get a popular majority in those areas where there is still a strong labour movement tradition. It is this which will ensure that Labour can still win a sizeable number of seats at local and national elections. But if it relies on

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party leaders see fit. (Nor do I think that this is what Patricia Hewitt, in her now notorious letter to Frank Dobson, was proposing). The policies are often ill-thought through, poorly explained, and imposed with a suicidal ineptness. But they speak to real and profound social conflicts that are not going to go away. Indeed, if the Thatcherite trends of mass unemployment and state authoritarianism, of get rich quick and damn the consequences, continue, those conflicts must become sharper.

The conflicts are usually sharpest in London - a partial explanation of the 'London factor'. The poor in London are not more wretched economically than the poor in other cities. But the disparities of wealth are more bleak and offensive; the City, with all its fantastic and ostentatious wealth is on the border of Hackney, Britain's poorest borough. More black and gay people have congregated in London - and clash with a police force which is, in the view of other police forces, more likely to be corrupt, violent and racist. Those oppressions which will not go

that labour movement alone, then it can still end up an ignominious third in a general election. For the furthest south that support stretches in England is probably Sheffield Central; the labour movement vote yields up isolated fortresses of support - South Wales, South Yorkshire, mid Scotland - in an undulating landscape of caution and hostility. There is no possibility in the short term future that this labour movement support will extend and entrench itself elsewhere. The Labour leadership has no choice but to attend to its different social constituencies and ask how it can construct out of their political claims a popular electoral politics.

UP till now, Labour's difficulty in doing this has been identified as one of not knowing what it is for. And indeed, what and who it stands for are indispensable questions. But one route to making that discovery is to define what it is so dislikes about Conservatism, especially in its Thatcherite form. As obvious as it sounds, it was only after the Truro by-election that Neil Kinnock decided to go for Thatcherism as the party of the 'ranting Right'. But that sounds like what it is - a belated response to the label of 'loony Left'. The characterisation should have preceded the Right's by years - as soon as it was clear Thatcherism harboured ideas and forces which were highly vulnerable to charges of brutality and anti-democratic practice. Instead, Labour has always been on the defensive - does it or does it not condone violence on the picket line, at Broadwater Farm, is it for or against GLC policies, does it adhere to 'national security' or not? The lead has come not from the leadership, but from the Right's aggressive response to Labour's active 'minorities'.

This aggression appears to have been pioneered by the press as a consequence of its ownership by rightwing media magnates, against whom Labour therefore has no chance. In fact, much of the media is imitative, not innovative, taking its lead from the politicians rather than following the beacon of its own prejudices. Labour's leaders have provided them with too few, clearcut attacks on what exactly is wrong, unjust, anti-democratic about capitalism or Thatcherism for them to have much to report. Robin Cook's recent attack on firms which irresponsibly take public money and sack workers was lapped up; what was remarkable was not that it was reported but that it should have stood out as an unusual example of a straightforward, effective, socialist speech.

Labour's silences on the iniquities of this government are not all Neil Kinnock's fault. Socialism and the Labour Party are collective enterprises. But Neil Kinnock doesn't help. Yes, he is good at rhetoric, quick and fluent on his feet. He can be witty and has an

engaging pleasure in words. He also invariably misses the point; the weak point in the Conservative case and the strong point in his own. His words are turned aside and mocked as windbagery; he goes not for the jugular but the funny bone.

Labour therefore needs to attack Thatcherite capitalism with a justified confidence that most people share a dislike of the dominance of unrestrained private enterprise and secretive state authoritarianism. Apart from giving the party and potential supporters a common purpose, such a drive will help clarify which aspects of 'the market' are intolerable, which could be incorporated into any feasible socialism; which aspects of state power it rejects as authoritarian and anti-democratic, which it intends to use in the process of economic regeneration and entrenching democracy.

But it also has to face up to the conflicts of its constituent parts. Not only will they not go away. But those 'minorities' have also breathed into Labour the only new life it's had for a decade; they may have eaten into a more homogeneous class tradition, have helped undermine the self-assurance of that tradition; but when it was defined as trade unions for a planned economy, that tradition had driven itself into stalemate anyway. What those 'minorities' do have in common with each other and with the labour movement, is a belief in, at the least, the right to oppose discrimination; their right to be represented. The idea that all people should enjoy equal rights, that discrimination does exist but should not, are still potent popular feelings.

Yet for all the publicity accorded to 'minorities', these feelings are rarely voiced. They are not spoken to by an embarrassed national leadership; but the groups themselves often do not make use of an essential common language of political freedoms. Too often, they are seen to rely on committee votes and bureaucratic power, not winning friends. It should no longer be possible to push through a policy on sex education at school or anti-racism at the workplace without discussing it with all those affected, listening to them and shaping the policy accordingly. Most parents, in any process of consultation where their views are sought and direct evidence against racism or sexism is offered, will accept that such racism or sexism is unfair, degrading and essentially dishonest in its portrayal of how the world works. Most will agree that children should learn the actual sexual facts of life, including the reality of homosexuality, rather than a hypocritical and evasive morality. Too often, they don't get that option.

And if elderly people are found in Labour canvasses to be more hostile to the unfamiliar presence of blacks or gays, then instead of insisting that they

just have to put up with it or condemning their bigotry, it is quite within the power of a local Labour Party to arrange for each to speak to the other. If *any* group within the Labour Party, including mainstream trade unionism, wants its views, its needs, to be incorporated into the main claim of socialism as the best alternative, each has to delve into the store of common political language and aspiration in order to make its claim.

This is ground on which the Alliance does not tread, which is peculiarly Labour's own, its possible strength, its current weakness. For the Alliance has achieved the seemingly paradoxical feat of on the one hand embracing a highly professional approach to politics, launched through the media, highly tuned to public image, sustained by computerised financing from its comparatively small membership base; and on the other hand of appropriating the voice of 'common sense' of the 'ordinary person'. Both are possible precisely because the Alliance does not have organised political groupings seeking organised political ways for achieving their aims. If this leaves them, in the eyes of their opponents, with no clear political position at all then 'common sense' fits the bill.

Here another dualism, another of several, runs through the Alliance. For it both lays claim to a familiar and comforting 'moderation', rejecting the new excrescences of 'extremism' recently spawned by the other two parties; and also stakes its right to exist on its very modernity. The SDP was launched with cries of 'we're new', 'we're completely different' and every speech from all its leaders echoed this language of modernity: Labour and Conservative are old and stale; the two party system is out of date; the voting system is an anachronism; class is dead; the other two parties are ossified in a political mould that no longer fits tomorrow's world; we've broken the mould. And it is this cry of the new to which the Alliance as a whole resorts in times of trouble. Bored and tired with the SDP in its modernistic red white and blue after five and a half years? Hey presto, here it is again, relaunched as the Alliance in new, untouched by political hand, colours of gold. It's fantastically new and fresh, and at the same time can claim its antecedents in past, much more reasonable times, through the Liberals and Labour's abandoned social democratic tradition.

It is of course the very 'extremism' of Labour and Conservative which provides the Alliance, the SDP in particular, with its *raison d'etre*. And this still means that their path is not so much chosen by them as carved out for them by the other two parties; they merely have to negotiate their fluctuating way through the shifting blocs on either side. That is not the same as *replacing* Labour as the alternative to Conservatism, an alternative which would force

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the Alliance to pick up on precisely those labour traditions which it has had to eschew to show it's not Labour under another guise. Indeed, despite its connections to a radical and labour tradition, the Alliance has been happy to float along in the wake of a rightwing populism which has identified blacks, gays, 'hard' feminists and trade unionists as enemies of the people.

There is an old populist tradition, especially strong in America, of popular common sense versus the experts, which the SDP's Rosie Barnes, rather than the Liberals' Matthew Taylor in Truro, employed to sell herself. It fosters a suspicion, which Ms Barnes was quick to enunciate, of political parties versus the normal values of ordinary people. The inherent danger in this rejection of the political as in itself a dirty war - our campaign is 'clean-scrubbed, pure, upright and honest' said Shirley Williams in Truro - is that it overlaps with the reactionary populism pioneered by the *Sun*, commandeered by the Tories.

Here the people are not so much against the state, as in the 1970s, as against those minorities. To be part of the ordinary people *means* not to be black, not to be gay, not to believe everything can be changed by politics. If the minorities assert their existence as citizens, then that in itself becomes a threat from aliens to the values of the common people. It is a deflection of

political feeling away from government to the alien enemy in your midst - wholly at odds with socialism's view, with its almost exclusive focus on government.

Both the Alliance and Tories are aware that however much they are politically opposed to each other, their constituencies of normality overlap. Norman Tebbit, straining at the leash to attack the Alliance, is often held in check by those Conservatives who know that to assault the moderate Alliance is to fracture the shared common sense and leave the Tories isolated as the extreme.

If that strident normalcy of the people were the most powerfully held of feelings Labour would be lost, its chance to build a common democratic politics out of its constituencies doomed to failure. It would decline into being nothing but a series of local bastions - labour movement in industrial areas, a mixed black, feminist, radical, gay presence in London, both with scattered, but impotent, pockets of support round the country. There would be no national, coherent politics for it to speak to, and Neil Kinnock could go on addressing what was left on the need for unity and discipline, sounding curiously like Prince Charles saying he doesn't want to be king in a fourth rate country. In fact, like all political feelings, that populist 'normalcy' exists in *relation to* other political

forces; if the voices of trade unionism, of blacks and gays and feminism etc, can be heard to speak for shared political beliefs; no more, for shared political advancement, the less the identification as 'normal people' will be clung to.

That shift may not be possible while unemployment is so high, the deprivation of the minority so strongly and angrily felt, the public resources to ease political and economic deprivation so scarce. If that is so, then it is better for Labour to support any form of government - minority or coalition - which will prevent the Conservatives being in government. However much the old truths of socialism have been questioned and discarded, one at least remains true: that the Left never gains from prolonged periods of mass unemployment and national insecurity. Being in permanent opposition would involve fewer compromises for the Labour leadership as well as the more radical constituencies of Labour. But if that means opposition to a very rightwing Conservatism, opting for opposition appears suicidal; such Conservatism is not going to treat the political and social rights of any of Labour's 'minorities' including trade unionists, kindly. If it means opposition to the Alliance, the future might be socially more promising for those minorities - though not trade unions. It would make the chance of any sort of socialist government infinitely remote. •

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