

Neil Kinnock

By the end of the general election campaign, Neil Kinnock had almost lost his voice, but he had not cracked. Although the Labour Party made a net gain of only 20 seats, Kinnock himself emerged with dignity - a bigger figure on the national stage than he had been before and one who, half-way through the campaign, had given the Conservatives the jitters.

His biggest single achievement was this: he came close to suggesting that there was an electable alternative to Thatcherism. He did not pull it off, but it certainly flickered across the national consciousness that a party seeking to promote a fairer society could win.

This is not the place to discuss why he failed, save to observe that there were too many obstacles stacked against him, including the divided opposition. The question is whether he has sufficient qualities to win in future.

Kinnock is, by any standards, an unusual man. It is peculiar to be at times the best orator in the country and, at others, to be among the world's worst wafflers. At times he preaches egalitarianism, yet at others becomes lyrical about the virtues of the meritocracy. One wonders what he would have been like if he had been at the University of Oxford, not Cardiff. More like a Thatcher than a Bevan, perhaps? Or another Harold Wilson?

When he opted for the non-nuclear defence policy, it looked like an act of conscience with bravado thrown in. He went even further than the bulk of the Labour Party had seriously demanded in seeking to deny the Americans the use of British bases. Yet afterwards he trimmed. The most damning charge against him here is that he did not know what he was doing.

On Europe - an issue that bedevilled the Labour Party for nearly 30 years - he won without a fight. The subject

was not debated at the party conference last year: acceptance of British membership of the EC was slipped into the manifesto and has gone unchallenged. In the last few weeks the Labour group in the European parliament changed its leader from an anti-marketeer (Alf Lomas) to a pro-marketeer (David Martin). But it is hard to say whether all that was an act of tactical brilliance by Kinnock or whether he got away with it because the Labour Party wasn't looking. Very few people outside the party seem to have noticed that Labour's position on Europe has fundamentally changed; and perhaps not all that many within.

Kinnock came up through the Labour Left, yet since he became leader has spent much of his time attacking it: Scargill, Militant and, most recently, Sharon Atkin for her adherence to the campaign for black sections.

It is very easy to dismiss him as a lightweight, both from a left and right wing perspective. Tory Ministers believe that his attacks on Militant were a charade because the Militant Tendency is still around. He attacked Scargill only when the miners had gone back to work. And he fell into the trap of accepting Tory propaganda about loony town halls. Very few of the town halls are loony. When Kinnock went for them, he was allowing the Tories to dominate the debate. It is remarkable that he should regard Ken Livingstone as a potential enemy rather than a potential ally. Livingstone ended his time at the Greater London Council as a rather popular figure who at least tried to do something for the capital: for example, cheaper fares.

Yet the fact remains that, despite his weaknesses, Kinnock is still there, his position enhanced by the election campaign. His strengths are twofold. One is that he is the unchallenged leader of the Labour Party. The other is that he appeals to a large



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number of people for whom Thatcherism is too harsh a doctrine.

The two go together. In the Labour Party Kinnock is beholden to no-one. He may have owed his election to the leadership largely to the unions which he had assiduously cultivated over the years, but he also owed it to constituency workers whom he cultivated as well. It was the Labour Party coalition, not a particular group, that elected him. There is no sign whatsoever of a belief that anyone else could have done better. Roy Hattersley, his rival for the leadership, has served him loyally and acknowledged early on that Kinnock was the right choice.

At his best, Kinnock is seeking to create another coalition in the country: between the haves and the have nots. In this he has never wavered. Every conference speech he has made as leader has stressed that Labour cannot hope to win on the basis of support from minority groups alone. The votes of the poor, the sick, the old, the unemployed and the otherwise disadvan-

taged are not enough, and in any case many of them do not bother to turn out. It is a matter of winning over more of those who are not too badly off.

The fact that the Conservatives still won no more than 42% of the vote, despite rising living standards for the majority, suggests that the task can be done. Kinnock had the right idea in emphasising that the twin priorities are the reduction of unemployment and the alleviation of poverty. The trouble was that not enough people believed he could deliver, and more than 20% of the electorate voted for the Alliance rather than Labour.

Shirley Williams once said that the Social Democratic Party was the last best hope for Britain. She was wrong. What must be true, however, is that Kinnock is the last best hope for Labour. He is only 45, learns very fast and, in the election campaign, gave the Tories a shock by reminding them that calls for a fairer society have not entirely lost their appeal. •
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