

Rethinking Labour

Reaching New Parts

Labour's Great Rethink is well under way. Although shunned by the hard Left, the policy review matters. It needs to deliver. In this issue *Marxism Today* assesses its progress. In the opening article, **Sarah Benton** analyses what it is all about, and then Eric Hobsbawm discusses the Kinnock/Hattersley document on 'Values and Aims'

In a new red-brick office, overlooking the Ministry of Defence's display of ancient cannons at Woolwich Arsenal, a stack of papers 18 inches high displays Labour's efforts to renew itself. These are the papers produced so far by the policy review which Labour set up after its conference last September. The proposal for a wide-ranging review came from Nupe (inhabitant of the red-brick office) whose deputy general secretary, Tom Sawyer, is co-ordinator of the reviews as chairman of Labour's home affairs committee. Trotting side-by-side with the review, and intended as a complement to it, is the 'listening' campaign, which Labour's campaigns chief and doughty Camden MP, Frank Dobson, oversees. For a project that's hardly got started - no date for completion has been set - it has attracted calumny from the Left, quiet hope from its instigators, and varied expectations from those who believe Labour will only survive after thorough reform of its aims, values, policies and general state of being.

The policy review has been allocated to seven groups, each chaired by two people drawn from parliament or the national executive committee (mostly trade unionists). They cover, roughly, the economy, the environment, international affairs and democracy. Each group has advisers who contribute papers and discussion, most drawn from the established circle of voluntary associations (eg, the National Council for Civil Liberties), trade unions and sympathetic academics. No surprises here. While each group has the Hattersley/Kinnock 'Values and Aims' statement to work to, they are free to meet and commission ideas as often or as little as they like.

The listening campaign is run from Walworth Road and has so far operated regionally - visits by mid-March to Brighton, Plymouth, Bristol, Manchester and the East Midlands. Meetings are also organised on policy lines, such as health, industry, education, and according to 'special interests'. Women and pensioners have already had some visits; young people and ethnic minorities are next.

Naturally, there are many in the Labour Party who are not in sympathy with the project. 'I can work under a red rose, I can even work under a pink rose, but I can't work under an ear-trumpet', Tony Benn is reported as saying. Why magnify the voices of those duped by Thatcherism into wanting private shares? For the hard Left, there is no need for a fundamental review because the fundamentals of socialism are beyond dispute.

The whole project was not however intended to be a think tank, expert or popular. The project is more simple and basic than that, its aims more modest than either detractors or visionaries anticipate. As Tom Sawyer says: 'I didn't want the party to tear itself apart after three election defeats in a row.' (Such self-destruction was widely anticipated nine months ago). Sawyer was instrumental in getting the appropriate resolution from Nupe into the appropriate composite at Labour's 1987 annual conference. He is both a rare trade unionist and familiar figure on the 'what's gone wrong' conference circuit. He is also a persistent advocate of the need for the trade union movement to rethink its own tactics for winning popular support.

For him, then, the review and the 'listen' campaign are, in the first place, something constructive, uniting, for the

Labour Party to do. God knows, that's needed. Above all, it's the role of the party itself, with its dwindling but still mass membership, that needs to be changed. Until the 1950s, the aim of getting people on to councils and into parliament was, perhaps, enough to absorb the energy and generate the enthusiasm of Labour's hundreds of thousands of members. Theirs was, after all, the party of the future and electoral work was the path to that future. It is clear that since the 1950s, when much of the day-to-day machinery of the state had passed into Labour hands, there has been progressively less for Labour's members to do beyond administering the state. And that was a job for the professionals on their way to becoming pillars of the community. What did they want with stropky parents and whingeing tenants?

The idea that the party had a role outside the state, which might involve working with voluntary associations, was alien and threatening. And to many local parties it still is, though that is changing under the pressure of government attacks on local councils. So far, however, there has been almost no response from the constituency parties to any part of the review. A campaign guide has been sent to each constituency party with suggestions for local activity, like opposition to the poll tax, and a sample questionnaire on what people like and don't like about Labour policies. Local parties are expected to reproduce these to conduct their own local 'listening', if only to force them out of committee rooms onto the streets. It has provoked little activity. So far, the 'listening' has been conducted by national figures, more of a road show, as one staff member unconsciously called it, to 'talk - sorry, listen' to those who had got the wrong impression.

Sawyer says the party lacks both the staff to push through such a national drive, and the structure. Labour has never been a 'democratic centralist' party in which the national leadership can take a decision, pass it on to the regional bodies and expect them in turn to filter it through to local units. Its full-time agents are often tired and apolitical men. No national paper, from *Labour Weekly* and *New Socialist* to *Labour Party News* has ever been taken up by the mass of members. There are those who dream of galvanising the Labour Party's majority of passive members into an active, evangelistic, community-campaigning mass organisation, who draw up schemes for conference to be less of a media show for the loudest voices and more an event of democratic, educational participation. There are many who oppose such schemes, from inertia, from fear of rank-and-file members, from reluctance to cede their privileged position.

This might be one obvious key to Labour's historic problem of revitalis-

ing its parts. But it's one which no policy committee has been set up to review. Nor, given the experience of a decade of painful, usually sectarian, argument about particular aspects of inner-party democracy - reselection, black sections, one person one vote etc - is it likely to be discussed. That debate may have helped clear some of the particularly moribund and right-wing elected members out of position. But as the Labour Party found, in Bermondsey and Greenwich for instance, the 'new forces' may well be as out of touch with local feeling as the old gang they ousted. And unlike the old town hail hands, they couldn't promise to deliver from on top nor, given a sectarian reluctance to work with non-Labour Party associations, from below. Indeed, it is symptomatic of the problems that the last decade of debate on the party has been largely motivated by profound suspicion of leaders rather than by a desire to ensure that the party is a self-renewing organism. It may now be too late for that discussion.

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Suspected by the Left, hardly noticed by the rank and file, squeezed by supra-national economic and political forces beyond its control, what can the review hope to achieve? At best, the party is giving some serious attention to some of its sorest parts. Many party members still squirm at the memory of the 1983 manifesto. Even those who supported its radical intent recognise that it dissipated its main claims to manage the economy into a jackdaw's nest of a myriad glittering promises.

One group, chaired by Bryan Gould, is examining production and competition which will look at, amongst other things, alternatives to nationalisation and minority private share ownership (several unions like the Union of Communication Workers support the idea of converting private shares to bonds for all). The 'economic equality' group, one of the most active, is looking at how tax and the welfare state can be designed to meet social and political objectives, such as greater equality between men and women, better economic prospects for the unemployed and black people, the poverty trap and poverty itself, without ignoring other economic imperatives. The 'people at work' group, with the largest circle of advisers, has generated a stack of papers on future employment trends. Ominously, it is the only group to focus closely on future economic trends, suggesting that the review itself is in danger of examining where it went wrong in the 1970s, not deciding, independently, what society is coming in the future.

Still, for a party that has been out of office for nine years, this serious attention to problems of politically conscious economic management is good for confidence. And for a party that has a tendency to pass resolutions committing itself to spend money on every good cause that passes its way,

any examination of both what it can do and, just as important, what it can't, is also a valuable exercise.

For the first time, too, the Labour Party has recognised the consumer as a distinct political and economic entity, with a group on 'consumers and the community', and service industries are making an appearance in both this group and people at work. If these two categories were thought about at all before, they tended to be seen as sub-sections of women's lives and hardly worth a second thought. They are, of course, a crucial part of women's lives, and all the more important for that. Anyway, the idea that people had a right to good quality products, that service providers and service users should have a relationship of mutual respect was once identified with Labour. The Co-op Women's Guild, which did so much to humanise prewar Labour with campaigns on health and maternal rights was organisationally rooted in the belief in consumer rights. The decades of neglect since have surely made the Rochdale pioneers, the whole co-operative movement which did so much to create a distinctively attractive Labour culture, turn in the graves in which heavy socialism interred them.

Whether or not the review groups on consumers, the environment and 'democracy for the individual and community' (chaired by Jo Richardson and Roy Hattersley) will be able to develop a political sharpness in their conclusions and hold their own against the heavy guns of the standard economic groups is doubtful. 'Consumers and the community' has been hampered by the preoccupation of one of its chairs, Jack Straw, with the education bill, and the illness of the other, David Blunkett. On their side is the awareness of unions like Nupe and the GMB that Labour must never again be seen as having abandoned state services to the economic interests of the workers rather than standing for an egalitarian, high quality service for all. Labour activists have to be convinced that service to consumers may be just as valuable a socialist goal as economic justice for the workers. (There is a special 'listening to women' team which must surely bring back this message to Labour's leaders.) If this sort of rethinking can break both Labour's right wing and left wing out of their hidebound and exclusive preoccupation with production then the review will certainly have been valuable.

Valuable. But enough to turn the tide? Before the last election Mrs Thatcher glibly claimed that she was going to 'eliminate' socialism, a small bit of clearing up for which she needed her third term. Dr Owen insists the Labour Party is done for though it may be 'a long time a-dying'. At the launch of the SLD the Liberals' fading matinee idol Adrian Slade told journalists that his party was going to oust Labour because

Labour could never win power. This might have earned a snort from the bar-room pollsters, for Labour's opinion poll standing that day was almost three times that of the putative SLD. But they do not all snort at the basis for Slade's assertion: many on the middle ground believe that the potential for their growth is unlimited, for they are not bound by class or region, while Labour's is limited, for it is.

Here lies the review's central problem; Labour's historic dependence on national state and trade unions to spread and generalise its political aims. Yet the modern world for which Labour has to reshape itself is *essentially* one in which the role of the centralising nation state can no longer be democratic or the sole agent for democracy. Labour alone has been fatally blind to this issue. For decades a strong state with a monopoly of powers was an instrument of progress as well as of repression, a means of including people in a common citizenship as well as of, in immigration law, excluding them. Through the state, progress on health, education, employment rights, the very notion of equality, could be consolidated and spread into unreceptive towns and shires. Taking that progressive potential and ignoring all other agencies in civil society *except* the trade unions, Labour institutionalised its exclusive dependence on the powers of the nation state.

Yet this whole complex of issues - the nation state, devolved powers, the organisation of communities and civil associations - is potentially one of the Left's strongest areas. Criticisms of narrow nationalism, of over-powerful authority, of the dysfunctioning of the welfare state, arguments for the right to freedom of association and the value of people collectively helping themselves, have all been pioneered by the Left. On its more anarchist, feminist and libertarian wings it is the Left which has been staunch in pressing the freedom of the individual to choose. There are no policy reviews on these issues. But these popular feelings are there to be heard and formulated into political ideas. If Labour listens.

Finally, one of Labour's biggest headaches concerns international policy on which there is a review group. It's a sorry irony for the one party which has institutionalised links with parties abroad and the longest history of lip-service, at least, to the cause of internationalism. Hostile to the European Community, antipathetic to the USA, fearful of seeming too friendly to the USSR, terrified of seeming internationally weak and unpatriotic, nervously silent on immigration and relations with the black Commonwealth, the party is really only at ease with the handful of countries that were once the white Commonwealth. The only international issue on which they feel free to take any sort of lead is South Africa. This is going to be a hard nut to crack.*