

Labour's One Hope

Labour cannot win the next election. **Tricia Davis** and **David Green** argue that the case for an electoral agreement is irresistible if Thatcherism is to be defeated

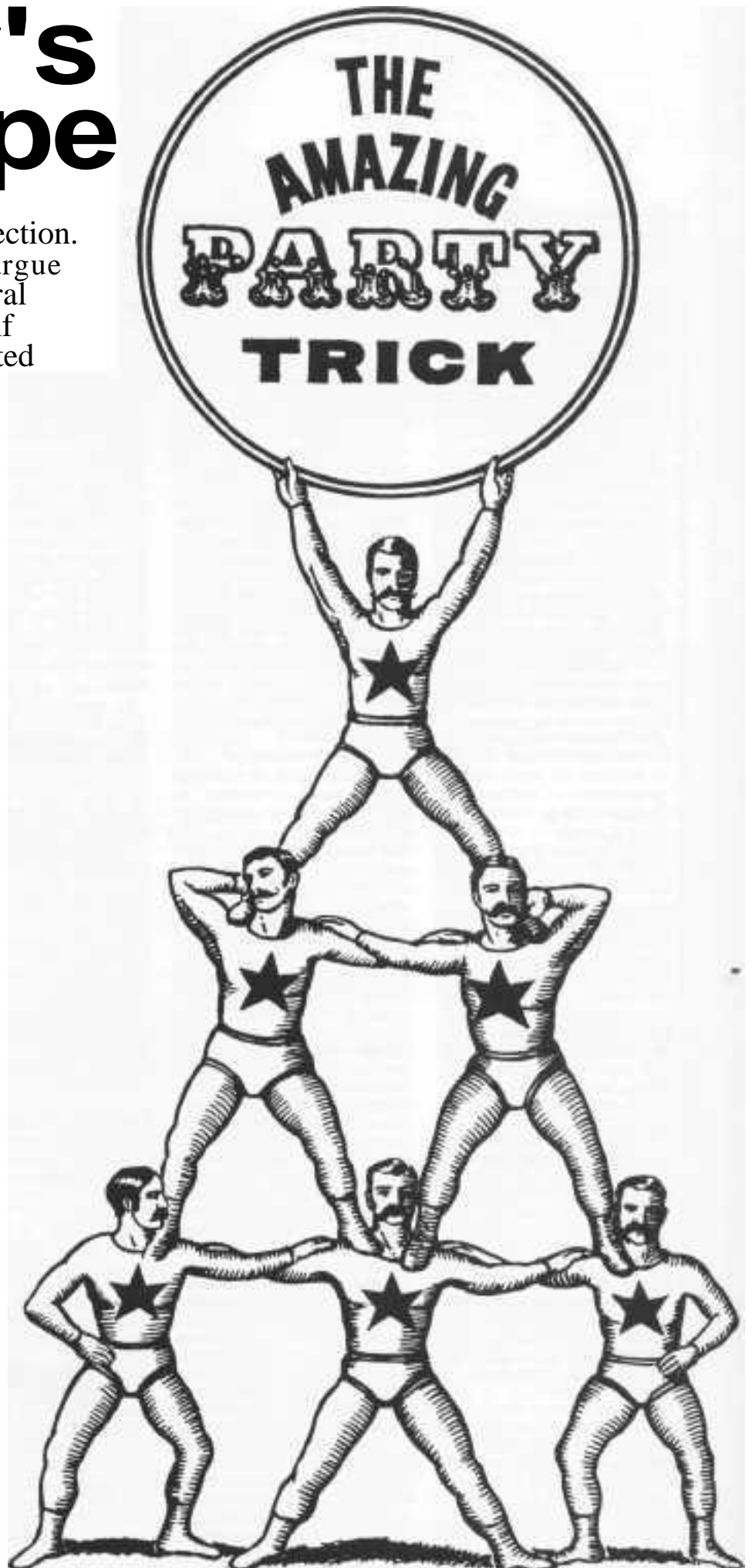
No serious political observer believes that Labour will win the next general election. From its current base in parliament, Labour needs a swing of 8% to win an overall majority of one seat. This is greater than the swing to Labour in 1945 in very different circumstances. Over the last 18 months Labour's poll position has been worse than during the comparable period after Thatcher's sweeping 1983 victory. And forthcoming boundary changes may well cost Labour an estimated 20 seats.

The main response from the Labour Party has been to soldier on in the hope that something will turn up. As Roy Hattersley has put it: 'There is nothing to do other than what we have done in the past, only better.'

The fact is that Labour cannot win the next general election on its own, while another Thatcher victory followed by a fourth term would create an even more difficult climate in which to defeat the Tories subsequently. It would make more likely the development of the Conservative Party into the single dominant party, a British version of the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party, exercising more or less continuous governmental power.

In some ways Thatcher's electoral success is puzzling. Many of the government's policies are unpopular, in some cases increasingly so. Support for more spending on the NHS, for example, has risen from 63% in 1983 to 83% in 1988. Moreover, the government doesn't, and never has, commanded the support of the majority of voters, let alone electors.

Thatcher's success depends on three factors. Firstly, Thatcherism possesses and offers a sense of purpose and direction which finds support even from those who strongly disagree with her on specific issues. Secondly, the centre-left opposition is divided in the electoral contest with the Tories.



Thirdly, there is as yet no coherent, modernising and popular alternative to the enterprise culture which can challenge Thatcherism successfully.

The overcoming of electoral division and the development of an alternative to Thatcherism are distinct but related projects. Here we want to concentrate on the possibilities of overcoming the electoral division.

During the course of Thatcher's third term, there has been a marked shift of opinion in the Labour Party on issues of electoral and constitutional reform. The most dramatic change concerns proportional representation. This has emerged from a growing sense that Labour is unlikely to win an election in the foreseeable future under the present electoral system, coupled with a somewhat belated recognition of the democratic issues involved. Robin Cook, John Cunningham and Jeff Rooker have all announced their conversion to some form of PR. Of course, the problem with PR is that until the Conservatives are defeated, there is absolutely no chance of it ever being introduced.

The growth of support in the Labour party for some kind of electoral agreement has been rather more limited but nonetheless real. Labour MP John Evans recently suggested, for example, that Labour and Democrats should stand down in an equal number of seats, 30 each, and has offered Bath and Hereford as examples where Labour might stand down, and Basildon and Battersea for the Democrats. John Reid, Labour MP for Motherwell, has made a similar proposal.

Perhaps the main objection from Labour's point of view is the fear that by entering into an electoral arrangement it would sacrifice any chance of winning a majority government on its own. This is certainly the case. But it is the case with or without an electoral agreement. Labour's failure to win an electoral victory since 1974 isn't a short-term aberration. Events in 1988 have brought this into sharp relief. The government's economic miracle began to look distinctly ragged. A growing number of Labour's front bench performed better than their Conservative opponents. The centre parties were preoccupied with internal questions. The simmering crisis in the NHS around funding and then nurses' pay highlighted the areas in which Labour has the better record. Yet the year ended with the Conservatives 10 points ahead of Labour in the opinion polls.

A further objection is that, in Labour MP Chris Smith's words, electoral pacts 'ignore the wishes, interests and dedication of party members up and down the country who struggle for years against enormous odds to maintain a Labour profile, to get councillors elected and to put issues across'. That any electoral agreement, whether limited or comprehensive, would mean large sections of southern England in

particular without Labour parliamentary candidates at the next general election has to be set against the real frustration of Labour activists and supporters when efforts and votes fail to deliver political power.

If such an agreement proved electorally successful, moreover, it would be a temporary arrangement, leading hopefully to a situation where future elections were held on the basis of PR, thereby giving a quite new meaning to Labour contests in those parts of the south where, under the present system, Labour is on a hiding to nothing.

The other side of the electoral equation mainly concerns the attitude of the SLD, at least in England. At the moment there is little sign of support within its ranks for some kind of electoral arrangement with the Labour Party. Immediate past history is an important factor here. The experience of the Alliance turned sour and has left a bitter taste. The SLD is presently involved in a difficult struggle to establish its own identity against on the one hand the SDP and on the other hand its own past. Talk of new electoral agreements is bound to be seen at the moment as muddying the waters.

Nonetheless, there is good reason to believe that the Democrats might be persuaded. Since the rupture with Dr Owen, the SLD belongs far more unambiguously in the anti-Thatcherite camp. Unlike Labour, which throughout the postwar period has been one of the two beneficiaries of the two-party system, the Democrats belong to a disadvantages tradition. Thus while Labour has always seen itself in autarchic terms, the Democrat tradition has not, while its commitment to PR has been longstanding for obvious reasons. Paddy Ashdown may now speak of going it alone and replacing the Labour Party as the main party of the Left, but this is mainly rhetoric.

The SDP poses a rather different problem. Ironically, at their conference last September, Owen called for an electoral arrangement with the SLD and floated the idea of a wider deal including Labour against Mrs Thatcher. Given the political history of Owen and the SDP this is very difficult to see. Arguably, he has more in common with the Thatcherite than the anti-Thatcherite forces, which is not to ignore the fact that there are other tendencies in the SDP.

In Scotland and Wales, of course, the nationalist parties will be an important consideration in any electoral arrangement. In Scotland debate along these lines is rather more advanced than it is in England. The reason is fairly obvious, namely the need for the 'opposition' parties to make common cause on behalf of Scotland against a Thatcherite force which is seen as profoundly English. Already there is talk of some kind of deal in the remaining Tory-held seats in order to eliminate the Tory parliamentary presence in Scotland.

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Finally, and most fundamentally, would an electoral agreement work where it actually matters, on the ground? Is it not the case that while most Labour voters may well transfer their vote to the Democrat candidate, the Democrat voter is rather less likely to reciprocate and could well vote Conservative? The evidence from the experience of tactical voting at the last election is ambiguous, while the sharp decline in support for the centre parties since then has gone to the Right as much as the Left.

The critical question here is the political character of any agreement. The easiest arrangement to arrive at would be one which concentrated on seats rather than policies. It is also the one that is least likely to convince voters and most likely to be blown apart by the Tories.

For an electoral agreement to realise the arithmetical sum of its parts, or better indeed, requires a more comprehensive political agreement. This would be much more difficult to achieve but is by no means impossible. For there is much in common between Labour and the Democrats on many questions.

There remains a real danger, however, that such an agreement would have the feel of the past about it. Electoral division is not the only reason for Thatcherism's success. Increasingly important has been Thatcherism's ability to capture and adapt to new social developments. For any electoral agreement to stand a chance of success, it would need to convince that it was looking forwards rather than backwards, that it had something serious to say about the post-Thatcherite agenda.

Any successful challenge to Thatcherism must be based on a political strategy which tackles the problems and meets the aspirations of the majority. Progressive, environmentally sustainable modernisation, combining recognition and encouragement of democracy and diversity, are critical themes to be adopted by any future government.

One of the interesting features of political debate on the Centre and the Left over the last year or so is that, as it has slowly come to address the new realities, so the discussion has become increasingly broad-minded and ecumenical.

People are increasingly prepared to listen to each other, and feel there is something to be gained from such a wider dialogue, and that party frontiers are simply too restrictive for creative political and intellectual debate. The extent of this emergent centre-left dialogue can be gleaned from a reading of the Labour Party policy review documents, the SLD's new *Our Different Vision* and the Communist Party's *Facing Up To The Future*. The development of this dialogue is critical both to the possibility of an agreement and its forward-looking character. •