

Pacts: Link Or Sink?

The 'pacts' debate arouses strong reactions. We tested the current mood by asking some familiar figures if they thought there was a case for some kind of electoral agreement between the opposition parties to defeat Mrs T at the next election. Here's what they said

In 1979 it was, above all, Mrs Thatcher's sharp certainty that she knew what Britain needed, coupled with her evangelical flair, that won over the voters. An incipid lowest-common-denominator electoral pact would carry no such conviction. I've never been on a demo where the chorus 'Thatcher Out!' excited the citizens on the pavement.'

What the Labour Party has to do is put together a programme that will convince and excite the voters. It is a dangerous illusion that the pain involved in doing that can be avoided by cobbling together an electoral pact.

Nor in practice would such a pact consolidate the opposition vote. Where Labour stood down the SLD/SDP (would they agree?) might well pick up most of the Labour vote. But where a Labour candidate stood, most of the SLD/SDP supporters would go back to the Conservatives-or stay at home. •

Lord Len Murray (General Secretary of the TUC, 1973-84)

No: I don't think there's a case for any kind of agreement. There are campaigns on which we can all work together, such as Charter 88 to get a bill of rights, but it is by no means clear to me that there is a sufficient common agenda shared between the opposition parties to make for an agreement yet. After the next election there may be a case for it, but that will require some real generosity on all sides. It isn't enough to be jointly against someone, and in any case there are some things I'd support her on! There have to be common goals and a shared vision as well. •

Julia Neuberger (Rabbi)



My own politics are 'angora jumper' - that is, pink and woolly. After a very radical youth, I'm afraid I discovered my other hand in my 30s. There's no such thing as pure politics: it must be deeply practical. It's a nice idea that David Owen and Neil Kinnock might cuddle up together in an agreement, but I can't see it. So the electorate should realise that it's perfectly reasonable to vote *against* a party you don't like, rather than, for instance, not voting at all because no party precisely suits your preferences. At the last election I was a great advocate of tactical voting.

It doesn't bother me so much who's in government, as long as they have the smallest possible majority: to make them work hard and to keep the opposition parties working hard too,

rather than ending up hopeless and demoralised. It is bloody ridiculous to have the present massive majority for a government with a minority of votes. That makes me angry.

Claire Rayner (Journalist, broadcaster and novelist)



The basic problem of British politics and society is that we hide division, rather than reveal it. To try and build artificial bridges is no answer, just short-term expediency. In the long term I would hope our political system could become much more diverse and locally-devolved, which would open up real possibilities for alliances. But that would need the present elective dictatorship to fall apart altogether first. •

Derek Jarman (Film-maker)

Unless the opposition parties can frame a clearly-defined manifesto, an election pact would be self-defeating. The Conservative Party would immediately ask which policies the combined opposition had agreed to support, and which to jettison. The electoral damage from the resulting turmoil would probably deliver a considerable majority to the Conservatives. GMB activists have repeatedly said that the Labour Party lost the last election because party policy was not focused sharply enough. An electoral pact which could only be held together by greater fuzziness would be a recipe for another major defeat. •

John Edmonds (General Secretary of the GMB Britain's General Union)

Unless the opposition parties agree to some form of electoral agreement, the Tories are almost certainly heading for a fourth term in 1991/2. That is common ground among political commentators today. All that is missing is the will among the leadership of most opposition parties to even discuss an electoral arrangement. It is almost as if to whisper the thought is an attack on the leadership's virility. In other words 'pure opposition' counts for more than shared power.

In the short term, Plaid Cymru has nothing to gain from any such arrangement. The likelihood is that we can hold on to our Westminster seats without any help, and in practice a smaller party always has more to lose. But the bottom line for us is the Tories' antipathy to any constitutional change. Only an anti-Tory government would introduce such change, backed up by a sizeable Plaid Cymru/SNP presence in Westminster.

Radical constitutional change is a

prerequisite to any arrangement we might consider. That would also benefit the regions of England. Neither the Labour Party, nor the SLD are in any mood to talk, but I have no doubt that a fourth successive defeat will force them to think again. •

Ieuan Wyn Jones (MP for Ynys Mon)

In the last two decades, Liberals - and later Social Democrats - have spent too much time debating electoral pacts while other parties have spent too little. Happily the subject is no longer taboo in cross-party discussions.

The reason electoral pacts must be discussed now is because of the dire political consequences of the simply enormous and undemocratic distortion brought about by our electoral system. Mrs Thatcher and her party have never won the support of more than a third of the British electorate. It is, therefore, ludicrous that she has had 10 years of power and that people can allow her unjustified control to continue. If our electoral system is flawed, it is no good waiting for it to come to our rescue. All democrats must now try to get round it until we have an electoral system that is democratic and fair. •

Simon Hughes (Liberal Democrat MP for Southwark and Bermondsey)

There is a powerful case for securing an electoral agreement - but of what kind? Democrats and SDP should be natural allies. The SDP has made it

clear that it is willing to negotiate. We hope that our former colleagues will eventually see the sense of this.

As far as Labour is concerned, they would have to revise their views on defence and the economy. If they then decided to back proportional representation we could put together a minimum programme of constitutional reform. We would end the poll tax, restore confidence in local government, introduce devolution for Scotland and Wales, bring in a bill of rights and pass a freedom of information act. Labour will not win the next election on their own. They should change their policy on electoral reform now and not wait for a fourth defeat to drive them to it. •

John Cartwright (President of the SDP, and MP for Woolwich)



The view of Labour's National Executive Committee is clear. In December there was a virtually unanimous vote to oppose pacts. The resolution was moved by Tony Benn, vehemently supported by Roy Hattersley and almost everyone in between.

For myself, I would be willing to consider pacts if we cannot stop Thatcher in any other way and if they would work. It is too early to conclude that Labour's position will not improve. Talk of pacts weakens our ability to pull out of the current demoralised mood. It is far from clear that people would be willing to vote according to instructions from on high. The campaign for tactical voting made no impression in the last election. Those who advocate pacts must test the views of the people. If they are unwilling to vote tactically in significant numbers then the whole thing is a non-starter. •

Clare Short (MP Birmingham Ladywood)

A better case can be made for opposition parties campaigning *now*, in favour of proportional representation. The present government won't introduce PR this parliament, but the effect of such a campaign is likely to be a better-informed electorate, which might then be more receptive to the idea of voting for a second-preference party in seats where an electoral pact had been agreed for the next general election. It's also unrealistic to imagine that the Democrats, SNP and Plaid Cymru would allow Labour a free run in some seats at an election, without prior agreement that they could either join the government or extract some key policy points from a Labour government. •

Margo MacDonald (Journalist)

The Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform says:

NO to Electoral Pacts!



The sure way to defeat the Tories is for Labour to embrace constitutional and electoral reform.
If we had a democratic voting system of proportional representation there would be no talk of electoral pacts.
Under PR, all Labour votes would count, regardless of where they were cast and tactical voting would be banished for ever.
Other Western European countries have PR, and successful Socialist governments - Why Not Britain?

Help change Labour's attitude to electoral reform.

If you are a Labour voter and would like further information write to:

Labour Campaign for Electoral Reform, PO Box 11 (EP), Guildford, Surrey GU1 3QN.



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