

Beatrix Campbell explores Labour's new-found confidence

Recipe For Success

Robin Cook is Labour's shadow secretary of state for health

What explains Labour's extraordinary triumph at the Mid-Staffordshire by-election, and the enduring success in the opinion polls?

I've always been very suspicious of single-cause explanations. There's no doubt that what crystallised the present mood of southern and middle England is the impact of the poll tax. That doesn't surprise me as a Scot. The poll tax is actually a wonderful symbol of the Conservatives' style of government: it is socially unjust, regressive between the classes, it poses a major threat to democratic rights and civil liberties. It is the product of a government that takes pride in demonstrating its strength by defying public opinion. It is also deliberately designed to be an unpopular tax, in the hope it would make local government unpopular.

So it is not simply a reaction to the poll tax, but also to the style of government.

So Labour is doing well because people hate Thatcherism?

I began by saying I don't accept simple solutions. A lot of things are happening. Labour has been undergoing substantial change.

What's changed?

There is a perception of Labour as having a competent new front-bench. That's been the case for three years, but it's only in the last six months that people have started to perceive it. Labour has also sought to position itself as a welcoming and attractive party which people could support without being offended, as it were.

I also think the message that we are prepared to listen and to engage in dialogue, both with local communities and professional people, has contrasted flatly with the style of this government.

How effective is Labour's metamorphosis?

Dramatic. A number of us associated with the Labour Co-ordinating Committee were saying back in 1982 that the internal battle is all very exciting for those taking part, but the important thing is to engage in a dialogue with the electorate. Eight years on the party is hungry for power and will now ruthlessly push aside anybody who puts their own personal or factional priorities ahead of the party winning. That has been a tremendous change - possibly too far....

So the party has been disciplined.

No. Discipline implies central imposition of control.

Hasn't that happened?

There's been an element of it, of course. But what has happened is a grassroots change in which people do not want to work for the Labour Party in order to make a gesture; they want to get Margaret Thatcher out of office, and they want progressive government. The central discipline could not have happened had it not been for that change.

Something that has characterised the commentary on Labour's Mid-Staffs success and recent opinion polls, is the word 'positive'. What is that positive support for?

To be honest, it is support, more than anything else, for change. But it reflects a negative view of the present administration. The exit polls from Mid-Staffs showed the poll tax and the national health service as the big issues.

There is also growing feeling for a positive statement for local democracy. And very strong unease about how far our society is palpably less equal, less just.

What makes today different from the early 80s, when people were appalled by unemployment, and yet it didn't ignite the resistance and rage that we see now?

I think you and I have got to be very careful, Bea, that just because we have been aware of these injustices all that time, we don't mock the Johnny-come-latelys who have suddenly discovered them and become concerned.

I'm not mocking them. One factor, presumably, is what people felt about Labour?

If there has been change, we are talking about public perception. The change in that perception may have occurred in the early 80s, when the party appeared to be convulsed with its own internal agenda rather than the priorities of the electorate.

What have you learned from that process? In what way have you been changed by it?

If I have been able to make a contribution to the party over the last two or three years, it is because I have been able to take the debate about the health service into the tabloids and television. We're taking an interest in the broadcasting media that we didn't before.

In 1980 or '81, I would have to put my hand on my heart and say that my priority was getting an article on the Agenda page of *The Guardian*. You can fill up your whole diary with evening meetings with people who share your passion and political commitment. But that is not mass politics. If you go into mass

politics it is a matter of communicating your message and trying to shape public opinion.

Right. So you communicate on a mass scale. But what's that got to do with mass politics? What does mass politics mean?

Mass politics is the mass franchise, isn't it? For which progressive and left people have fought from 1832 right through to 1918. An extraordinary breakthrough for working people who were able to use the strength of their vote to counter their economic weakness. We possibly forgot the importance of that power.

We see people take action over the poll tax, doing something. How would you integrate expressions of resistance with the electoral imperative?

Can we try and escape the use of this phrase, 'expressions of resistance', which has, firstly, a purely negative ring to it. But secondly, it also has the problem that it concedes the legitimacy of the Right and the centre taking action and then the necessity of the rest of us to resist it.

What has actually been very interesting over the last two years is the way in which people's immense frustration at finding ways of resisting the poll tax has brought home to them the sheer lack of democratic rights to give expression to mass resistance.

What does a political party do to organise what people feel and what they can do about this tremendously unpopular tax?

It makes visible that popular disagreement so that neither the government nor the media are in any doubt about it. Secondly, you carry that argument to parliament. Thirdly, you encourage people at every possible opportunity when they have a ballot to cast their vote accordingly.

Now, the democratic theory is that any government confronted with that visible evidence changes its mind. But we are playing with a prime minister who does not play by those rules. Anybody else - Heath, Macmillan, Wilson, Callaghan - would have backed down.

In a sense, that's the final irony. Just at the very time when the nation is in a state of new rebellion, the Conservatives have discovered they have no way of democratically getting rid of their prime minister.

What the Tories are trying to do now is to target acts of civil disobedience, people taking to the streets on marches...

There's no civil disobedience in marching down Whitehall to have a big demonstration in Trafalgar Square.

EYE TO EYE



Let's be very careful what we're saying. People still have a legal right to demonstrate. I don't think we should assist the Conservatives by suggesting that the 200,000 people who turned out the other Saturday were participating in an act of civil disobedience; they weren't. They were perfectly legitimately, and overwhelmingly peaceably, demonstrating their opposition to the poll tax.

That gets converted somehow, doesn't it, into something else?

You just converted it yourself. You described it as civil disobedience.

Wait a minute, I'm trying to suggest that if people want to sit down in the road, if they don't want to - or can't - pay the tax, that gets represented as civil disobedience. The language suggests these acts have been criminalised.

Well, I don't describe not paying the tax as civil disobedience. I'm bound to say that the reason why the language stands up is because some on the other side play the same language.

I thought it was wonderful that so many people were prepared to turn up to that demonstration and peaceably register their presence. It is tragic that some people turned up patently to disrupt and discredit it. The objective of registering a protest against the poll tax was lost.

The Labour Party presents itself more successfully now than for 10 years. It wants to be the government, but it's not, and a government is not the same as a mass party that has to animate and express all sorts of differential wishes.

I've walked along streets as often as you have, and so have most members of the shadow cabinet. If you look back over the history of the party, we have organised marches as big as anybody else's. What is encouraging is that local Labour Parties have broken out of a fairly sterile and barren culture, they are now looking for different ways to connect with ordinary people.

Now, that is the interaction of a party which has a very clear objective to get in government, and an anxiety also to make itself accessible to local people in a way that possibly we didn't, six or seven years ago. All the changes that have happened are moving in the direction you're talking about, rather than there being any barrier between the Labour Party as a purely electoralist organisation, and people who've taken to the streets, if by taking to the streets you mean participating in demonstrations. We do it more often than any other organisation in the land.