

# Labour's Forward March Centre Of Attraction

Labour's surge is unparalleled since 1945.  
Ivor Crewe gives chapter and verse and explains  
what it all means

**T**he Labour Party is enjoying an extraordinary surge of popular support. Mid-Staffordshire clocked up the largest Conservative-to-Labour by-election swing for over 50 years. In the opinion polls, Labour's lead over the Conservatives doubled from 11% in January to 24% in March, the equivalent of a Commons majority of over 250 seats. At the last election 10m people voted Labour; now 16m people say they would. Even allowing for Labour's low baseline in 1987, for mid-term blues and by-election fever, this is a quite exceptional turnaround of party fortunes. A 24% lead is a 24% lead.

This seismic national shift has broken the electoral fixtures of the past decade. In the 1980s Labour was a regional class party of dispossessed minorities. It was left to represent the have-nots, while the have-somes teamed up with the have-lots behind the Conservatives. The only groups giving Labour majority support were the poor, the unemployed, black people and council tenants. Now the only group not putting it ahead are the professional and managerial salariat. It is more popular than the Conservatives in every other class, including white-collar office workers; among home-owners (outright owners as well as mortgagees); in all age groups, including the retired, and in all regions, including the south east outside London. The have-somes have changed sides and it is the Conservatives' turn to be a regional class rump and Labour's to be a national party.

What do these 6m extra voters signify? Are they committed converts or temporary refugees? Four interpretations are going the rounds. The first is that Labour is benefiting from the collapse of the centre and the reversion to the old two-party system. The second is that the Thatcherite revolution has been devoured by its children as the property-owning dream has turned into the mortgage-paying nightmare. The third is that voters have at last finished their fling with Thatcherism and returned to the safe social democracy of a reformed Labour Party.

All three interpretations offer optimistic prognoses for Labour.

A fourth interpretation is more sceptical: Labour is merely benefiting from an intense but ephemeral protest by a volatile electorate which will melt as quickly as it materialised. There is substance to all these arguments, but none paint a complete picture.

The slump in the centre vote - from 23% in 1987 to about 10% now - is clearly a major factor in Labour's revival. The ex-Alliance vote held up surprisingly well in the polls and by-elections until spring 1989. It finally snapped after the Richmond by-election, where the SDP and Liberal Democrats, by refusing to agree on a single candidate, let the Conservative win despite securing 54% of the vote between them. In the Euro-elections four months later it limped behind the Greens in fourth place.

What needs to be explained is why despairing centre supporters switched in overwhelming proportions to Labour rather than dividing evenly between the two big parties, as surveys suggest they would have done in 1983 and 1987.

The fortuitous timing of Labour's policy review was one factor. Between Richmond and the Euro-elections it became apparent that Kinnock was abandoning Labour's 'something-for-nothing' unilateralism and would carry a majority of the national executive committee (NEC). This completed Labour's metamorphosis from socialist chrysalis to social-democratic butterfly. On macro-economic policy, on the role of the market, on public services, on privatisation and the public sector, on Europe, on trade-union democracy and finally on defence, Labour's policy review had adopted positions barely a millimetre away from the SDP's of 1987.

Indeed, Labour's transformation went beyond policy. Kinnock was spearheading a campaign to restructure the party precisely along the lines that the Social Democrats wanted, but failed to secure, in the early 1980s - one-member-one-vote locally, the end to the block vote nationally, a reversal of mandatory reselection and the transfer of policy-making away from the NEC. All that separated the Liberal Democrats from Labour by summer 1989 was proportional representation, incomes policy,

party loyalty - and the ability to win office. A committed Liberal or SDP voter, loyal to party policy throughout the 1980s, had no reason to vote Labour at the beginning of the decade and every reason at the end. Why should ex-Alliance voters support the Liberal Democrats or SDP, who have no chance of winning power, when there is now available a new and bigger centre party which has?

**The collapse of the centre can account for Labour catching up with the Conservatives, but not for its leaping into such a commanding lead. The other component in Labour's recovery is the willingness of large numbers of Conservatives - about one in six - to switch directly to Labour. This has not happened on the same scale since 1945: disillusioned Conservatives normally vote for the centre. Labour's occupancy of the centre ground is again part of the explanation. Why should Conservative deserters stop at the Liberal Democrat hut when the modern Hotel Labour is next door?**

'Thatcher's children' is the other explanation. As Table 1 shows, Labour has advanced furthest among the 'new working class' of affluent and secure skilled workers with homes of their own in the south and Midlands - the groups that deserted Labour in 1979 for Thatcher's brave new England. The Conservative-to-Labour swing since 1987 has been particularly sharp among the C2 class of skilled manual workers (20%), working-class home-owners (20%) and voters in the non-metropolitan south-east (23%) and east Midlands (21%). The shift to Labour in Scotland, in the north of England and in the traditional working class of semi- and unskilled workers and council tenants has been less marked.

**T**he class impact of high interest rates has clearly been a factor. Spiralling mortgages have turned affluent workers into struggling bourgeois. The people hardest hit are those who stretched their household incomes to the limit to start on or climb up the housing ladder - typically young, two-earner couples of skilled workers, technicians and office staff.

But the importance of high interest rates should not be overdone. They are nasty for borrowers but nice for savers - and net savers outnumber borrowers. Less than 40% of voters are mortgagees. The Harris/ITN exit-poll in Mid-Staffordshire reported that mortgage rates was only the third most important issue in voters' minds, lagging well behind the health service and, overwhelmingly, the poll tax.

Commentators assume that the poll tax has hit the same people as high mortgage rates; hence the sudden haemorrhaging of Conservative support. The true picture is more complex. Generally, those least affected by high mortgages have been most affected by the poll tax. The people worst affected

**Table 1: The surge to Labour since the 1987 election**  
% shift in party support, June 1987 - March 1990

	Cons	Lab	Lib Dem & SDP	Con to Lab swing*
All	-15	+20	-12	17.5%
Men	-15	+21	-12	18%
Women	-14	+20	-12	17%
18-24	-20	+19	-12	19.5%
25-44	-11	+21	-16	16%
45-64	-18	+22	-8	19%
65+	-13	+18	-8	15.5%
Prof & managerial (AB)	-13	+18	-14	15.5%
Clerical & office (C1)	-15	+20	-12	17.5%
Skilled manual (C2)	-17	+23	-13	20%
Semi/unskilled manual (DE)	-12	+17	-10	14.5%
Outright owners	-16	+21	-10	18.5%
Mortgagees	-14	+22	-16	18%
Council tenants	-12	+17	-8	14.5%
Private tenants	-20	+22	-11	21%
Working-class home owners	-17	+23	-14	20%
Working-class tenants	-13	+18	-9	15.5%
Scotland	-6	+8	-11	7%
North	-13	+20	-12	16.5%
Wales	-16	+24	-13	20%
Midlands	-15	+20	-11	15.5%
London	-14	+17	-11	15.5%
South outside London	-17	+22	-12	19.5%

Sources: BBC/Gallup survey, 10-11 June 1987; Gallup 9000, March 1990.  
\* 'Swing' is the average of the change in the Conservative and Labour shares of the vote.

**Table 2: Labour fitness to govern**

**Question: 'How competent do you think the Labour Party is to manage the country's affairs?'**

	Oct	Jan	Change
Very/fairly competent	37	50	+13
Not very/not at all competent	59	42	-17
Net competence rating	-22	+8	+30

**Question: 'Do you think that the Labour Party is united or divided at the present time?'**

	June 1987	March 1990	Change
United	24	50	+26
Divided	72	40	-32

**'Labour has become too extreme'**

	April 1987	Sept 1989	Change
Agree	67	29	-38
Disagree	24	61	+37

Source: Gallup.

**Table 3: Economic prospects under a Labour government**

**Question: 'I would now like to ask you some questions about the prospects for Britain if Labour wins the next general election. Do you think ...'**

	Sept 1989	March 1990
<b>... the economy would be stronger under Labour than the Conservatives?</b>		
Stronger	18	21
About the same	34	30
Weaker	42	39
% stronger minus % weaker	-24	-18
<b>... taxes for the average family would be higher?</b>		
Lower	21	18
About the same	32	33
Higher	40	42
% lower minus % higher	-19	-24
<b>... prices would rise faster under Labour?</b>		
Slower	18	19
About the same	48	38
Faster	28	35
% slower minus % higher	-10	-16
<b>... your own standard of living would be higher?</b>		
Higher	n.a.	23
About the same	n.a.	44
Lower	n.a.	27
% higher minus % lower		-4

Source: NOP for *The Independent*, March 17, 1990.

are tenants (with no rates bills) and occupiers of older, smaller property with a low rateable value - typically retired people on relatively low incomes. Together the poll tax and rising mortgages have spread the electoral damage rather than concentrated it.

This is reflected in the swing figures for different social groups. What stands out are the similarities, not the differences. The swing barely differs between men and women, first-time voters and their grandparents, boiler suit and white collar, outright owners and mortgagees, London and the north of England. Labour has advanced along a remarkably broad front.

Consensual shifts of this kind reflect a politics of national mood rather than a politics of group interest. They should alert us against misinterpreting Labour's surge in terms of specific issues or identities. If the national mood has changed, what was it before and what has it become?

Sylvia Heal, Labour's victor at Mid-Staffordshire, gave an answer by way of interpretation three. The electorate had finally rejected Thatcherite values of selfishness and greed and voted for a more caring Britain. In one sense this was naive nonsense. The electors did not send her to Westminster in a blinding flash of moral revulsion against Thatcherism. The very opposite; they deserted the Conservatives because Mrs Thatcher was no longer delivering the goods. 'Selfishness' fuelled the Labour vote of 1990 as much as the Conservative vote of 1987.

In another sense, however, she touched upon an important truth. Whatever their motives for voting Conservative, the British public has never accepted Thatcherism as a public philosophy. At the 1987 election, despite the Conservatives' handsome win, Thatcherite values and proposals were rejected by large majorities. Tax cuts? Only 12% supported a cut in taxes, even at the expense of public services; fully 88% said they wanted an extension of public services 'even if it means some increase in taxes'. The jewel in the Thatcherite crown, privatisation? As many believed it would concentrate wealth (50%) as spread prosperity (50%). Trade unions? A 71% to 17% majority described them as a good thing 'Generally speaking and thinking of Britain as a whole' and 70% to 21% disagreed that 'trade unions may have been needed at one time in Britain but not any longer'. As for specific proposals, the poll tax was rejected by 54% to 28%, the privatisation of electricity by 56% to 34% and the 'opting out' of schools by 54% to 46%.

Opinion on these issues has shifted even further leftwards since 1987, but not by much - and certainly not as much as the shift in voting intention from Conservative to Labour. There has been no sea-change of values from Thatcherism for the simple reason that Thatcherism was

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not the prevailing value system in the first place. The traditions of welfare, collective provision and public services, traditions on which Labour could always draw, never lost their popular legitimacy.

In the 1980s people voted for the Conservative Party despite its policies, and against Labour despite its values. In their study of the 1983 election (*How Britain Votes*) Heath *et al* worked out that if everybody had voted for the party they preferred on the specific issue that mattered to them most, the result would have been a dead heat. The Conservatives won because most people do not vote like that. What matters most - even more than the economy - is the purely political question of whether the party is fit to govern. Policies and values enter into that judgment but carry less weight than, in rough order of importance, party unity, recent track record (especially on the economy), 'strong leadership', sense of purpose, policy coherence and personal rectitude. In 1979, electors turned against the Labour government because its authority collapsed during the winter of discontent. In 1983, they turned further against Labour because the party was riven by faction and weakly led. In 1987, its recovery was limited because it was still regarded as divided and 'extreme'.

What has changed since 1987 is not the electorate's values but its perceptions of the Labour Party. And the percep-

tions that have shifted most are not of Labour's values or policies but of its capacity to govern (see Table 2). Labour is safe and respectable again; it no longer frightens the middle classes. For the first time in over a decade, substantial majorities regard Labour as united, moderate and competent. Indeed, in a reversal of the psephological norm, Labour is seen as more united than the Conservatives, and as having a leader who would make as good a prime minister as the actual incumbent. Mandelson's magic and Kinnock's 'no risk' strategy have worked - so far.

Management of the economy is a crucial ingredient of governing capacity. Tucked away in the small print of the polls, however, are hints of the electorate's lingering scepticism about Labour's abilities in this respect (Table 3). In March, when the public was exceptionally pessimistic about economic prospects and criticism of the government's handling of the economy reached a 10-year high, there was precious little faith in the Labour alternative. Asked about life under a Labour government, a large minority thought it would be the same, and of the remainder pessimists outnumbered optimists. More voters thought that taxes would rise (42%) than fall (18%), that inflation would speed up (35%) than slow down (19%), that the economy would get weaker (39%) rather than stronger (21%) and that their own standard of living would be lower (27%) not higher (23%). Signi-

ficantly, the balance of opinion had barely changed since the preceding autumn despite inflation, mortgage rises and poll tax. The Conservatives still have the reputation for prosperity, Labour for recession.

By avoiding all electoral risks the Labour Party has maximised its chances of benefiting from government mistakes. If interest and inflation rates remain high, if the Conservatives are divided and demoralised, most of Labour's 6m new voters will stay Labour. The public expects Conservative governments to be competent not compassionate, creators not spreaders of wealth. If the Conservatives come to be regarded as no more adept at managing the economy than Labour, voters will choose between the parties on more specific policy grounds, such as the poll tax, the NHS, jobs and pensions, on which Labour is far more trusted.

The weakness in Labour's strategy will be exposed if inflation and interest rates are tumbling fast in the run-up to a spring 1992 election and the Conservatives present a united and confident face to the electorate. Then Labour will be penalised for its lack of vision, or even one big idea. Voters will perceive the choice to be between two teams of politicians differing little in direction or principle. The salient distinction will turn on experience and past performance. And when that judgment comes to be made, many of Labour's extra 6m might float away.

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