

Labour's Pains

There are two sorts of politics in society. Practical politics is the most widely known and reaches out to everyone during elections, revolutions and civil wars. It is the 'art of the possible'. It is popular politics. Parallel to this is the long-range politics that establishes the consensus within which everyday government operates. The tussles that go on to create the consensus tend to occur on the quiet and out of the popular spotlight. They are, however, more extensive than party politics and media speculation, reaching more deeply and more informally into society. Popular politics is most often merely one expression of the general but low-key moral and political awareness that constitutes consensus opinion.

There is no consensus for dismantling the National Health Service, legalising heroin or abolishing compulsory education. However, things can and do change. There is now a consensus for many things unthinkable thirty years ago. Explicit pornography on sale in most local newsagents, the sale of council houses and the official 'blind eye' to soft drug possession are all widely accepted now.

At the moment it is also generally accepted in Britain that there is a need for a government and a state. The consensus also accepts the two-party constitutional monarchy. This system involves the need to have a specialised class of labour, namely party politicians. They have little time to spend either making or breaking the consensus. They will tend for the most part either to concentrate on getting into power with the established consensus or attempting to discover new trends in feeling that could gain them support.

As long as a party is within the broad political consensus it will lose few votes on the policies score. The voters in elections do not wish to be troubled by details. They also do not want elections coming too often. They do not want to be worried by constant crises. The principal issue at stake in the last election and in practically all previous

elections is a party's fitness to govern. Only a small minority of voters will be greatly swayed by the particular bag of policies a party presents. Electorates are fundamentally conservative. They vote the same as before unless they feel their previous party is unfit to govern.

In the recent election people once again had their attention dragged away from what interests them towards what bores 95% of them, 95% of the time. Their demand for a party that can firstly govern, and secondly govern within the consensus, settled on Mrs. Thatcher. She had coped with rioters, Argentineans, three and a half million unemployed, the miners and an assortment of Conservative ex-Prime Ministers and 'wets'. She was certainly governing well within the post-war political consensus. She had even gone against it a bit by increasing taxes and the state's share of national income. Despite these last two Britain was not 'never having it so good' but neither was it all that bad.

In 1979 there had been a government bruised in disputes with the unions, having changed leaders in mid-term, having had to go cap in hand to the IMF for a loan, plus a leader who appeared smug about it all. Labour under Callaghan suffered in comparison to a fairly united opposition with a fresh leader - and so lost the election. Come 1983 the voters faithfully ignored the scares about the 'real' Tory manifesto and the truth about 'Labour's most radical manifesto for years' and concentrated on the real issue - the relative fitness of the parties to govern. Foot's leadership proved that libertarian inclined socialists who are long in their sentences and in the tooth are not the best candidate Prime Ministers. Being clearly split over many things and with many years of acrimonious infighting behind them Labour were no match for the Conservative government.

Unfortunately for Labour, the Liberal Party (made more substantial by the alliance with a group of ex-Chancellors of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretaries and Education Ministers) was there on the spot to take advantage of the dissatisfaction with the quality and fitness to govern of the anti-Tory party. This was important as at heart most Labourites are

little more than anti-Tories. As such they will pay attention to the reality of a situation where Labour is not capable of winning, and will switch their allegiance to an anti-Tory party that can do so. As a consequence, in the South and West of England Labour was effectively relegated to minor party status, and did poorly outside all other areas but the inner urban fringe.

In the short run a party's policies are not very important. In the long run they must however fall within the consensus. Do Labour's do so? To be sure the political consensus is moving away from statism towards liberalism. But this is a very slow process that could be halted if groups like the L.A. do not prosper. We think they will prosper and that statism will recede. At the moment, however, it seems this process has not gone far enough to leave Labour run aground through its being the party that advocates more statism.

Labour and the Unions

There are signs that some of Labour's less popular policies (those on the periphery of the consensus) are being dropped by nearly all the candidates in the leadership contests. There are also similar signs amongst the union leaders. This is perhaps more important for Labour as it was the trade union power that originally made the party strong enough to compete for government. This began with the decision in 1908 by the miners' unions to switch their sponsored MPs from backing the Liberals to support for the fledgling Labour Party. However, this move made little difference to voting patterns in the division lobbies. The unions further enhanced Labour's reputation in the eyes of the voters during the First World War when several Labour (and trade union sponsored) MPs took on active ministerial responsibility for the running of the domestic war effort. Thus proving, in the eyes of the increasingly nationalistic and socialistic electorate, their patriotism and governmental ability. Together with the doubling of union membership during the war, Labour were a much more substantial force in 1918 than in the pre-1914 days.

The union grip on the party was demonstrated when they forced, during the 1920s and 1930s, a purging of undemocratic

elements in the party. They wanted power; to get that they had to conform - and conform they did. This enabled them to take advantage of the dissension and splits within their anti-Tory ancestors (and for a time competitors), the Liberals, to become the established alternative to the Tories. So when elections were held for the first time in ten years, immediately after the Second World War, great expectations with Labour and the lack of confidence with the Conservatives expressed itself in a landslide victory for the Labour Party.

But union support for Labour cannot be guaranteed. In the 1830s, once the new urban population had established its social presence in the new cities of the industrial revolution, it set out to establish its political presence in the country. It did this in agitation for reform of the voting system, through campaigns for cheap food and an end to agricultural protectionism, and through more heterogeneous and less effective campaigning by the Chartists in the 1840s. Once the first flush of power had faded their main representatives, the trade unions, lined up fairly solidly behind the Liberal Party. So that by the 1870s all the top union leaders, such as Henry Broadhurst, were unquestionably Gladstonians.

Just as there are some signs that the Labour movement is going to reassess its policies in the light of two crushing electoral defeats, so there are signs that this will not happen. If there is little shift to newer, more acceptable policies then further splits are in prospect. The Labour movement would then do well to remember its leading maxim, "Unity is strength".

Pressures have built up between the new, more stupid, reactionary and dogmatic type of activists fresh out of the colleges and the older more typically anti-Tory labour sympathisers. These latter could not be called dogmatic as they have few concrete policies to be dogmatic over. They are also not the types to have been much influenced by a sort of 'false consciousness' which makes them see themselves as a separate 'working' class, a condition brought on by too many sociology classes. In the unions themselves there is also a split looming over whether to co-operate with the government

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over aspects of union organisation and over economic policy in general. If the unions fall out their power will be broken even more than it has been by Thatcher and it will surely spell doom for their party.

However, Labour could change ideas peacefully just as major parties have changed their outlook before. In the 1850s the Tories were the first to notice the movement among intellectuals towards greater state intervention. Disraeli and his 'one nation' followers were the popular political expression of the earlier influential movement of romantic Christian socialists. Previous to this the Tories had been variously kept in check by Whig dominance or simply swept along by the general *laissez-faire* feeling. They were the first party to change their outlook though they were slow to follow up the theory with practice. As usual it took the anti-Tory party to do that.

The anti-Tory party at the time was the Liberal Party. It changed its outlook from a more or less old fashioned liberalism, seeing little role for the state, to a 'new liberalism' of active statism. Joseph Chamberlain and the notion of municipal socialism were the chief agents of this change of outlook, although many particular statist reforms had already gone through with little or no opposition, such as Acts to regulate hours and to introduce state education. So it was pretty unexceptional that by 1908 the Liberals should be laying the foundations of the welfare state.

Parties change their ideas to fit the consensus. This is no guarantee of survival. Parties must appear unified, and responsible or they will be rejected. This was the fate of the Liberal Party in the years after 1916. With a leadership split not on ideological grounds but over personalities (Lloyd George's and Asquith's) they disintegrated under the threat from an alternative anti-Tory party. Beatrice Webb was correct when she wrote in her diary that "The Liberal Party did represent, in its policy and outlook, the anti-Conservative element in the country; and if it had not been for the Great War and for Lloyd George's post-war action, it would have continued to occupy the position, with the Labour Party as a left wing" (*Beatrice*

Webb's Diaries 1924-1932, ed. by Margaret Cole, 1956, p295).

Parties are not often stranded by tides of public opinion. They mostly float in and out with them. Parties in the past have quietly and unspectacularly accomplished major changes in outlook and have carried on. But the Labour Party, by fighting over policies or personalities in public, will breed further dissension, splits and more recruits to the (Liberal-SDP) Alliance. If this happens it will not have been ditched because its policies have put it beyond the consensus, but by proving itself unfit to govern.

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