

## SOCIALIST RENEWAL AND THE LABOUR PARTY

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To pose the question of the possibilities and problems of socialist renewal in the late twentieth century inevitably means bringing forward a series of difficult, even unnerving, questions. Do socialists have an adequate grasp of the economic, political and cultural dynamics of contemporary society? To the extent that they do, or can develop such a grasp, what are the social forces to which socialists can today hope to appeal? What are the felt troubles, the immediate aspirations, the identifiable interests of such social forces and how might socialists develop and advance a clearer understanding of them? What can be the ideological, symbolic and programmatic basis of a renewed socialist appeal in the short and long-term? What strategies of socialist mobilization can be envisaged and put into practice so that the socialist project can once again become a mass movement? And, lurking behind all such questions, stands yet another, no less important and no less difficult and unnerving, the answer to which often sets the parameters for the way in which each of the above questions is answered. It is the question of whether—and how—socialist renewal can be achieved within and through the institutional framework of those social democratic and communist parties which have heretofore dominated the history of socialist political practice in this century.

In the attention that has recently been paid by socialists to these questions, there has been an overwhelming sense of frustration at the weakness and relative isolation of the left in a period of severe capitalist crisis and reaction. On the one hand, concentration has very largely been focused on a search, through the entrails of surveys of voting behaviour, for the social causes of the immediate electoral difficulties of many of the traditional parties of the left. And, on the other hand, moving from the profane to the holy, there has been a great deal of attention paid to the limitations of socialist, above all Marxist, theory. Sometimes this has descended into a despairing political and ideological self-flagellation, reflecting a dramatic loss of socialist conviction and identity among many of those intellectuals nurtured on the heady post-1968 revival of Marxist theorizing and revolutionary aspiration. But not all of it should be seen this way. For there is also a creative dimension here: above all, the concern with associating the struggle for socialism with the struggles of new social

movements and for identifying contemporary socialism with popular aspirations for greater democracy and freedom.

What seems to have been missing from even the more creative currents in this regard, however, is much serious analysis of what kind of political organization could embody a renewed socialist project. Between the concern with electoral behaviour, which must inevitably take the existing party organizations, programmes and images as datum, and the concern with the limitations of Marxist theory, there is a discernible vacuum. The continuing influence of Gramsci's concept of hegemony is clear in both concerns, but what is absent is Gramsci's explicit connection of a counter-hegemonic project with 'the modern prince', with fashioning the kind of political formation which could best ask and evolve answers to the kinds of questions mentioned above, and could best represent and educate, organize and mobilize, all to the end of contending for power. Filling this vacuum cannot be a matter, of course, of a mere 'imagining' of some future organization which would bid for political power, but of examining the recent political practices of socialists in attempting to fashion such a party, reflecting on the possibilities and problems they embodied and revealed, and attempting to go beyond them.

Other articles in this volume address the question of socialist renewal from the perspective of the lessons that can be learned from the recent experience of the major Western Communist parties. This article seeks to advance an understanding of the promise and problems that attended recent attempts to transform social democratic parties into parties of socialist advance. Our main focus shall be on the attempt to change the Labour Party in Britain. But it is important to recall that the attempt to change the Labour Party was part of a broader European phenomenon. Twenty years ago, in the heady days of 1968, it appeared that a new generation of socialists, and a significant number of people among the older generation, were coming to the conclusion that socialist renewal could only take place outside the old parties. Yet through the course of the 1970s, as the inability of Trotskyist and Maoist parties to make a breakthrough became apparent, as community activists became aware of the costs of isolation from party politics, and as a leftward shift within a number of social democratic parties emerged as a possibility, many thousands of socialists reinvested their aspirations and efforts for socialist renewal in those parties. The regroupment and revitalization of the French Socialist Party under the strategic and programmatic thrust of an alliance of the Left and extensive public ownership and 'autogestion'; the adoption by the Swedish labour movement of the wage-earners' funds proposal, conceived as a new 'middle way' towards establishing a socialist society by gradually socializing thereby the means of production; the emergence and 'short march to power' of the Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement (PASOK) under an explicitly anti-imperialist and radical socialist banner—these were

major instances of this development. What took place in the British Labour Party, while programmatically rather *less* radical, was if anything more profound. For it raised, as an essential condition of socialist renewal and advance, the issue of a democratic transformation of party structure and through it of state structure, as no other development elsewhere quite did.

The failure of each of these attempts at changing social democracy are all too evident today, and in each of these parties the forces for socialist renewal have been rendered marginal, if not entirely defeated. Policy moderation under the aegis of a conventional parliamentary elite is once again the order of the day, with a growing tendency to define policy moderation in terms of trying to compete on the terrain of the individualist appeal of neo-conservatism. And even many of those who were among the most wildly optimistic partisans of the attempts at socialist renewal within and through the social democratic parties now display a marked inclination to move with the tide and to concentrate on attempting to reconstruct a viable electoral base for conventional social democracy. Yet it is the contention of this article that these recent failed attempts at socialist renewal still have real meaning for those who remain committed to socialist change. After examining briefly the promise and limits of the attempts in France, Greece and Sweden, we shall turn to the Labour Party. Our main concern will not be on the events that marked the defeat of the attempt to change the Labour Party in the 1980s, but rather on the factors that gave birth to this attempt and the promise it offered. The defeats the left in the Labour Party suffered from 1981 onward will be addressed in the concluding section but it is first of all necessary to appreciate that these defeats were but the final episode in a longer struggle, the importance of which can only be registered if we remind ourselves of what the struggle was all about in the first place. This requires an examination of the development of this struggle in the late 1960s and through the 1970s. The limits the attempt to change the Labour Party faced as it developed, and that eventually it proved unable to overcome, will not be ignored. But this essay is primarily an exercise in socialist retrieval. There has been an insistent line of propaganda which has portrayed this attempt as a meaningless intra-party dispute or as a best-forgotten moment of romantic or mendacious ultra-leftism. It was neither, and there will be little prospect of socialist renewal in the advanced capitalist countries unless the purpose and the promise of the attempt to change the Labour Party, as well as its limitations, are retrieved and rendered meaningful.'

### *Social Democracy's Left Turn*

For some twenty to thirty years after World War II, socialism, as ideology, as programme, as organizational practice, had been to all intents and purposes effectively side-lined from the agendas of social democratic

parties throughout Western Europe. The Keynesian and corporatist policy framework which governed social democratic practice led to the marginalization of any vision of an alternative future other than that offered by the inherent trends of 'actually-existing capitalism' in the conjuncture of its greatest period of social mobility and growth and in its welfare statist dimensions. It was inevitable that internal party life would be significantly affected thereby. When the socialist vision becomes transmuted into actually existing capitalism, there is little place for, and less need for, a party-based 'counter-hegemonic' community. The activity of party branches continues to serve an instrumental function in electoral terms and in playing their allotted role at party conferences, but they lose what *raison d'être* they had as centres of education and mobilization towards an alternate way of life. Individual membership in absolute terms and as a percentage of the total electorate was for such reasons likely to stagnate if not fall, and this was in fact the trend for all social democratic parties in Europe in the post-war era (with the single exception of the West German SPD whose achievement in any case was that of managing to keep its membership abreast of the increasing size of the German electorate).<sup>2</sup>

Although the student radicalism and industrial militancy of the late 1960s led to a sharp turn by activists to extra-parliamentary forms of activity, the reverberations were bound to be felt in the parliamentary socialist parties as well. This entailed, first of all, a revival within these parties of a socialist discourse within which issues were discussed (or, more often, debated) and solutions, even reformist ones, advanced. The language of 'class', of 'capital', of 'exploitation', of 'crisis', of 'struggle', of 'imperialism', of 'transformation', while never entirely extirpated from these parties, had certainly become marginalized within them in the decades after World War II. By the early 1970s, it was again within constant earshot at party meetings and conferences. Even the term 'social democracy' was often used pejoratively, and one suddenly found even many of the most jaded leaders now calling themselves 'democratic socialists'. But more than language was involved: there was a programmatic turn as well, in which the questions of taking capital away from Capital through major extensions of public or workers' ownership (or at least through radical measures of investment planning and industrial democracy) and the pursuance of a foreign policy independent of the United States, came onto the agendas of some of these parties. Certainly only the most inexperienced observer or participant could have thought in the 1970s that these parties had actually been transformed into effective vehicles for a socialist transition; the more cynical remained convinced that these parties were in the process of reconstructing their viability as mediating agencies for the consensual reproduction of capitalism and the containment of industrial militancy and radical structural reform. Nonetheless, the new discourse and programmatic thrust did carry with it an explicit critique of established

social democratic practice. At the very least, it represented an acknowledgement of the need for raising that practice 'to a new level'. This could not be simply ignored.

The question remained, of course, of whether socialism could be placed back on the agenda, not only of these parties, but in the broader political arena. It certainly cannot be claimed that there was a ready-made groundswell of socialist electoral opinion just waiting to be tapped: it needed to be created in the interplay between party discourse and popular experience. The eventual victories in the early 1980s of the French, Greek and Swedish parties on the basis of the most radical programmes put before their electorates at least since the 1940s certainly invalidated simplistic claims, so commonly heard even on the left today, that parties which advanced such a programme were inherently unelectable. But if a socialist alternative not only was to avoid conjuring up a negative electoral reaction, but was to produce the popular support that is needed to sustain a socialist government's radical thrust, this depended on a sea-change in the organizational and ideological practices of parliamentary socialist parties themselves. They had to become unified around the socialist alternative; they had to find the means to be effective vehicles for a transformation and mobilization of popular attitudes; they had to develop mechanisms to ensure that their leaderships not only mouthed a socialist discourse that the activists wanted to hear at party meetings, but shared a commitment to radical change and maintained such a commitment even once subject to the conservatizing pressures of office.

It was a tall order indeed. The programmatic changes that occurred in a number of social democratic parties in the 1970s were obviously developed with some awareness of these questions: as in the emphasis placed on industrial democracy alongside nationalization and investment controls, or on the decentralized socialization of capital through trade union administered wage earners' funds. These policies were conceived with a view to popularizing a socialist alternative via obviating its association with the authoritarian practices of Eastern European 'actually existing socialisms' as well as the bureaucratic practices of state-owned enterprises in the West. But this was itself a small first step. For even to make this credible and popular, fundamental organizational changes within the social democratic parties themselves were necessary to make them effective vehicles for a democratic socialist alternative. And in this respect there was much less to the developments in the French, Greek or Swedish parties, in contrast with the British, than initially met the eye.

The restructuring of the old socialist parties that produced the new **Parti Socialiste** certainly yielded a new programme and a new discourse. **François Mitterrand** declared flatly that the PS was not a 'catch-all party', that it constituted a radical break with the 'errors of the past' and especially 'social democratic nostalgia', that it had 'nothing in common

with the corrupt compromises of a Schmidt or a Callaghan, let alone a Mollet'.<sup>3</sup> It also was based on a new organizational structure, ostensibly 'the most pluralistic' of all the French parties whereby it gave representation on its *Comite Directeur* to the various groups in the party according to the proportion of the vote their platforms obtained at the biennial national party congress.<sup>4</sup> Yet, less visible but more significant was the underlying—and unchallenged—reality of the organizational structure of the PS, which was to prove to have enormous effect after Mitterrand's and the Socialists' victories in 1981. As Raymond Cayrol observed as early as 1978 regarding Mitterrand's dominance of the party organization through his personal *cabinet*: 'It is the case of a party whose cement is still largely provided by loyalty to the line taken by its first Secretary, and the organization of the national headquarters eloquently institutionizes his indisputable preeminence at every level. There is, to be sure, a double circuit of legitimacy within the socialist apparat. But in the day-to-day affairs of the party it is the one which is based on François Mitterrand's trust that appears to be dominant.'<sup>5</sup>

Once established in office, it soon became clear that everything now hinged on the man in the *Elysée*. Very early on in the Government's term, a remarkable interview was given by senior members of the French Cabinet and PS leaders to officers of the British Labour Party and the TUC's research departments who were trying to distill the lessons of the French planning initiatives for a prospective Labour government. It was made clear that the relationship between the Party and the Government were extremely tenuous, with the only formal link being through the political advisers of Ministers who participated in the party's commissions and with party policy statements pressed on the Government 'only in an ad hoc way'.<sup>6</sup> By 1983, with the Government having already shifted gears to a virtually monetarist economic policy and having shown itself entirely uninterested in the 'autogestion' which was to have made the nationalizations undertaken in the first months popularly-based, Raymond Cayrol could write: 'The PS has not been able to elaborate an adequate role for itself which would ensure a certain autonomy from the government and provide it with the capacity to initiate vis-a-vis the government. . . Rarely has presidentialism and the asserted primacy of the executive been so consecrated as under a left government. This phenomenon constitutes an obstacle for the emergence of a pluralist debate within the party and within the governing institutions—all roads appear to lead to l'*Elysée*. . .' Cayrol concluded that in lieu of any 'dialectical relation between the action of the party's rank and file and that of the political action at the top. . . [the] PS seems to have voluntarily trapped itself in the State'.<sup>7</sup>

A similar situation had developed in the course of PASOK's 'short march to power' in Greece. After the downfall of the Junta, PASOK emerged on the basis of an alliance among the various resistance organiza-

tions and the old cadre of the socialist party with a decidedly radical orientation. Its goals were no less than 'a structural reorientation of Greek society' and 'the creation of a polity free of the control or influence of the economic oligarchy'. Its programme included the complete nationalization of the powerful private financial sector as well as withdrawal from NATO, since behind 'NATO and the American bases there are the multinational monopolies and their local subsidiaries'. All this was seen as the prerequisite for the realization of 'national independence, popular sovereignty, social liberation, and political democracy'. PASOK constantly criticized social democracy and even on occasion insisted that Marxism was the party's 'method of social analysis'. But although it promised a mass democratic and participatory party structure which would distinguish it from the centralism of the traditional left and the clientalism of the bourgeois parties, PASOK in fact evolved in a decidedly autocratic fashion under Andreas Papandreou's leadership. The rapid and conservative policy reorientation the Papandreou Government underwent after its election in 1981, especially in economic policy, was preceded by unsavoury intra-party developments during the short march to power which were marked by a series of major expulsions of those radical sections of the party that questioned Papandreou's personalized form of control over the party. No party congress was called between PASOK's inception in 1974 and the first Congress in 1984. A very knowledgeable Greek student of PASOK's internal development has written: 'While in its founding Document the Movement undertook to make "the principle of democratic procedure" its living organizational practice, during the seven years following 1974, PASOK became a prime example of an undemocratic, even authoritarian organization. Controlling intra-party opposition by administrative means, Papandreou established a centralized organization in which everything revolved around the omnipotent leader and his inner circle.' Michalis Spourdalakis has gone on to document the effect of this on the Greek state itself: 'PASOK's presence in the edifice of Greek state power has promoted a general tendency towards authoritarianism in the central state apparatus. . . PASOK has systematically exempted the military, the diplomatic service and the Justice department from parliamentary or public scrutiny. This is especially troubling since Papandreou's Government has surpassed its immediate predecessor in the scale of state coercion in certain areas. The heavy-handed policing of strikes, the increased surveillance of places where young people congregate, the cracking down on punks and the constant harassment of gays, are some striking examples of this depressing picture.'<sup>8</sup>

No such picture of the Swedish state under social democracy can be drawn, and this must serve as a reminder, as Spourdalakis properly avers, that 'political parties are portraits in miniature of the societies which they have chosen for their social project'. Nevertheless, it is important to note

that the new 'middle way' to socialism that the wage-earners' funds proclaimed entailed no significant political mobilization of the SAP's and the labour movement's supporters such as would have made its realization a possibility in the face of a Swedish capital increasingly alarmed and conservative. The wage earners' fund proposal, which emanated from the trade unions, was always looked upon with intense suspicion by the party leadership. They were content to refer the critical details of the proposals to a series of commissions, which in the intervening period between the infrequent (triennial) party conferences managed to water-down the content, so that by the time they were actually introduced by the SAP Government elected in 1982, they amounted to little more than a forced savings scheme providing a pool of capital for an unreconstructed corporate sector and a quid pro quo to wage restraint. To its credit, and by virtue of the continuing absorptive capacities of the public sector and the training schemes of the Labour Market Board, the Government has kept unemployment relatively low. But the orientation of recent economic policy toward 'the renewal of the private sector as the engine of the economy' involving tax incentives for capital, a tighter money supply, and a wage freeze, has left the unions again vociferously complaining of a income and wealth distribution to the benefit of capital in the face of a stock market boom, while real earnings have declined by 10 per cent over the past decade. In the run up to the 1987 party congress (the last was in 1984), there was again grumbling, especially in the youth wing of the party, that the party had lost its vision, amidst complaints that 'terrible class differences are returning to Sweden'.<sup>9</sup> The final word on the aspirations that so many socialists had placed on a hegemonic social democratic party in Sweden being the locus of an attempted transition to socialism, may be given to the powerful Minister of Labour, Anne Leijon, who in response to a question on whether the party has a socialist strategy any longer, spelled out the SAP's philosophy clearly: 'We are social democrats. The democratic part of it is as important as the social part. Over 90% of enterprises are in private hands and they will remain at that. On the other hand we think that public services are important. So we will distribute services in a public way rather than through insurance companies. We feel the economy is not democratic enough and we will find new ways of extending industrial democracy. We have wage earner funds but not the kind Meidner proposed. We have a mixed economy and we will continue to have this.'<sup>10</sup>

It is important to stress that it was not only business's vociferous opposition which determined this outcome. The sorry fate of the wage earners' fund as a means of socialising capital had much to do with the fact that there is in Sweden as elsewhere, 'the unfortunate general pattern of labour politics. . . the failure to develop a political capacity anywhere in the labour movement, least of all in the party, as seen in the latter's

typical incapacity to work through problems of policy implementation when framing electoral programmes. Such are the objective, organizational roots of labour governments' hasty retreats from electoral commitments, servility toward Treasury advice and ultimate sacrifice of class interests on the altar of "the national interest".<sup>11</sup> A no less severe problem lay in the incapacity of the labour movement, including the party, to act as the kind of politicizing agent which was necessary to generate much popular enthusiasm for the funds as a means of socializing capital. Despite the opening the fund proposals seemed to provide for such politicization, the continuing predominance in the party of its statist and technocratic wing, part of which threatened to leave the party over the fund proposals in their earlier radical incarnation, rendered this promise inoperative.

It is against this comparative background that the attempt to change the Labour Party needs to be reassessed today. For this attempt was centrally focused around a struggle which readdressed the enormous problem that the other left turns in social democracy in the 1970s failed to address seriously. It was the problem that Robert Michels had quite properly identified at the beginning of the century: the tendency to oligarchy in mass socialist parties. The issue, as he noted, pertained to these parties particularly, not because **non-socialist** parties were not elitist and undemocratic in their structure, but because such characteristics were—and remain—entirely consistent with their role as defenders of the social order. For parties of social change, the conservatizing and demobilizing effects of a leadership which was able to use the party's resources to distance themselves from the pressure of socialist activists and the mechanisms of democratic control established in the party's mass organization, was entirely another, and far more serious matter.<sup>12</sup> But in many ways the real issue inevitably went beyond the question of intra-party democracy to the question of the *nature of democracy* in the state. As Max Weber had discerned more clearly than his pupil Michels, it was through the embrace of the state, an embrace consistent with but having far greater effect than elitism in the party, that the democratic socialist thrust of the mass working class party came to nought: '... in the long run,' he wrote, 'it is not Social Democracy which conquers the town or the state but it is the state which conquers the party.'<sup>13</sup>

This has enormous importance for understanding what the attempt to change the Labour Party was about and why it produced such a reaction throughout the British establishment, a reaction far more deeply felt and far more hysterically sounded (including by Labour's own parliamentary elite) than that produced by Thatcherism's assault on the Keynesian/welfare state. To be sure, and contrary to much myth-making about it by its opponents, the project of those who sought to change the party remained 'reformist'. It did not seek to 'smash the state', least of all parliament; it continued to put its faith in representative democracy and the electoral

road to socialism. But its reformism, by being pointed now to a structural reform of the mode of representation, took on a dramatically novel aspect.

### *Origins of the New Labour Left*

The Labour Party, which had always been keen to present itself as the lynchpin of political stability as well as reform in Britain, generated a new radical opposition out of the contradictions in its own practices in government and their effects on its constituencies in the 1960s and 1970s. A new Labour left began taking form long before Thatcherism had established its strength, and indeed with some perceptive anticipation of the looming possibility of such a turn to the right; and it gradually set itself the task of transforming the ideology and organization of the Labour Party as the critical means of transforming the British state and society. As the sorry experience of the 1964–70 Labour Government, reinforced by its tragic repetition from 1974–79, including the inauguration of monetarism in 1976, the Labour Party turned inward on itself to fight a battle over the very meaning of socialism and democracy and posed the question—as it had never been posed with such force before in the party's history—of whether a social democratic working-class party like Labour could be adapted into becoming a party directed towards socialist mobilization and change. The challenge of the new Labour left to the party's ancient structures and practices was prosecuted in an often unclear and sometimes actually confused and certainly incomplete fashion. It was also burdened with occasional but on the whole minor 'entrists' allies, such as Militant, who reflected some of the more troubling aspects, and the most easily challengeable by the forces representing the status quo, of a committed but sectarian practice. Nevertheless, the new Labour left was moving—haltingly, stumbling, taking two steps forward and one back as must inevitably be the case when one is traversing new terrain under enemy fire—towards a new conception of socialist party politics, one which pointed beyond the stale and decaying practices, not only of the traditional parliamentarism of social democracy, but also of the Leninism of the vanguard parties and the alliances between the elites of various parties that was designated as 'popular frontism' by the Communist parties.

As regards earlier struggles by the Labour left, it was certainly not incorrect for critical students of the party to identify their failures with the traditional weaknesses of this left itself. Of these, the one most commonly and justifiably identified was the Labour left's 'almost total preoccupation' with parliamentarism to the downgrading, if not the exclusion, of extra-parliamentary mobilization.<sup>14</sup> The Labour left generally defended the authority of the party conference and valued it as an expression of a collectivist, class orientation to politics which countered the individualizing, isolation effect of bourgeois politics, wherein, as Miliband put it in his debate with McKenzie in the 1950s, '... the electorate is an

amorphous mass, which, at least between elections, only acquires political meaning and becomes capable of political initiative through organization, mainly political organization'. Unless such organizational initiative was nurtured, the result could only be 'the degradation of the business of politics. The authority which the annual Conference of the Labour Party claims over its leaders is at least one obstacle to that degradation.'<sup>15</sup> But Miliband well recognized that traditionally such challenges as were initiated by the Labour left to the autonomy of parliamentarians through the assertion of party conference supremacy did not 'encroach very far into the political system', as Mike Rustin was to put it a quarter of a century later. 'The idea of participation in the Labour Party has not extended much beyond the formulation of policy and its legislative embodiment by the State. Policies formulated democratically are to be implemented bureaucratically. . . Labour leftism has been a parliamentary and electoralist version, mainly bound up with electing a Government to carry this out.'<sup>16</sup>

Certainly this was the case with the Bevanites in the 1950s, who were primarily a parliamentary faction, although they did have considerable support in the constituencies. But the Bevanite organizational goals were largely limited to securing the nomination of like-minded parliamentary candidates, and within the parliamentary framework they mainly sought no more than the right of backbench MPs to dissent from the collective solidarity of the Shadow Cabinet or Cabinet. *The May Day Manifesto 1968* clearly expressed the assessment of many socialists who had turned away from the party by the late 1960s and devoted their energies elsewhere:

. . . the traditional Labour Left has been a compromise between socialist objectives and the existing power structure, at the party level. It has made important efforts to reform this party power structure, but with the odds continually against it. . . it becomes of necessity involved in the same kind of machine politics, the same manipulation of committees in the names of thousands, the same confusion of the emptying institutions of the movement with the people in whose names they are conducted, as that of the leaders and managers whom it seeks to affect or displace. **It** is then not only that in the game of manipulation it is always likely to lose; it is also that it is directing energy into the very machines and methods which socialists should fight. . . And this has prevented the outward looking and independent long-term campaign. . .<sup>17</sup>

These words have a strong resonance in the 1980s. And they still bear a vitally important message. But it would be wrong to assimilate the project of the new Labour left with that of what went before or to forget why it emerged despite the failures of previous Labour lefts. It is important to remember that many socialists turned to the Labour Party in the context of the inability of various parties to the left of Labour to make a broad

political advance in the post-1968 era; related to this was the inability of those (including the authors of *May Day Manifesto*) who hoped to develop a new socialist party free of old Leninist centralist practices and insurrectionary pretensions of the Trotskyist parties, to get anything remotely like even a 'preparty formation' off the ground. And many socialists looked again at the Labour Party, not only for these reasons, but because of the development in the Party of a new Labour left which seemed to many to have overcome the weaknesses of the past. Even as staunch a critic of the Labour Party as David Coates was writing by 1975: '... the current Labour Left, unlike any before it, is not simply or even mainly a Parliamentary force. . . For it is a Left which captured control of the Party conference by mobilizing an alliance between left **M.P.s**, constituency activists, and, crucially, the votes of the delegations of the big trade unions. For the first time, the Labour Left activists in Parliament and the constituencies established a firm organizational connection, through their alliance with the leaders of the large unions, with the groundswell of industrial militancy.'<sup>18</sup> Coates was, if anything, portraying this alliance in too strong colours, as we shall see, although he personally remained convinced that the attempt to change the party would fail. But by the late 1970s, many people from the 1960s 'New Left' had joined the party or were at least framing their political activity within the parameters set by the new Labour left. What had happened to change their strategic and tactical perspectives? Simply this: they believed that the odds had changed. And they had—although not quite so favourably as some came to think. The serious socialist critique of Labourism had never been so much about 'parliamentarism versus insurrectionism' as about the *kind* of parliamentary strategy the Labour Party traditionally practised. Nor were most critical accounts of Labourism, such as Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism*, premised on the attribution to it of an ahistorical 'set of "enduring reflexes"', divorced from political conjuncture, as has recently been alleged by Raphael Samuel and Gareth Stedman Jones.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, they were usually based on detailed examinations of the balance of forces in different conjunctures, but tempered by an awareness of the parliamentary elite's autonomy and its enormously important role as an active agency in the construction of political discourse, not just a passive reflection of working class 'history from below'. When the odds changed, socialists who took this view were prepared to look carefully if still critically at the new balance of forces in the party. A good number of them even wanted to join the battle.

The source of the attempt to change the Labour Party is not difficult to trace. It lay in the effects which the Labour governments of 1964–70 had not only on socialists but on Labour's supporters more broadly. Recent evidence has confirmed that a new generation of working-class voters who had become voters in the 1960s were more class conscious than those

who had first entered the electorate before 1929, but less class conscious than those who had become voters over the subsequent thirty years. These new voters largely opted for Labour in the mid-1960s. But it was the same new working-class voters who, in great numbers, deserted the Labour Party in the 1970 election, more than cancelling out a lesser flow to Labour from among middle-class individuals. In that election the Labour Party suffered a decline in electoral support '... by ten times the amount we would have expected on the basis of changes in social structure. It was in that election that Labour first lost a large proportion of voters from among social groups which had previously supported the party. The loss in Labour voters from among these groups indeed continued after that date, but at very much slower rate... when we consider the kind of people who actually reacted against the Labour government of 1966-70... the largest swings away from Labour voting occurred in the solidly working-class strata.'<sup>20</sup> It would thus appear that the critical period for understanding the electoral dealignments that gripped the attention of psephologists with the rise of Thatcherism occurred in fact under the Wilson Government of 1966-70. It was only in 1970 that a substantial portion of the working class vote deserted Labour for the first time, with manual workers' support falling from 69 per cent in 1966 to 58 per cent in 1970 (where it stayed through 1974, and then fell further in 1979 to 50 per cent after another experience of Labour Government). As Mark Frankland has put it:

The Parliament elected in 1966 provided the first Labour majority in fifteen years that was large enough to have a chance to build upon the achievements of 1945-50. The Parliament of 1966 thus provided the first opportunity for young voters to become disillusioned with the prospects for a socialist Britain. The same election will also have provided the first opportunity in fifteen years for the party to prove to potential supporters from middle-class backgrounds that it was content to govern a mixed society. The latter objective was the one Harold Wilson espoused. Paradoxically, his very success in achieving this objective may have been what cost the party so much support among members of the working class. Young voters may have ceased to see any class difference between the parties during this period, and so become responsive to appeals that were not class-based."

Of course the Wilson government had no 'success' in *actually* governing a 'mixed society'. Indeed, the proof it provided that **it was** content to do no more than try to do so, *and the fact that it failed so miserably in the attempt* was no doubt its—and Labour's subsequent—electoral undoing. From this point on, Labour had to prove *anew* that conscious class identity in politics, at least as reflected in support for a mass party associated with the labour movement, was relevant to a large part of its own constituency. And it was hardly surprising that a great many of the activists who stayed with the party through this *débâcle* (and even more who subsequently

joined it in the 1970s) insisted that Labour could only recover if it adopted a broad range of policies of direct and manifest benefit to working people and also *provided a new popular socialist practice so as to make it a relevant basis for political identification and distinguished itself from the other parties thereby.*

There were two distinct extra-parliamentary forces in the party which converged to initiate the attempt to change the Labour Party after the 1970 defeat. The first was composed of left-wing trade union activists which reflected the radical stream of working-class tradition and catalysed the industrial militancy of the time. The second was composed of an amalgam of old and new socialist party activists who stayed with the party or joined it in the early 1970s rather than having moved toward, or at least stayed long with, the revolutionary groups spawned in the late 1960s. They were quite distinctly not Maoists (as in Italy and France), by no means were most of them middle-class 'Poly-Trots' or organized entrists, and many of them were as 'organic' to the working class as Labour Party intellectuals had ever been; that is, their social origins were often working class; they often were active members in, or at least had close ties with, a union (increasingly white collar or public sector); and their political base lay in the working-class communities from which they had sprung or in which they participated as community, as well as Party, activists.

The passage of the British trade union movement from the **deeply**-ingrained defensiveness of the post-1926 General strike era (subsequently reinforced by the Cold War) to the militancy of the 1960s and 1970s took on many facets. But not least important was the effectiveness of a new alliance between the Labour and Marxist (especially Communist) left that became increasingly visible in challenging the predominance of the **right**-wing union bureaucracy. If anything laid the basis for the Labour Party's ending of its blacklist of 'Proscribed Organizations' that symbolized the party's partial opening in the 1970s to old and new socialist currents, it was the preliminary development of this 'broad left' in the unions. And in the face of the disappointments of the Labour Government, there was a marked shift in the attitudes of union delegations at party conferences. Massive union votes for radical policy resolutions opposed by the party leadership from this point forward became a common phenomenon, and by 1979-80 it was to extend to sufficient support to see through the constitutional changes designed to limit the autonomy of the parliamentary party. As we shall see, the priority which even the left-wing union leadership continued to attach to securing that 'real partnership' between the union and party elites which Wilson had promised but not delivered on, set real limits to the project of the new Labour left. Nevertheless, throughout the 1970s the general impact of a changed climate in the union movement on the party was that it produced far greater tolerance for dissent than the parliamentary leadership would have been content

to allow. And this was to have important implications for the role that a new generation of activists in the constituency parties was able to play.

By the end of the 1966–70 Labour Government, it was obvious that the Labour Party was in the throes of a severe membership crisis, which only the determination of union leaders to sustain the block membership affiliations of the unions helped to conceal. It is by no means clear that until the experience of the mid-to-late 1960s the Labour Party was in worse membership trouble than other European social democratic parties. Only the Swedish and Austrian parties showed an ability to maintain a significantly higher ratio of party membership to the total electorate throughout the post-war era.<sup>22</sup> But during the term of the first Wilson government individual party membership fell again by another 150,000. With regard to the party's membership crisis, as with its electoral crisis, it is obviously again the experience of the Labour Government in the 1960s that is crucial. As Seyd and Minkin put it: '... the greatest depletion took place in 1966–70, during the Wilson government. . . A combination of social change, neglect and political disillusionment almost destroyed the Labour Party as a mass party. In terms of ward and committee attendance—and electoral work—activity was the lowest in individual memory.'<sup>23</sup>

This decline in Labour Party membership certainly did not mean a decline in political activism in Britain. On the contrary there was a virtual explosion of extra-parliamentary activity at national and local level. Nor, it must be said, was the initial alienation of a new radical political generation entirely self-imposed. Studies of constituency parties through the 1950s and 1960s invariably show a marked exclusionary practice, particularly *vis-à-vis* left-wing activists. This was apart from the steady stream of expulsions that ran through the period. As John Palmer (who was later to play a critical role on the Greater London Councils' Enterprise Board) put it at a debate at the 1969 conference with Tribune MPs on the question of socialists working within the party: 'Whether you're in or out—that's largely a question of whether you're allowed to be in or

It was the massive defeats suffered by the Labour Party in the 1967 and 1968 local government elections which laid the basis for a new generation of activists to join and have an effect within the party. These defeats had undermined severely the domination of the old right-wing exclusionary cliques that had run many local party wards and branches on the basis of a small and passive membership since their power had been based on the ability of the local machine to manipulate patronage and traditional class loyalties into large electoral majorities and the safe control of their councils. As David Blunkett, who was elected to Sheffield City Council while still a student in 1970, put it: 'Sheffield was more towards the traditional right while I was growing up—Roy Hattersley was on the

Council—but gradually in the late 1960s began to swing to the left. Labour lost power in the council in 1968, [the first time since 1932-L.P.] , just for a year, but that year was traumatic. It began a shift in attitudes as well as politics.<sup>25</sup>

A discernible drift towards joining the Labour Party could be seen in the early 1970s, especially among young community activists. The experience of the twelve Community Development Project teams set up under Home Office auspices in 1969 is often cited as indicative. Their inter-project report in 1974 revealed that they had moved from the social pathology approach that had led the Labour Government to call them into existence in 1969 towards an 'assumption that social problems arise from a fundamental conflict of interests between groups or classes in society. The problems are defined mainly in terms of inequalities in the distribution of power and the focus of change is thus on the centres of organized power (both private and public). The main tactic is organization and raising levels of consciousness.'<sup>26</sup> Most of them came to share Cynthia Cockburn's view that "'Community" belongs to capital': that participatory democracy if conceived 'apart from the arena of conflict between the dominant and the exploited class' would become 'a tournament between small groups more closely related to each other: within the working class and its near neighbours. . . they shake out as tenants, mothers, ratepayers, teenage youth, house owners, swimming enthusiasts and squatters. All are asked to compete and defend their special interests against each other, while the class with real power remains untouched and out of earshot.'<sup>27</sup> This did not mean that they gave up on the local state; on the contrary they saw it increasingly in terms of 'class struggles in the field of reproduction' and attempted to connect their local activities with the struggle to transform the Labour Party and through it the state at the national level.

There was thus a marked change through the 1970s on the part of the '1968 generation' in their attitude to working within the Labour Party and the broader labour movement. If there was one common ideological theme that constantly resurfaced among the new activists once they joined the party, it was their strong opposition to what Blunkett identified as 'the belief in paternalistic, parliamentary change' within the Labour Party:

We have to persuade those who are still living in the 1950s and 1960s that the way forward is to commit people from the bottom up in a jigsaw—a jigsaw that doesn't ignore national and international parameters, but relates to them. This can make it possible to mobilise people in every sense of the word at the local level, in their work, their community activity, and their commitment to the collective approach. . . This can only be done from the local level, because you do have to fire people's imagination and commitment. They do have to have an alternative vision of the world, if you are going to overcome the obstacles. The idea that legislative paternalism is going to be successful has been discredited so many times that it is amazing that anyone in Parliament still believes it.<sup>28</sup>

Cynthia Cockburn found a similar attitude among the radical new activists (which included Ken Livingstone) in the **Norwood** local party in Lambeth in the early 1970s. They differed from traditional Labour practice in having 'a more powerful and intrusive relationship with local popular organizations than other Labour parties' and they were active in recruiting and fund-raising for propaganda. The agent told her that 'We get our councillors active quickly in new street groups and tenant associations as they emerge.' Cockburn concluded that 'a relatively dynamic party. . . could afford to "use" local activists with a support base in tenant associations, etc., to curb the strength of the **councillors**'.<sup>39</sup> This orientation to politics laid the basis for the more visible 'municipal socialism' of the 1980s, the central orientation of which, as a recent book on the experience of the Greater London Council has articulated it, was to use the resources of the state 'to extend effective democracy beyond the political franchise to increase democratic control over the economy and economic policy'. The object of the exercise was for political leaders, even, indeed especially, from within state, not just to respond to voter expectations, but to centre their political practice around 'raising expectations, encouraging people to make demands, to organize and to have confidence in their dealings with the government they pay rates and taxes for. . .' This was 'an end in itself, as well as a way of working on economic policy' and it was premised on the notion that 'where popular initiative and control grew, there was far more change than elsewhere'. The role of political leadership, as articulated by these new activists, was to create a constituency which would in turn pressure *them* to produce more effective policy: 'If that pressure had increased, if in a sense that constituency had turned on them and forced them to be much more responsive, then **many** of them would have felt they had **succeeded**.'<sup>40</sup>

It is crucial to understand this orientation to politics on the part of the activists who composed the new Labour left if we are to understand what the attempt to change the Labour Party was **all** about at the national level. A myth has grown up, sponsored in large part by Labour's parliamentary elite itself, that the internal party disputes over the accountability of **MPs** represented nothing other than a battle conducted within a 'hermetically sealed train' by orthodox socialists wholly unconcerned with the issue of developing popular support outside the party. The truth is actually otherwise. It was **the new** activists who recognized, on the basis of the experience with the Labour Government of the 1960s and 1970s, that the traditional loyalties underlying Labour support were fraying severely and that the only way to remedy this was not to attempt to reassert old 'parliamentary paternalism' of a social democratic welfare state in crisis, but to turn the party into an agency of social and political mobilization. To be able to practise the kind of politics which eventually yielded fruit in the new municipal socialism in the early 1980s, these activists had to engage in

considerable intraparty conflict against the old guard at the local level. Their determination to see this through was a sign of their seriousness, of a recognition that a change of leadership was a condition of effecting the new kind of politics. A similar consideration determined the practice of the new Labour left at the national level.

### *Bennism*

By the early 1970s the politics of the new local activists was still relatively inchoate and they had not yet thrown up any nationally recognized leaders or distinct organizational space within the party. If there is one single departure one can point to in this conjuncture, which more than any other signalled the clear initiation of the project of the new Labour left, it lies in a series of speeches made by Tony Benn in the early 1970s. These speeches displayed a depth of analysis and strategic perspective uncharacteristic of active politicians, but at the same time they manifestly reflected the attitudes and activities then current among a new generation of political and industrial activists. Benn had always been an iconoclast among both the traditional right and left groupings of the parliamentary party, a radical liberal rather than a radical socialist. But after his experience in the first Wilson Governments, he came to articulate the goals involved in changing the Labour Party with greater clarity (and as it turned out with greater commitment) than any leading party figure had ever done. It was not through his espousal of more state intervention or of 'clause four' that Benn had emerged as the spokesperson of these new activists. It was in his understanding of the limits of 'parliamentary paternalism', in his rejection of it, and in the alternative modes of political practice he tried to put on the agenda that he made his mark as 'the prominent voice' of the new Labour left.<sup>31</sup>

Benn's starting point in these speeches was the extra-parliamentary militancy of so many new activists at the time and the meaning it bore for democracy. He was convinced that this had been triggered not only by the heightened expectations produced by rising incomes and collective bargaining strength, post-war capitalist boom, but also by higher levels of education and training which had improved people's analytical capacities, and by the mass media revolution which gave people an unprecedented amount of information about current affairs and exposure to alternative analyses of events. He repeatedly pointed to 'the thousands of . . . pressure groups or action groups [that] have come into existence: community associations, amenity groups, shop steward's movements, consumer societies, educational campaigns, organizations to help the old, the homeless, the sick, the poor or under-developed societies, militant communal organizations, student power, noise abatement societies. . .'. He saw in them 'a most important expression of human activity based on issues rather than traditional political loyalties, and [they] are often seen

as more attractive, relevant and effective by new citizens than working through the party system'. But he recognized at the same time that this was only one side of the picture. He took very seriously what Heath's 'Selsdon Man' presaged, and was not wont to portray it as a throwback to an earlier type of conservatism, as were most Labour Party spokesmen on the left as well as the right. A decade later some of those commentators who discerned in Thatcher a new authoritarian populism would insistently criticize the new Labour left and Benn himself for failing to recognize its appeal. But as early as 1970 Benn in fact had anticipated them. He warned of an:

alternative philosophy of government, now emerging everywhere on the right, [taking] as the starting point of its analysis that modern society depends on good management and that the cost of breakdowns in the system is so great that they really cannot be tolerated and that legislation to enforce greater and more effective discipline must now take priority over other issues. The new citizen is to be won over to an acceptance of this by promising him greater freedom from government, just as big business is to be promised lower taxes and less intervention and thus to be retained as a rich and powerful ally. But this new freedom to be enjoyed by big business means that it can then control the new citizen at the very same time as Government reduces its protection for him.<sup>22</sup>

This was a most serious reaction, Benn contended, to a situation where people were showing that by banding together collectively in a myriad of new organizations with clear objectives they could win surprising victories on given issues against large and centralized corporations and governments which were increasingly vulnerable to dislocations. The locus of decision-making power still remained in place in these 'lumbering monoliths', however, and the perpetuation of their power, increasingly enveloped with a philosophy of less state regulation of the economy but more discipline over an obstreperous citizenry, remained at the same time also intimately bound up with the traditional structures of parliamentarism:

If the people have so much potential power why do those who enjoy privileges seem to be able to hold on to them so easily? The awful truth is this: that it is outdated concepts of parliamentary democracy accepted by too many political leaders in Parliament and on Local Authorities, which have been a major obstacle. . . For too many modern political leaders have inherited an aristocratic view of parliament and their role in it. . . This philosophy explains why political leaders often seem to be telling us two things: first—'there is nothing you have to do except vote for us'; and second—'If you do vote for us, we can solve your problems'. Both these statements are absolutely and demonstrably false. . . A real leader will actually welcome the chance to give way to the forces that he has encouraged and mobilised by a process of education and persuasion. Legislation is thus the last process in a campaign for change. . . The people must be helped to understand that they will make little progress unless they are more politically self-reliant and are prepared to organize with others, nearest to them where they work and where they live, to achieve what they want.<sup>23</sup>

It is important to remember that Benn continued to believe 'passionately' in parliamentary democracy, insisting that all the great achievements of the left had come about by pressures from below which made 'the parliamentary system serve the people rather than the vanity of the Parliamentarians'. He was convinced that 'the debate between extra-parliamentary violence versus parliamentarism. . . is highly diversionary'. Where there was no route to democratic change there was a moral right to revolt, but where democratic popular organization and parliamentary change were not prohibited, socialist strategies could not pretend these were ephemeral, and if they did this reflected 'the pessimism of the ultra-left' which he refused to share because it served to aid the right in convincing the working class 'that whatever they did, they couldn't win'. A socialist government arriving in power through a coup would not forestall the necessity of having public support: 'when the crunch came. . . You would be easily overturned, because the subversion of international finance will be brought to bear with even more zest, with even more public support, if you came to power illegally. . . My criticism of those who call themselves revolutionaries is that they speak as though reform had been tried and failed. Reform hasn't been tried. . . I don't think there are any real revolutionaries in Britain. There may be dreamers, but there is nobody on the left who is actually planning and preparing themselves on the assumption that the transfer of power will come by *revolution*.'<sup>34</sup>

Nevertheless, Benn's central point was that if the Labour Party reacted defensively or with hostility to the new organizational activism that had emerged outside the party, the party would become obsolescent. 'I see it as our business so to reconstruct the Labour Party so that a Labour government will never rule again but will try to create the conditions under which it is able to act as the natural partner of a people, who really mean something more than we thought they did, when they ask for *self-government*.'<sup>35</sup> If most of the recent progressive forces had developed outside the party this had much to do with the fact that the party's 'internal democracy is also riddled with the same aristocratic ideas as deface our national democracy'. He articulated at this time many of the dimensions of reform that later became so familiar: the selection process for parliamentary candidates, the electoral base of the Leader and Deputy Leader, the accountability of Cabinet members, **MPs**, local Labour Groups and Councillors, and trade union delegations. It was 'not on narrow and legalistic constitutional grounds' that these issues had to be taken up, but in terms of their contribution to fostering a much broader and profound change in the party's orientation.

Tony Benn had by the early 1970s convinced himself, and certainly convinced many of those who came into the party after having rejected it in the 1960s, that 'the public will become very interested if they think we are ready to criticise ourselves and really want to make ourselves and

British politics more democratic', and if it initiated 'a period of intense public discussion about the nature of Parliamentary democracy and the nature of Party democracy. . . . If it is thought they are too difficult, or too dangerous or too divisive to embark on this debate I fear we shall miss a great opportunity.' If the party just devoted itself to 'more research to produce detailed policies which will win back public confidence in our capacity to run a modified capitalism', it would entirely mistake the reasons it lost the 1970 election. This defeat was very largely bound up, in his view, with the party's concentration 'from the role of Government to the exclusion of the part that the people themselves could play in solving their own problems'. When Benn coined the phrase in 1972 'a fundamental shift in the balance of wealth and power in favour of working people and their families' he was in his own mind putting the stress on power and meant by it much more than a shift in power from capital to the state. With a characteristic optimism that inspired many new activists but maddened many others, Benn believed that the debate he was calling for 'is more likely to unite than divide the party—by helping it to see its way forward to a new broader interpretation of modern popular democratic socialism'. But he admitted that whether he was right or wrong in this judgement would depend on whether the themes the new Labour left were trying to develop would 'command general support in the movement' and he warned that if the party did not face the issue of democracy directly it would find itself in a situation where other less salient differences within the party and the unions would emerge and further weaken people's confidence in the Labour Party and 'the trend to the right would continue'.<sup>36</sup>

It can readily be seen that the new Labour left differed in many ways from traditional left Labourism. The old Labour left was itself a product of the victory of 1945 and took largely for granted the near **majoritarian** (always over 40 per cent) electoral support that sustained the party right through the defeats of the 1950s. The new Labour left, by contrast, was a product of the electoral and membership crisis that surfaced during the 1964–70 Labour Governments. **Bevanism** was mainly a parliamentary tendency that drew support from the old class identities and socialist consciousnesses in the constituencies; **Bennism** was more an expression of the emergence of a new generation of community activists that understood that class identity and socialist consciousness had to be reconstructed. The Bevanites' socialism was epitomised by 'parliamentary paternalism': it wanted to extend the scope of nationalization and the welfare state via legislative enactment and benign bureaucratic administration: and it looked to the party conference as a means of sustaining that minority group of parliamentarians who would defend such an orientation at Westminster. The new Labour left's socialism was inflected towards the participationism of 1968: it wanted to extend the public sphere but to the

end of deploying the resources of the state to empower people in their local and industrial communities and in their pursuit of 'issue politics'; and it looked to the party conference as a means, not only of equipping socialist parliamentarians with socialist policies at Westminster, but of securing the accountability of parliamentarians to party activists and even more broadly of securing a redefinition of the general role of party and parliamentary political leadership.

The old and new lefts also had different understandings of class and class struggle and the meaning it bore for party and state. The old left saw the working class in more homogeneous terms and its party political project depended on a displacement of the stultifying right-wing union bureaucracy's representation of that class in the party and its replacement by left-wing union leaders who would combine with the Bevanites in Parliament to challenge the revisionists' dominance over the party. The new left saw the working class as anything but homogeneous, and although it also depended on the block vote of left-wing union delegations at party conference, its party political project involved also trying to secure space for autonomous women's and blacks' representation in the party as well as pushing for the establishment of workplace party branches. (This was in large part a generational difference, but not entirely so: the tensions that existed between the new left activists in the party and Militant had much to do with the latter's orthodox view of the homogeneity of the class and its hostility to autonomous women's and blacks' representation.) As for the relationship between class struggle and the state, a divergence in orientations was no less remarkable. **Bevan's** famous last speech in the House of Commons (which Harold Wilson was fond of quoting) was a lament on the difficulty of persuading working people to make sacrifices so that state economic planning might lay the basis for economic growth, a lament that saw industrial militancy as a syndicalist expression of a failure of the needs of working people to be expressed in Parliament. The new Labour left tended to look at industrial militancy more from the perspective of its potentiality for an empowerment of workers at the point of production and in the making of industrial policy. This is why Benn's encouragement (in his brief and beleaguered tenure as Minister of Industry in 1974-5) of **workers'** co-ops and the Lucas Aerospace workers' alternate production plan became a beacon for the new Labour left and the model for industrial policy at the GLC in the 1980s.

### *The forces of resistance and the limits of change*

It is one thing for socialists to define and articulate a project for socialist renewal; it is another thing to construct such a project and realize it. And in the latter respect the evolution and the fate of the new Labour left inevitably needs to be understood in terms of the dialectic between its goals and the resistance it faced, not only from those who had ruled the

party through the 1950s and 1960s and continued to do so in the 1970s despite their terrible failure in office, but from the old left as well, whose own role in the party hardly faded from the scene in the 1970s but rather became more and more interwoven with the struggle on both sides.

As before, when the parliamentary party went over to Her Majesty's Official Opposition with their tails between their legs (and with only the partial exception of 1931), the leadership 'team' emerged largely intact—and largely unchastened and unchanged by their electoral defeat. Their political vision right through the 1970s and into the 1980s remained confined to the issue of obtaining trade union wage restraint to smooth a Keynesian management of a capitalist economy under the aegis of an elitist parliamentarism. It was a leadership that remained not only content to try to govern in this fashion but determined to do so. This mentality was perhaps best epitomized by Anthony Crosland, who as the theoretical author of the revisionism of the 1950s was the one leading Labour figure who could really claim any distinction as a strategic and economic thinker. In a Fabian lecture in 1970, he drew an explicit contrast between 'the position today' and the 1950s when in light of full employment and the welfare state 'a fundamental rethinking was required'. There was no need for another such departure in the 1970s, he claimed, 'and the evidence is the lack of any furious ideological ferment within the party'. This astonishing lack of awareness and comprehension of what was already taking place within the party, let alone outside it, was matched by an equal blindness to the deep contradictions that had beset modern capitalism and which were on the verge of ushering in an end to the post-war boom. Even by 1974, when Crosland acknowledged a revival of Marxist economic analysis and prescription (which he insisted, however, was only confined to Britain), he was still convinced that 'if we examine the western world as a whole we cannot detect signs of a new and fundamental crisis. . . full employment is maintained; economic growth continues; world trade expands. . .' The 'one possible exception' to this was Britain, and if this now made him take note of the 'Marxist revival' there, it only confirmed its general irrelevance. This explains the obsession of the old revisionists with Common Market entry. It derived from their belief that riding on the coat-tails of an allegedly crisis-free European capitalism would be a political as well as economic prophylactic for continuing to govern Britain along the lines 'of a clear commitment to the agreed ideals of the 1950s'.<sup>27</sup>

The very success that the National Executive (increasingly reflecting in its composition a shift to both the old and new left among constituency and union activists) had in advancing radical economic policies at party conferences in the early 1970s reflected the enormous vacuum in economic thinking among the parliamentary leadership. Yet it is important to stress that in so far as this turn to the left is understood only in terms of policies that promised a greater extension of the state's role in the

economy, this was not in itself a new phenomenon nor did it address the severity of the party's crisis. The common view that the really significant departure from the norm for the Labour Party in the 1970s concerned the development of such policies is flawed. It was certainly the most visible; it was where the left initially made most inroads amidst the very radical rhetoric that could be heard on all sides at party conferences, but it was not the most salient aspect of what was just then emerging as a challenge to party tradition. The heady debates among socialist economists concerning the ambiguous nature of Planning Agreements, the National Enterprise Board and the import and exchange controls advanced under the Alternative Economic Strategy missed the main point. For in so far as the policy changes were directed at merely electing a Labour Government to carry them through from on high, they portended in themselves little indeed. For they did not by themselves address the central political question of the structural changes in party and parliamentary politics, as well as in the ideological orientations of the leadership, that could open the means to their implementation. The main question was not only whether a Labour Government would have either the will or the courage to go ahead with the enunciated policy once it became clear what else it would involve, but how they could transform their own managerialist practices to mobilizing ones so as to retain their popular mandate even if they could be elected on this basis.

The parliamentary leadership discovered after 1970 that they no longer had the same unchallenged initiative in policy formation within the party as they had in the early 1960s, but they certainly retained the veto power that went with the continuing independence of the parliamentary party and the strength of its appeal to party unity on narrow electoralist grounds. Harold Lever, who was to play an important role in the 1970s in articulating the 'realistic' policy posture of the parliamentary leadership in the face of the radical policies being advanced by NEC and the conference, perhaps expressed the parliamentary leadership's philosophy most clearly:

**Clause four or no clause four, Labour's leadership plainly believes in a mixed economy. . . [it] knows as well as any businessman that an engine which runs on profit cannot be made to run faster without extra fuel. . . For their part, businessmen should show less sensitivity and more sense. It is time they realized that a ringing political slogan is often used as a sop to party diehards or as an anaesthetic while doctrinal surgery is being carried out.<sup>22</sup>**

It was precisely for this reason that it was the bringing the question of the adequacy of the vehicle, not just the adequacy of the policy on to the Labour Party's agenda, that stamped the new Labour left with a truly original and strategically salient mark. By the late 1960s a number of constituency parties were already submitting resolutions and amendments

to Labour Party conferences related to this question. In 1968 there was one calling for a constitutional commission, whose mandate for overcoming the popular 'frustration and apathy to such an extent that democracy itself is endangered' ought to include such changes to encourage full participation in the party by its members as a wider mechanism for the election of the Leader. Another called for disciplinary measures against MPs who 'act against the principles and policies determined by National Conference'.<sup>39</sup> The Wilson Government's consistent flaunting of conference decisions could not but be a central issue at this time. But it was remarkable how many of the speeches at conferences at this time went beyond mere recrimination and raised more strategic concerns. One CLP delegate argued: 'How can we go to the pressure groups and say, "If you join us perhaps we can say to you that your policies will be accepted and implemented?" We cannot.' Unless the participation that had been strangled in the party was renewed, the party itself was no more than an ineffectual pressure group. She insisted that the leadership should not insult the delegates by going back to the old argument about day-to-day decisions having to be made by parliamentary representatives: the delegates from the constituency parties and the trade unions operated and well understood the relationship between them and their Labour Groups, GMCs, and union executives. Jack Jones, the leader of Britain's largest union, the TGWU went further. He argued that if the Party's view of socialism were to be made relevant to 'the things that were worrying ordinary people today' this involved going back to the social ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange as 'the essential base—and I mean Clause Four'. But 'in order to achieve that we have got to start to build genuine democracy in Britain instead of the sham democracy which exists at the present time. . . we have a great barrier of custom and practice in our Parliament which acts as a keep out notice to the man in the **street**—and too many Parliamentarians love that. . . For too long the idea has been that an M.P. was just a representative, and not a delegate. That idea had been reinforced with such a snobbish view that decisions have been the exclusive prerogative of a few, and in so many cases the M.P. has not even been a representative.' The issue, he insisted, was not only that of eliminating the House of Lords and making MPs accountable to CLPs: to meet the demands that citizens' groups by the dozens were making on the corridors of power, it would be necessary to set up such things as 'representative conferences' through which MPs would be required continually to consult with community **organizations**.<sup>40</sup>

Given the extent of the underlying crisis, the imperative condition for the success of the new Labour left's strategy was to win over the party quickly so that the kind of outward looking mobilization could be inaugurated. Where this was accomplished in local parties and in the unions, significant changes in the representative role of local councillors and union

officials was registered, although their policies and mobilizing capacities were inevitably highly constrained in so far as a transformation of the party at the national level did not take place. But such a rapid turnabout in the orientation of the parliamentary party was simply not on the cards. The intransigence of the 'parliamentary paternalists' could not defeat the new Labour left, but it could turn its struggle inward and thus deny its potential for effecting the broader strategy it had articulated. Despite the difference in the strategic orientation of the new Labour left from the old, the dilemma outlined by the *May Day* Manifesto still obtained. The problem is simply stated. The new Labour left, with substantial and growing support in the extra-parliamentary party, was trying to get its leadership to develop a socialist strategy, not only in terms of programme but of mobilization. But the preponderant part of the leadership was not interested in developing a socialist strategy; it did not believe in it; it considered it irrelevant, or actually harmful, to the Labour Party's and to Britain's problems. Roy Jenkins told the party conference in the early 1970s that 'socialism is just a slogan'. One local councillor (later an MP closely associated with Benn) retorted that missed the very point that the new activists were trying to make: there was 'a crying need' for the party 'to translate the abstractions of economic control into concepts that people can understand. . . and to translate them in such a way that makes them not just moonshine, but something which is eminently and imminently practical'.<sup>41</sup> The dilemma for the new Labour left, however, was how it could turn the party into a socialist party without purging itself of its leadership—without lopping off its own head, so to speak. This dilemma was reinforced as the PLP, even after the shift to the left in the extra-parliamentary party became unmistakably clear, and even while the Tribune Group of MPs (composed of both old and new left figures) grew to upwards of 70 members, brazenly continued to elect a shadow cabinet dominated by the centre-right through the 1970s and into the 1980s. It was not the fetishization of intra-party democracy, but the attempt to provide an answer to this dilemma that led to the pressures for constitutional reform.

And in this respect, the National Executive of the party, and the union-dominated Conference Arrangements Committee, was much less ready to be moved than on radical policy resolutions. The issue of constitutional reform was largely kept off the agenda of the party conference in the early 1970s and thereafter any resolution of it was postponed until after the 1979 election. A critical role in this respect was played by the old parliamentary left itself, above all by its leading spokesman, Michael Foot. The main thrust of most of the Tribune MPs after the 1970 election defeat was to raise again the issue of public ownership. They returned, in other words, to reviving the terms of the stale debate over more or less nationalization. Michael Foot wrote that 'what is needed is a strong shift leftwards. . . the

Party in Parliament ought to start that process, but if it won't the party conference will have to do it for **them**'.<sup>42</sup> But in so far as the Tribune MPs were determined to make the key issue that of more public ownership, the question was not about the numbers of firms targeted for public ownership in conference resolutions, but of how Foot's promise that the conference would force the PLP to 'do it' could be realized.

A Tribune Group pamphlet in **1972** did take up the issue of the accountability of Labour representatives at all **levels**,<sup>43</sup> but Foot's name was conspicuous by its absence from the list of **38** MPs who endorsed the pamphlet. Indeed, Foot was already in the process of acting as a buffer for the parliamentary leadership. He strongly opposed an inquest after **1970** into the mistakes of the Labour Government. As he explained in **1972**: 'It was a dangerous moment. The Left within the Labour Party could have demanded a grand inquest on all the delinquencies of **1964-70**, could have mounted a furious attack on the **leadership**'.<sup>44</sup> From **1972**, when he became Shadow Leader of the House and was elected to the NEC at the top of the constituency section, his role became that of recementing the frayed bonds of trust among and between the parliamentary and trade union elites. His primary goal was to avoid dissension within the party so as to present a united parliamentary face against Heath's Government, which he saw then in much the same terms as he later saw Thatcher's, as the 'most hard-faced Conservative Government since Neville Chamberlain', rather than as Benn saw it, as presaging a far more populist and hence dangerous new conservatism. The overarching concern of Foot (and later, of his annointed successor, Kinnock) with party unity determined that he would play a dampening and ultimately oppositional role to the forces trying to change the party. In so far as his shadow cabinet parliamentary colleagues were as opposed to the radical economic policies as they were to broader changes in the party, the logic of his position led him by **1973** to supporting Wilson in making as vague as possible the leadership's commitments to party conference in this regard. A year later, after Labour had stumbled back into office in the wake of Heath's confrontation with the unions, he came to play a key role in the Cabinet against Benn's attempt to mobilize popular support for and implement those policies as Minister of Industry. Much of this took place behind the scenes in closed NEC and cabinet meetings, however, and this contributed to Foot's retaining the loyalty of many constituency party activists. The centre-right parliamentarians could not obtain such support on their own; Foot was a critical intermediary, therefore, and the role he played was of real consequence to slowing the progress of the new Labour left in the extra-parliamentary party.

Of even greater **conséquence** was the fact that Foot enjoyed the support of, and in turn had a strong political influence on, the left-wing union leadership. Despite the shift to the left in the unions, the actual political

meaning of this for the Labour Party remained almost as ambiguous in socialist terms as the political meaning of the party's vast trade union membership had ever been. The number of indirectly affiliated union members to the party had doubled from 2,500,000 to almost 5 million with the 1945 Government's introduction of the provision for trade unionists having individually to 'contract out' of paying a political levy as part of their dues. It then stayed virtually constant right through to the mid-1970s hovering around five-and-a-half million (thereafter rising to near six million as union membership in the late 1970s grew apace). But while this made the union financial clout in the party and their block votes at party conferences ever more important, this still only reflected the steadiness of the unions' organizational link with the party and concealed any trends in trade union membership support for or activity in the party. In the late 1960s, it was common to see reports of branches voting to disaffiliate from the party, which were always explained in terms of the actions of the Labour Government. Union journals and conferences were replete with appeals from leaders to their members and branches not to show their displeasure in this negative fashion. They tried to protect Labour by calling for workers to vote for it and above all by continuing to finance the party, but they entered into conflict with the Labour Government through 'direct action' industrial militancy. It was a mark of their political desperation.

Some of the union's anger was directed at trade union-sponsored MPs who had supported the Government's policies, and, as we have seen, a deeper concern with the nature of parliamentary representation was raised at this time by Jack Jones. Although this was indeed a portent of the eventual support the left-wing unions were to give to the constitutional changes, the fact that this support took until after the 1979 election defeat to materialize in sufficient numbers to see the reforms through was taken by many on the new Labour left as a sad indication of just how slowly the old union cart horse moves. But the main reason for this, in fact, was that democratization never really stood at the forefront of even the left-wing union's political approach to resolving their difficulties with the party leadership. They saw the main way forward primarily in terms of insisting on a more effective 'elite accommodation' between the industrial and parliamentary leadership. This insistence, most strongly voiced by Jack Jones himself, came to be institutionalized in the 'social contract' and in the creation in January 1972 of the TUC-Labour Party Liaison Committee which became from then on the effective final arbiter of party policy (although, as the Labour Government of 1974-79 showed, the effective final arbiter of Labour Government policy remained the Treasury). It was also this insistence which also gave Michael Foot his new prominence in the Labour leadership. Foot's retention of the politically crucial role of intermediary with the left union leadership into the 1980s,

alongside the high personal regard for him in the constituencies, proved crucial to slowing, and ultimately to defeating, the attempt to change the Labour Party.

There were two further elements that played an important role in the complex array of forces that determined this outcome. One of these was located deep in the bowels of the party organization—its permanent officials; the other was external to the party but had a constant impact upon it—the British media. The new Labour left's strategy of opening the party to new currents of community and issue politics and turning it outward toward socialist education and mobilization obviously required a major reform of party organization. This especially applied to the role of its agents and regional organizers who usually played a policing role against left-wing influence in the constituencies. Yet despite the NEC's selection of General Secretaries after 1972 who were not only close to the Tribune left, but broadly sympathetic with the new Labour left's project, they proved unable to escape the traditional role of the General Secretary as a protective buffer between the party conference and the parliamentary leadership. This involved calling for tolerance on all sides, but increasingly striving for a form of party unity that would maintain stability as far as possible. This meant deflecting the thrust of constitutional change, but no less important it also meant setting aside any serious consideration of the sweeping changes that were needed in the party's organization. While many of the most creative new left activists increasingly found employment with left-led Labour Councils or unions, the one place where they were most needed for the change in the party to succeed—in the party's national organization—was the place where they were least likely to be hired. To have done so would have inflamed even further the party leadership. And as the centre-right parliamentarians responded to challenges in the constituencies to deselected anti-socialist MPs with a vociferous campaign against alleged 'extremists' in the party, the General Secretaries were drawn into appeasing this by overseeing right-wing inspired party inquiries into Militant's operation as an organized entrism group in the party.

Militant was not the main source of the intra-party conflict and everyone knew it. It was an easy target, as a sectarian cadre organization, which the right in the party, and increasingly the forces that grouped around Foot, employed to taint the much broader and non-sectarian new Labour left in the party. Roy Hattersley was, for once, candid about this at the climax of the intra-party crisis in 1981: 'The problem is not Militant, about whom we always talk, because Militant is so easily identifiable and so unpleasant that most people are prepared to squash it. . . the problem is those organizations which talk the language of democratic socialism'.<sup>45</sup> The National Executive after 1970 tried to establish a more tolerant and open party to socialist ideas and currents, but their attempt to mollify the right in the party by going along with the attack on Militant, had the

effect of fanning the flames, as the right and their supporters in the media, constantly upped the ante to attack radical local government leaders, the advocates of feminist reforms and of black sections in the party, let alone Marxists of any stripe in the party, as 'kindred pestilences' (Michael Foot's own unfortunate phrase).<sup>46</sup> In the name of party unity against the capitalist forces of reaction, the forces of party conservatism and of compromise fed the media in creating a powerful public impression that the main source of anti-democratic pressures in Britain lay inside the Labour Party. What this amounted to was a decade-long exercise in establishing the illegitimacy, not only of Militant, but of the democratic aspirations and thrust of the new Labour left.

The role of the media had hardly been ignored by the new Labour left, especially by Benn, who took the view as early as 1973 that the 'bias of the media against working people' could no longer be ignored by the party leadership as a long-term strategic issue.<sup>47</sup> The main point was not about the media's treatment of party policies and Labour leaders had enough access to the media so they 'are able to look after themselves'. Labour's problem with the media indeed went much deeper and ultimately rested on the fact that the media closed off the possibility of revealing what broad popular support might exist or be developed for the social forces that underlay radical change. 'The greatest complaint against the media is that its power is used to dominate the community, that it excludes ordinary people and that it is not accountable in any way, save the crude test of market success. The main victims are the trade unions whose motives are regularly distorted, whose members are insulted and ignored, and who are presented in a way that denies them the opportunity to describe their work and interests properly.' Government censorship would be 'totally wrong and unacceptable'; and so would industrial action 'arbitrarily exercised by anyone in the production chain who took exception to something that was being printed and transmitted'. What he proposed was that the unions should demand a Code of Conduct be agreed with the broadcasting media for equality of treatment in the handling of industrial disputes and they should demand that the TUC be allocated a certain number of hours per year, like the parties, to present their policies and explain the position of member unions. More fundamentally, unions in the media, who concentrated too narrowly on the traditional issues of collective bargaining, ought to be encouraged to form a federation and bargain for the establishment in each newspaper or broadcasting unit of a council, elected by the whole labour force, which would be responsible for receiving, discussing and issuing published reports on complaints against bias or victimization of journalists for what they had said or written. This would not encumber the daily process of producing news, but 'accountability afterwards is perfectly practicable and would influence future action'. It was a typical 'Bennite' proposal, concentrating

less on what a Labour Government could do legislatively to counter media bias, but on what it could do to encourage those directly involved to act in a political and strategic way themselves.

For a party with a very different leadership and with less of an institutionalized division of labour between political and industrial action, this kind of thinking might have been very potent strategically. For the Labour Party, it ran directly against the grain, and was in fact used opportunistically by the centre-right Labour parliamentarians to discredit Benn. Benn was certainly highly media-conscious—he has always seemed to believe that the most dangerous thing for his style of political leadership was to be ignored by the press. This may have been a fatal error, since by the early 1970s the media already began treating 'Bennism' as a metaphor not only for a mendacious ultra-leftism, but for a 'loony' brand thereof: 'Benn' became a four-letter word which fitted comfortably into a single column in the largest type-face and symbolised the leftward shift in the party. "Bennery" was coined and assumed to be synonymous with demagoguery, populism, public ownership, syndicalism and workers' control. Yet the prejudicial approach toward his often tentative, exploratory, restless views blinded many to what he was seeking.<sup>48</sup> The British press not only demonstrated in this respect its partisan guardianship of a narrow interpretation of parliamentary democracy and its extreme defensiveness against Benn's criticisms of the systemic structural biases of the media. It also showed that when it came to discrediting prominent political dissidents—and especially those who were 'traitors to their class'—by labelling them as psychologically unstable, they could teach the Soviets a thing or two. Holding the 'fool' up to public ridicule has always been an effective alternative means of exclusion to that of institutional incarceration. The social democrats in the parliamentary party not only played up to this grotesque fault in the primary organs of opinion formation—they actually fed it and encouraged it, using their close relations with mainstream journalists as a means of demonstrating the inherent unpopularity of the new Labour left's ideas and thus bringing pressure on the party to resist and defeat them. Yet at the same time their hands trembled, as they opened their copies of *The Times* or even *The Guardian*, lest they discover another example of what Benn had allegedly said the night before that might have tarnished their respectability. ('Was Benn speaking for the Labour Party?' was the question the press was always implicitly and often explicitly asking.) Their solution to this contradiction was increasingly to use the media as a powerful weapon on their side in the intra-party debate. Unless 'Bennery' was defeated, the party would also suffer the same fate of not being treated seriously by received opinion. As is often the case with contradictions, this produced less a resolution of the problem (since 'Bennism' *did* have a strong base in the party) than a vicious circle.

But it also posed a real contradiction for Benn, and given his role as **the**

most prominent spokesperson of the new Labour left, for the whole project of changing the Labour Party. He kept an annual tally of the hundreds of meetings at which he spoke, and it seemed that he partly judged his success as a politician in terms of how extensively his accompanying press releases were taken up by the media nationally. This was consistent with the role of motivator and educator, rather than legislator and decision-maker, that he now ascribed to political leadership. Many on the new Labour left were not uncritical of this approach, feeling that he might well spend less time delivering speeches and preparing press releases and more time organizing. It was indeed remarkable that he did not through the 1970s try to establish around himself a disciplined intra-party faction. He still did not join the Tribune Group (although they put him on their slate for the PLP's Shadow Cabinet elections from 1970 onwards), and even when the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy formed in 1973, he kept aloof from it. Given that he was burning his bridges with most of the PLP by the positions he was taking, and that Foot was emerging as the trade union voice in the party hierarchy, it is ironic indeed that a sizeable proportion of the old left in the party fell in with and fed media cynicism about Benn's motivations, ascribing them to personal ambition alone—a transparent bid for the party leadership. This especially applies to Foot, who increasingly insisted on treating 'Bennism' almost exclusively in this light, although he had always been scathingly dismissive of the same charges when they were earlier made against Bevan.

In fact, Benn did remarkably little to trim his sails so as to increase his acceptability to the majority of MPs (wherein the choice of the Leader resided until 1981) or even to the majority of union leaders, despite the fact that the unions, together with the MPs, were sure to dominate any electoral college for leadership election of the kind he had advanced as early as 1971. (Addressing the 1972 TUC congress, he had insisted the unions were insufficiently democratic themselves; had made no serious effort to explain their work even to the wives and families of union members, let alone to the broader public; and failed to support enough other movements of legitimate protest by women, the poor and others. All this allowed them to be portrayed as if they 'actively favoured the conservative philosophy of acquisitiveness'. Above all, Benn repeatedly challenged the unions to stop waiting for Labour Governments to install industrial democracy and make this the centre-piece of collective bargaining, including using the strike weapon to achieve it.\*\*) For Benn to have become leader on the basis of the kind of principles he was espousing and the new forces he was encouraging would indeed have given him a mandate for radical transformation of the party. As attached to this goal, on which he never wavered, his leadership ambitions were hardly to his discredit—indeed realizing this ambition probably constituted one crucial ingredient for altering the unfavourable odds against a successful attempt to change

the party. The fact that most of his parliamentary colleagues sought to demean what he was saying and doing by constantly pointing to his leadership aspirations may say more about their own narrow conception of Labour Party politics as a personality contest.

It was in the context of this complex array of pressures against change that party activists increasingly turned towards supporting the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy's attempt to concentrate the intraparty forces for change around winning precise constitutional reforms designed to break the hold of the centre-right parliamentarians over the party. (The catalyst for the formation of the CLPD by an initially small group of activists was Wilson's veto of the NEC's decision in 1973 to specify in the party manifesto that twenty leading manufacturing companies, one of the major banks, and two or three leading insurance companies would be brought into the public domain under the aegis of the NEB. The specification of 25 companies was not aimed at the electorate, but at the leadership, and seen as means of requiring them to comply with the general direction of policy already established by the party conference. Wilson's veto presaged for many activists the trajectory of the Labour Government elected in 1974, and compounded their discomfort at slogging away through two election campaigns in a year for sitting MPs who were in no sense representative of the activists' own political orientations.) During the course of the 1974–79 Government, the activists did not abandon the party in the wake of the Government's showing itself to be primarily accountable to the Treasury and the IMF and to anonymous international financial markets. Rather they mobilized behind the CLPD's proposals for constitutional change, while continuing their work at the local level.

Constituency delegates were traditionally an 'amorphous mass' at party conference and trade union delegates generally met only with their own delegations to decide how they would cast their block votes. By 1979, the CLPD had effected a dramatic change in this pattern both by lobbying constituencies in advance of the conference in relation to the resolutions they advanced, and by bringing union and constituency delegates together at massive meetings on the eve of conference to plan tactics to get those resolutions on the agenda and to secure their passage in the face of opposition from the platform. There is no doubt that most activists saw the constitutional reforms in instrumental terms: taking the election of the leader and deputy leader out of the exclusive hands of MPs and passing it to the party conference would, they expected, mean that Foot and Benn would take the leadership; requiring a competitive reselection process for MPs in their constituencies would at least force MPs generally to be more mindful of their activists' political goals. But the increasing sense of urgency with which they organized to accomplish this, reflected their recognition that the issue of the autonomy of parliamentarians was not just about whether they were free to make decisions inside the state. It was at the

same time about the autonomy the Labour leadership's vaunted position of 'government' at the pinnacle of the state gave them from the task of renewing class identity and undertaking socialist mobilization in the face of an ever more visible and explicit right-wing populist threat. Despite the fact that Labour came to office in 1974 with less than 40 per cent of the vote (37 per cent in the February election and 39 per cent in October) for the first time since the 1920s, Wilson had proclaimed that his third and fourth victories in five successive elections proved that 'Labour is now the natural party of Government.' Most party activists had been far less triumphalist in 1974, and as Labour's electoral fate in 1979 and afterwards was foreshadowed in opinion poll findings and local election defeats during the term of this Government, they appeared ever more strongly placed to force a resolution of the challenge to the party which the new Labour left had raised.

### Breaking *the* Mould?

'Breaking the mould': this was a central motif of political discourse as Britain entered the 1980s. Paradoxically, it applied least of all to the party from which the term itself emanated. The Social Democratic Party which emerged in 1981 out of the Labour Party's conflicts primarily represented an attempt to shift the practices which had actually dominated the Conservative and Labour parties for decades towards the institutional terrain of a new party of the centre, once it became apparent that the two major parties were abandoning, or at least finding it increasingly difficult to sustain, their old political way of life. Thus even if the creation of a new party with some immediate electoral appeal amidst massive media support was itself novel, what this party represented programmatically and ideologically was not a new but a very old political practice.

In so far as 'breaking the mould' was—beyond the most superficial conceptions—the object of party politics, developments in the Conservative and Labour parties really reflected this. Mrs Thatcher's 'market populism' had catalyzed a back-bench, upper-middle class revolt in the Tory party against the Keynesianism and corporatism to which the Heath Government had quickly attempted to return after its own brief flirtation with the individualist 'Selsdon Man' in 1970. The objects of this revolt were almost as much the established Tory defenders of the welfare state, corporatist industrial relations, and Foreign Office pragmatism as anyone else. The fact that Edward Heath's (temporary) individualist appeal in 1970 and the more committed and virulent Thatcherite 'market populist' appeal in 1979 managed to win support among the skilled working class already represented a more decisive rupture with pre-existing electoral and ideological patterns than anything that the SDP subsequently attempted or achieved.

But, as we have seen, the crisis of Keynesianism and corporatism that

produced Thatcherism had also produced another challenge to the mould of British politics. Immediately after the Labour Government's defeat in **1979**, the Labour Party finally had the great debate on democracy that Benn and the new Labour left had called for almost a decade before. The Labour Party now turned inward on itself to fight a battle over the very meaning of socialism and democracy and posed the question, as it had never been posed with such force before in the party's history, of whether a social democratic working-class party like Labour could be adapted into becoming a party directed towards socialist mobilization and change.

Although it scarcely seems credible today, it was only some six years ago that there was a widespread impression inside Britain and out, and ranging over the whole political spectrum, that something approaching a fundamental transformation of the Labour Party was in train. The CLPD's organizing efforts and the parliamentary leadership's cynical manipulation of union loyalties to obtain their support for years of wage restraint, finally yielded sufficient support for the constitutional reforms to have them carried through at party conferences in **1980** and **1981**. A book on *The Battle for the Labour Party*, published shortly after the **1981** party conference, began with these words: 'The Labour Party has undergone cataclysmic change. The power of the traditional leadership has been broken.'" Robert McKenzie, in his last published article before his death, returned to his defence of the British constitution with a new sense of urgency, and criticized the party leadership for paying lip service to the ideal of intra-party democracy and failing to make it clear 'that political parties are unique among political organizations in that their leaders must *escape* control of their followers if they are to fulfill their broader role in the political community'.<sup>31</sup> Those who looked at the question of parliamentary representation from the point of view of the management of the existing social order, and who obfuscated the dominance of capital amidst the 'other interest group volitions and demands' a government had to balance apart from those of its own party activists, were aghast at the rather moderate constitutional reforms the party had effected. Those who looked at it from the point of view of whether socialists could turn the Labour Party towards trying to mobilize a majority constituency in favour of a transition to socialism and marry parliamentary representation with such mobilization so as to effect this peacefully, took heart.

To be sure, observers on the left were generally more sober regarding what had transpired in the Labour Party. They recognized that most social democratic parties (and many bourgeois parties) elected their leaders at conference and required a competitive reselection process for sitting parliamentarians. What mattered was whether the inauguration of these reforms in the Labour Party would sustain the momentum of the new Labour left so that its much broader strategic perspective, as we have outlined it above, now became dominant in the party. This was still to be

tested in Benn's campaign for the deputy leadership under the new electoral college in 1981; in the fate of further proposals for constitutional reform being advanced to open space for enhanced women's and blacks' representation in the party; in the national party's degree of support for the new experiments in municipal socialism; above all, in the kind of leadership they provided for extra-parliamentary struggles against Thatcherism. But it was certainly striking how many on the British left now felt the need to reassess long-standing views on the possibility of changing the party. Ralph Miliband's position perhaps epitomized the views of socialists who had right through the rise of the new Labour left in the 1970s still thought, as he had, that the 'hope of the left to transform the Labour Party was illusory, and that far from representing a short cut to the creation of a mass socialist party in Britain (which has never existed), it was in fact a dead end in which British socialists had been trapped for many decades—in fact since the Labour Party came into being'. Writing in 1983, he was still 'far from convinced that I was mistaken. . . on the most optimistic expectations [the new activists] have a long way to go, with many obstacles in their way. But it is obvious that I underestimated how great was the challenge which the new activists would be able to pose to their leaders; and how limited would be the capacity of those leaders to surmount the challenge. I now take it that the question whether the activists can push matters further and achieve the conquest of the Labour Party is more open than I thought.'<sup>52</sup>

It was in fact less open than he, and many others, thought. The deep intransigence of the bulk of the party leadership even to having the debate, let alone to seriously trying to refashion Labour's conventional interpretation of democracy, proved to be the determining factor in ensuring that the intra-party debate on democracy (which was itself unstoppable) produced not unity but continuing division and abrasiveness on all sides. It had taken over ten years of struggle by the new Labour left to effect two quite moderate constitutional changes. By this time Thatcher was in power and was effecting a counter-revolution against the welfare state. And by this time, as well, before the ink was even dry on Labour's constitutional changes, a counter-revolution was in effect in the party led by those still convinced that reproducing Labour's traditional image as an alternative parliamentary 'team' was the way to restore its ever more severe electoral problems. The balance in the party had temporarily shifted far enough to the left to yield the new Labour left with a momentary victory. But it had not shifted far enough to sustain their momentum in the face of both of these counter-revolutions.

This is not to say that those who came to recognize the novelty and significance of the new Labour left's challenge were mistaken in doing so. Those who, in the debates of the early 1980s, still insisted on the impossibility of changing the Labour Party were indeed proved correct.

But the reasons for this did not primarily lie, as for instance David Coates now tended to insist, on the new Labour left reflecting 'the traditional limits of Left Labourism'.<sup>53</sup> On the contrary, what was so remarkable about the new Labour left, as I have tried to show in this essay, was that in important respects it transcended those limits. On the other hand, the limits of the old Labour left, epitomized by Foot, and of the limits of the union leadership, who still gave top priority to striking a better partnership with the leadership 'next time', were indeed crucial in the defeat of the attempt to change the party. Foot's election as Leader by the **PLP** in **1980** (Callaghan's resignation being timed to avoid the possibility of Benn being elected when the new electoral college came into force) reflected a recognition on the part of enough **MPs** that only a Leader traditionally associated with the parliamentary left could command sufficient support in the unions and constituencies to contain and deflect the new Labour left's momentum. This entailed real costs in policy terms for the centre-right parliamentarians, and those who left to form the **SDP** were not prepared to sustain these costs, since Foot's occupancy of the leadership at least guaranteed that Party policy would finally incorporate unilateral nuclear disarmament. But Foot's continuing commitment to **NATO**, together with the fact that the centre-right continued to dominate shadow cabinet elections, left considerable space for manoeuvre for the vast majority of social democratic parliamentarians who opted to stay with Labour. And their staying was bound up with, and indeed was conditional upon, Foot and later Kinnock proving that the constitutional changes could be contained and rendered innocuous in terms of their implication for the autonomy of the parliamentary party; and relatedly, that the new Labour left could be defeated and marginalized.

What became clear during **1981**, as Foot joined with the centre-right in a campaign in the media against Benn's very decision to put the electoral college to the test by challenging Dennis Healey for the deputy leadership, was that if unity had to be achieved on the basis of realizing the new Labour left's strategic vision, of which the constitutional changes were only a necessary but hardly sufficient part, then there would be no unity. With the Rank and File Mobilizing Committee providing Benn with an organizational cadre for the first time, Benn succeeded in winning the vast majority of the constituency votes. The **RFMC's** political meetings at trade union conferences also marked an important break with traditional boundaries between the two wings of the movement. But the outcome of membership ballots undertaken by a number of unions, where Healey generally did better than Benn, indicated not only the effects of a heavily biased, indeed virtually hysterical, media; it also indicated the costs to the new Labour left of its having devoted its energies to **effect** the intra-party constitutional campaign to the detriment of conducting a broader political campaign. In the end, the trade union vote was narrowly split, while the

PLP vote was overwhelmingly for Healey. It took the abstention of only 19 Tribune MPs, led by Kinnock (who thereby proved his 'trustworthiness' to the centre-right in the party) to defeat Benn. It was a watershed in the attempt to change the party and the centre-right immediately pushed its advantage. A group of centre-right trade unionists which had the year before engineered an important change in the make-up of the TUC General Council now turned their efforts to the party and effected a parallel change in the composition of the NEC, and swept the left from the control of key party committees. At the same time, the right wing in the unions and the PLP, and to some extent Foot himself, led the media in a vociferous public opposition against any attempt in the constituencies to actually **reselect** an MP, against demands by women and blacks for strengthening their representation, and against the **GLC's** 'loony left' municipal socialism.

Right through the intra-party struggle on the constitutional reforms, until early 1981, Labour had run well ahead of Thatcher in the opinion polls. This, together with the elections in France and Greece of parties whose programmes were even more radical than Labour's, and the new Labour left's taking control of the Greater London Council, emboldened the forces for change in the party. But a combination of factors rapidly undermined such confidence. The **SDP's** emergence as the first **media-created** party in Britain's history showed immediate potential for capturing a sizeable portion of Labour's vote; the Falklands war established, on the basis of a recrudescing chauvinism (tragically connived in by Foot himself), Thatcher's image as Britannia incarnate; and the effect of the international capitalist recession, as well as domestic austerity policies, had the effect of reducing inflation, which produced a rise in real wages for those sectors of the working class not immediately touched by the massive rise in unemployment. It suddenly became clear that Thatcherism might not be a temporary interregnum. The new Labour left had long understood that only a long-term campaign of mobilization and education to refashion and reconstruct working class and socialist identities could restore securely Labour's electoral base. But they had also expected that this might still be accomplished through scraping back into state office as Labour had done in 1974 (and was still doing at the local level in the 1980s) and using state resources to empower popular forces. What now became all too clear was that the new Labour left's balancing act, between changing a party fundamentally while relying on an anti-government vote to sustain in the meanwhile the viability of the party's claim to office, was no longer sustainable itself. The choice between a long-term campaign and immediate even if unstable electoral viability became a stark one after 1981. The attempt to change the Labour Party at that point ran up against the most intractable barrier that stands in the way of changing an electoralist party: that is, that trying to change it in as fundamental a way as the new Labour left proposed involves continual, not temporary, **dis-**

unity within it, and a visibly disunified party cannot win elections. And winning elections appeared ever more important if only as a defensive mechanism against the depredations of Thatcherism.

Yet such was the severity of Labour's failure over the previous decades in government as well as in sustaining the party as a counter-hegemonic community, that despite the marginalization of the left at the national level before the **1983** election campaign, and even more so under Kinnock's leadership thereafter, Labour's parliamentary team has failed miserably to restore Labour's electoral fortunes. The one accomplishment that can be claimed is that voiced by Austin Mitchell MP after the **1987** election campaign: 'The Labour Party has now moved back to the middle ground. . . It is not the Labour Party of **1981**. It has reverted to the historic mould.'<sup>14</sup>

If Benn's defeat at the **1981** conference marked the crucial watershed in the attempt to change the party, it was Neil Kinnock's attack on Militant and the National Union of Mineworker's leadership at the **1985** party conference after the miner's strike that marked the patching of the old party mould. The unparalleled support for the miners at the base of the party, in strong contrast with the party leadership's visible lack of enthusiasm (to put it mildly) for the strike, had shown that the struggle within the party was also a struggle about the very nature of the labour movement in Britain. It involved thereby far more than party 'factionalism', but concerned fundamental differences over collective bargaining strategies no less than differences over ideological or constitutional ones. The miners' strike signified an old fact about the Labour Party: that class struggles are not only represented by it or restrained by it, but appear within it and often divide it. And it revealed very clearly what was the most important aspect of the struggle inside the party, i.e., that it concerned the question of whether the Labour Party leadership was to seek office—and conduct itself once in office—on the basis of distancing itself from class struggles, and indeed other popular extra-parliamentary struggles. This was the absolutely central issue raised in the attempt to change the Labour Party.

Neil Kinnock's attack on the NUM and Militant at the **1985** Conference represented, and was *intended* to represent, far more than a distancing of the party from what he derisively called 'the generals of gesture' and 'the tendency tacticians' of the 'hard left'. And it was more than a particularly impassioned assertion of the theme that had brought him to the leadership and governed his behaviour in it, i.e. that the task of winning the next election had to stand as an 'unavoidable and total precondition' over any other consideration. This had all been asserted before, by Foot no less than Kinnock, and it actually had dominated the party's practice since two years before the **1983** election. Kinnock's speech was, above all, a full redeclaration of independence for the parliamentary party. And it was successful because it was premised on four years during which the left had suffered more defeats than victories in the party. Until the **1983**

election, however, particularly as seen in the imaginative and popular initiatives of a number of local Labour councils, the possibility of developing a novel socialist practice which would garner rather than lose votes had by no means been effaced yet in the party. But in the immediate aftermath of the terrible defeat it suffered in the June 1983 general election, most of the Labour Party became as transfixed by a conservative appeal of unity as it was by the demand for change after the 1979 election. The concern with party unity as a possible means of quickly restoring Labour's electoral viability was not surprising given the extent of the defeat, but given the form this unity took it rendered quite secondary any serious attempt to revive the attempt to transform the Labour Party. The popularity of the Kinnock/Hattersley 'dream ticket' at the 1983 Conference, the massive vote at that conference in favour of the Militant expulsions, the marginalization of Tony Benn and the absorption of a large number of his erstwhile supporters into the Kinnock 'team', the election of a shadow cabinet with many new faces but still dominated numerically by the centre-right of the parliamentary party—all this represented a series of severe defeats for those forces which had been at the centre of the thrust for change after 1979. It confirmed the passing of the initiative within the party precisely to those elements, by no means any longer confined to the traditional centre-right, who attributed a great deal of the blame for the election defeat to the process of change having gone 'too far', and who looked to policy 'moderation' as the basis for both the new unity and for electoral success.

The miners' strike temporarily threw this tack off course. On its success depended, as the party leadership wrung their hands on the side-lines, not only the fate of the mining communities, but the regaining of the initiative by the new Labour left in the party. The Thatcher Government's 'counter-revolution' against the Keynesian/welfare state had produced such mass unemployment, destitution, alienation and conflict that the maintenance of public order had come to depend, paradoxically in light of the claims of the new Conservatism, not on less state but on more state—and indeed on the most coercive elements of the state. Since the confrontations at the pits, no less than the confrontations in the inner cities, involved important segments of Labour's class and ethnic constituencies, this had brought the Labour Party face to face with the question of whether to counsel moderation on the traditional Labour principles of obeying and respecting the law and the police, or whether to mobilize support for the struggles, including by coming out full square against the government's blatantly coercive tactics and against the bias of the police and the judiciary. This is a wrenching question for a party whose politics is premised on the values of social harmony and moderation. The Labour Party's *raison d'être* has been to hasten a process of gradual reform which it believed was natural and inevitable: it contained no ready made consensus on what to do in

the face of state reaction on the one side, and on the other a stubborn refusal on the part of a substantial section of the party's own constituency to back down in the face of it. Although its parliamentary leaders knew what they were supposed to say, that is, counsel compromise and look to the next election, the question was whether they could say it without recreating a damaging scission within the party. Kinnock's equivocations while the strike was at its height, condemning violence on all sides without taking sides, could only be replaced by his bravado at the 1985 Conference once Mrs Thatcher and the full strength of the police, the judicial system and the media had done their work.

Labour Party conferences, with the saturation media coverage they attract, are as much public displays of the balance of forces in the party as they are venues for policy resolution. As Labour Leaders had done so often in the past, but with far greater effect than usual given recent Party history, Kinnock spoke as much over the heads of the delegates as he spoke to them. He was effectively saying, to the media, to the Tories and the Alliance, and not least to the social democrats who still dominated the PLP: *You may say that the Party is beholden to the unions, you may say the constituencies are dominated by extremists, but you can't pin that tab on me.* And since within the British constitutional framework what matters once a party is elected is not so much what the party does or says as what the Prime Minister does and says, this was indeed the message they all wanted to hear.

Significantly, the delegates in their great majority gave Kinnock a prolonged standing ovation. Only the cynic could ascribe this wholly to the delegates playing their allotted role before the television cameras in the spectacle that is the Leader's speech to Conference. Many of the same 1,800 people who attended a *Labour Herald* rally the night before to hear and cheer Benn and Scargill were on their feet applauding Kinnock. This political schizophrenia is not surprising if it is recognized that it has less to do with deference to the Leader than to the fact that Kinnock, like Foot before him, retained a substantial base among the rank-and-file of the party of a kind that right-wing parliamentarians have never had, in good part because of his position on unilateralism and his defence of the welfare state. And however much the delegates might have preferred, and indeed continued to vote for, left-wing resolutions and national executive candidates, they also badly wanted to win the next election, to get Thatcher out at all costs. There was a strong pull to accept the argument that this meant bending to the media's prejudices and the shadow cabinet's conventionalism to give the appearance of party unity behind Kinnock's 'moderation'.

The trouble with this, of course, was that it closed off the possibility of constructing out of the current crisis anything resembling a *socialist* alternative to Thatcherism within the given party system. Conference

commitments on unilateralism remained intact but they sat uncomfortably with a renewed commitment to NATO and increased expenditure on conventional defence within it. Kinnock's attack on the use of Marxist rhetoric did not mean that he was abandoning rhetoric himself, but re-asserting the primacy of social democratic rhetoric in the hope of recovering the good old pre-Thatcherite days when the use of such rhetoric was so familiar it was invisible. Nevertheless, the strength and depth of the socialist mobilization in the party that preceded this was such that there was no smooth passage to presenting a unified face to the electorate through the rhetorical swamp of social democratic verbiage. In the current crises of capitalism and of American global hegemony, there is no clear road back to the nostrums of Atlanticism in foreign policy and Keynesianism and corporatism in domestic policy. It was in good part because of this that the challenge from the left was far more profound and still has deeper resonance in the party than anything that went before. Under these circumstances the exorcism of the left could be a one-off event, and this made the leadership's strategy not a little problematic. For the danger in a strategy that depended on the Labour leadership proving it was worthy to govern by its attacks on the left was that there can never really be sufficient proof that will make the strategy credible. Despite the expulsions that preceded the 1983 election, despite such unimpeachably respectable figures as Dennis Healey and Peter Shore presiding over the daily press conferences at party headquarters during the campaign, Mrs Thatcher was still able to make a leading theme of her campaign the choice this 'historic election' offered between 'two totally different ways of life', with the prize to be fought for being 'no less than the chance to banish from our land the dark, divisive clouds of Marxist Socialism'. And David Steel could still allege that Labour was drawing its inspiration from 'the decaying bones of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery'. Given what transpired in the party after 1983, the Labour leadership hoped that continuing McCarthyism of this sort would sound unfair. Yet, despite Kinnock's attack on Militant and the NUM, *The Times* immediately turned its attention to women and black activists: '... the face of the Labour Party has not stabilized. What is offered to the voters in Brent, Haringey or Hackney is not Mr Kinnock's emollience but Miss Abbott's rhetoric of class struggle and skin-colour consciousness and the insurrectionary talk of Mr Bernie Grant. In a party with no boundaries, in a church with no catechism beyond the nullity of Clause Four, they have as good a claim to speak for "socialism" as he does. Exit (perhaps) Mr Mulhearn, Mr Hatton and sundry other followers of the Fourth International; enter—with no one to bar their way—class and race warriors in thrall to the same Marxist doctrine.'

The tendency to blatant distortion of the socialist left, in all its diversity, is based on the most crude presumptions of what the term 'Marxism' is attached to in the eyes of those who subscribe to such ideas

in the party. Indeed, it is probably not even in the broadest terms accurate to identify most of the women and black activists as Marxist at all. But this very crudity derives from an *a priori* passion finally to write finis, albeit some two decades later than it was supposed to happen, to 'the end of (socialist) ideology'. This passion is not much less strong among those in the Labour Party who long for an end to Thatcherism than it is in the opinion *The Times* represents. For instance, the right-wing Solidarity Group of MPs labelled as 'Stalinist' a Campaign Group of MPs' (formed around Benn after 1981) questionnaire to the candidates for Labour Chief Whip in 1985. The questionnaire asked whether they favoured recorded votes for PLP elections and meetings; party conference control over PLP rules; election of the shadow cabinet by the electoral college that elects the leaders; black sections in the constituencies; a strengthened role for the women's conference of the party; inclusion of at least one woman and one black on all constituency short lists for parliamentary candidates: withdrawal from the Common Market: and **expulsion of people giving any support to the Militant Tendency**.<sup>46</sup> That a questionnaire designed to reveal the political positions of candidates for party office should have been construed as Stalinist, of all things, presumably implying some ultra-centralist organizational practice rather than the antithesis of it, as is patently the case, is worthy of Ronald Reagan's designation of the Samoza Contras in Nicaragua as 'freedom fighters'. But it is the function of such political rhetoric, not its accuracy, that counts. The function of the rhetoric hinges on establishing the illegitimacy of the very attempt to change the Labour Party on the basis of the political principles that the left had *actually* taken up in the 1970s, i.e. denying the complete autonomy of Parliamentarians between elections, advancing the common ownership of the means of production as a relevant goal, and conceiving strategic questions in terms of class and popular struggles. The notion that these principles are inherently totalitarian, or the claim that they are catechisms of a dead church, can only be taken seriously if they are seen for what they really are: ideological aids in the struggle to consolidate the old parliamentarist mould.

If the new Labour left was 'unrealistic', as has so often been alleged, it was mainly in that it severely *underestimated* the sheer breadth and depth of the parliamentary leadership's commitment to the old parliamentarism and the sheer weight of conventional wisdom and bourgeois opinion they could call to their side in defense of it. It also *overestimated* the commitment of the left union leadership to the new labour left's struggle and the staying power of the collective instrumentalism of industrial militancy under conditions of capitalist restructuring, mass unemployment and state reaction. In the face of this, as is so often the case in history, some of the new Labour left's original activists, and even more of the commentators who watched from the sidelines, initially with some sympathy, became

themselves dispirited and confused about what had been the point of the thing all along. Many of them succumbed to the illusion that Labour's electoral disintegration was caused by the intra-party debate, forgetting that this debate was itself but a symptom of the failures of parliamentary paternalism. And some began to bend to the views of the social democrats inside and outside the party regarding a further redefinition of the intra-party democracy. After most of the parliamentarians had fought tooth and nail to prevent anyone but **MPs** from electing the leader and declared that the reselection of **MPs** sounded the death-knell of democracy, they suddenly switched to the view that these new rights should be passed over to a ballot of all party members. The reason was entirely tactical. They hoped thereby that an 'amorphous mass' would now save them from the initiative that political organization within party structures had raised up. To be sure, the constitutional reforms that had been effected inevitably and properly brought forward critical questions regarding whether the constituency party structures, and especially those in the unions, were conducive to allowing all those who wanted to participate to do so. But this involved further reforms to encourage participation and accountability at party meetings, as many on the left and especially Benn had long insisted, not an incorporation within the party of the plebiscitary principles that governed elections between parliamentary teams at the level of the state.

Under the impact of Thatcher's ever more bold attacks on municipal socialism and class struggle trade unionism, and the Labour leadership's attack on Militant and others inside the party, the new Labour left grew increasingly fractious and indeed fractured. As the proponents of the parliamentary paternalism renewed themselves and once again powerfully asserted their control over the party, segments of the new Labour left fell in with the view that the fortunes of the party could only be restored if the parliamentary 'team' were allowed to get on with it. Some of them joined that team. This is a sad thing. But it speaks more to the factors that rendered the Labour Party incapable of transformation than to the objectives of the new Labour left.

The new Labour left never claimed that there was a ready-made majority constituency in Britain that was just waiting for the opportunity to elect a socialist government, once the Labour Party sorted itself out. On the contrary, its development was characterized by the concern to turn the Labour Party into the kind of party that might at least attempt to mobilize such support. Those who are opposed to the socialist project, or those who study politics as allegedly neutral commentators, will be little concerned with this objective. Most socialists will be rather less content to merely accept the defeat of the attempt to change the Labour Party and join with Labour's parliamentary team in an attempt to win back support by appealing for votes on the individualist grounds that Thatcherism has prepared. Nor

will most of them, it may be hoped, be content to sit back and wait for the economy to unfold with the stock market. Since the 1987 election, there have been attempts to chart a new way forward as seen in the large socialist conference held in Benn's constituency in October 1987, attended by two thousand socialists inside and outside the Labour Party, and including representatives of the Greens and the Welsh Nationalists. Enduring sectarian blinkers of parts of the extra-Labour left endanger such initiatives: there must be an appreciation of the new Labour left's project of broadening democracy and making it more amenable to popular struggles. But new attempts at socialist renewal of that project will have to concentrate less on reforming the Labour Party and more on building a long-term independent campaign for a democratic socialism that transcends the limits of parliamentary paternalism.

## NOTES

1. This essay forms part of a larger study of the attempt to change the Labour Party to be published by Verso.
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3. R.W. Johnson, *The Long March of the French Left*, New York 1981, p. 159.
4. D.S. Bell and S. Criddle, *The French Socialist Party: Resurgence and Victory*, London 1984, p. 209.
5. R. Cayrol, cited in Johnson, p. 158.
6. Minutes of TUC-Labour Party Liaison Committee, Industrial Democracy and Planning Sub-committee, 'Planning and Industrial Policy in France', December 21, 1981.
7. R. Cayrol, 'The Crisis of the French Socialist Party', *New Political Science*, 12, Summer 1983, pp. 11, 16.
8. M. Spourdalakis, 'The Greek Experience', *The Socialist Register 1985/6*, pp. 151-2.
9. See P. Walters, 'Distributing decline: Swedish Social Democrats and the Crisis of the Welfare State', *Government and Opposition*, 20:3, Summer 1985, pp. 356-7; and R. Stanbridge, 'Palme faces Workers revolt', *The Guardian*, January 20, 1986.
10. Verbal reply to author at the Labour Market Adjustment Conference, York University, Toronto, December 11, 1986.
11. W. Higgins, 'Political Unionism and the Corporatist Thesis', *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, 6:3, August 1985, pp. 361, 271-2.
12. R. Michels, *Political Parties* (1915), New York, 1972. It is worth noting that one of the very few Marxists of the time who took Michels' 'iron law' seriously enough to engage with it was Bukharin. See his comments on Michels' 'very interesting book' in N. Bukharin, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology* (1921), Anne Arbor, 1969, pp. 309-11.
13. M. Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik*, Tübingen, 1924, p. 409.
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16. M. Rustin, 'Labour's Constitutional Crisis', *New Left Review*, 126, March-

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  18. Coates, p. 209.
  19. 'The Labour Party and Social Democracy', in Samuel and Stedman Jones, (eds.), *Culture Ideology and Politics: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm*, History Workshop Series, London 1982, pp. 320-9.
  20. M. Franklin, *The Decline in Class Voting in Britain*, Oxford 1985, pp. 153, 161.
  21. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
  22. See Bartolini, *op. cit.*, esp. Figure 7.3, p. 188.
  23. 'The Labour Party and its members', *New Society*, September 20, 1979, p. 613.
  24. Fringe meeting debate between the Tribune Group and the International Socialists at 1969 Labour Party Conference.
  25. D. Blunkett, 'Why I am a Socialist: Sheffield Steel', *New Socialist*, November-December 1982, p. 56.
  26. Quoted in C. Cockburn, *The Local State*, London 1977, p. 126.
  27. *Ibid.*, pp. 118, 159-61.
  28. Interview with David Blunkett, in M. Boddy and C. Fudge, *Local Socialism*, London 1984, pp. 244-5.
  29. Cockburn, p. 90.
  30. M. Mackintosh and H. Wainwright, *A Taste of Power: The Politics of Local Economics*, London 1987, p. 399.
  31. The term is Minkin's: *The Labour Party Conference*, London 1978, p. 329.
  32. T. Benn, *The New Politics: a socialist reconnaissance*, Fabian Tract 402, September 1970, pp. 8-9, 12.
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  34. Interview with Tony Benn in A. Freeman, *The Benn Heresy*, London 1982, pp. 174-5.
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  36. See *Speeches*, pp. 275, 281, 285, 287-8; and *The New Politics*, p. 28.
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  38. Quoted in *The Observer*, April 3, 1966.
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  40. *Labour Party Conference Report*, 1970, pp. 176. 182-4.
  41. *Labour Party Conference Report*, 1971, p. 236.
  42. Quoted in M. Hatfield, *The House the Left Built*, London 1978, pp. 36.41.
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  44. Quoted in Hatfield, p. 114.
  45. Interview with Roy Hattersley in D. Kogan and M. Kogan, *The Battle for the Labour Party*, London 1982, p. 37.
  46. Letter to *The Times*, December 11, 1985.
  47. T. Benn, *Speeches*, pp. 164-75.
  49. Hatfield, p. 68.
  49. See *TUC Report 1972*, pp. 401-2; and Benn, *Speeches*, pp. 188-95, 16-25, 285.
  50. Kogan and Kogan, p. 10.
  51. R. McKenzie, 'Power in the Labour Party: the issue of intra-party democracy', in D. Kavanagh (ed.), *The Politics of the Labour Party*, London 1982, pp. 196-7.
  52. R. Miliband, 'Socialist Advance in Britain', *The Socialist Register 1983*, pp. 116-7.
  53. See his 'Labour's New Reformism' and 'The Limits of the Labour Left' in *New*

*Left Review* 129 (September-October 1981) and 135 (September-October 1982).

54. Quoted in *Tribune*, September 11, 1987.

55. *The Times*, December 10, 1985.

56. 'Whips refuse "Stalinist" questions', *The Times*, October 21, 1985.