

The crisis of New Labour

The end of choice at the ballot box

TONY Benn MP has posed, with remarkable clarity, the issues involved in the current battle over Labour's future. In an article for the *Observer* entitled "The end of choice at the ballot box", Benn has accurately spelled out the disastrous consequences of a series of related developments, especially the NEC's proposals to change Labour's structure, and its decision to create a Lib-Lab cabinet committee on constitutional reform.

Benn puts it like this:

"The Prime Minister's decision to set up a Cabinet Consultative Committee under his chairmanship, with a wide remit, and made up of Labour Ministers and Liberal leaders marks another step in the move to create a new political party in Britain...

"...The next major step is due to take place at the Labour conference in October, when a plan called 'Partnership in Power' is to be presented, under which members of the party, the constituencies and affiliated organisations may lose their right to submit motions to conference.

"All these plans, combined with the tough new disciplinary code under which any Labour MP who holds an alternative opinion on any issue may be expelled and all new candidates will be drawn from an approved panel, virtually hands over complete control to the leadership.

"By the end of this parliament, if not before, it is possible that this project will have been completed and this new party will closely resemble the American Democratic Party, backed by big business and with no meaningful links with the Labour Party or labour movement.

"The British establishment has gone along with this from the very beginning and it is not hard to see why. It hopes and believes that such a party would be stronger than the Tories in dismantling the welfare state... and cutting public expenditure and wages in the name of labour flexibility and globalisation."

This is exactly what is happening!

Benn's great merit is that he has spelt out with a clarity absent from the circumlocution and coding employed by most of the parliamentary Labour left the enormously high stakes involved in the current battles inside the Labour Party. He has elevated the discussion of the New Labour project above the trivia of spin-doctor gamesmanship and the degrading, "King Tony is badly advised" pap. Clearly, sharply and bluntly he has put the New Labour project in the proper context of class, and linked this to the paralysing bureaucratisation that is creeping like black ice over politics:

"But the price that may have to be paid (for the "Project") is the obliteration of any real policy choice through the ballot box, any real debate in the Commons, and a crisis of representation. We could see the complete disillusion with democracy and the appallingly low turnout there is in America. Clinton was elected

with only 20% of the electorate."

This is exactly the danger. *Workers' Liberty* has warned of it again and again. Back in 1980, at the high water mark of the Labour left, we argued that the outcome of the battles for Labour democracy would either be a transformed socialist labour movement, or the "Americanisation" of British politics and the destruction of the Labour Party as an entity based primarily on the labour movement. That logic is working itself quickly towards the moment of realisation. The key thing now is to know how socialists should relate to this, possibly terminal, crisis of labourism.

On this question of tactics Benn once again makes an important contribution:

"Those of us who remain committed to the trade union link and socialist objectives... must continue to campaign quietly and persistently from inside the party and not be tempted to break away. Such principled campaigns are likely to win a great deal of support from the electors who voted Labour on 1 May, since the sheer scale of that victory suggests that it was not only the Conservatives who were rejected but much of the market based philosophy which nearly destroyed our social fabric and which urgently requires real change, not just new management."

Benn is right to say: No, we should not walk away from the Labour Party if we lose at the Brighton conference. The issue Benn fails to develop, and it is fundamental, is how socialists can continue to raise the issue of working class representation if New Labour is transformed into a "pure bosses'

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party". The trade unions are the key here.

Even the traditionally right wing AEEU, the engineering union, is talking of the need now to fight to get working class people into parliament. Its criticism of the class composition of the Parliamentary Labour Party — now mostly lawyers, journalists, academics and other jobbing political whores and loose ballast of that sort — is a great step forward.

It shows what effect socialists can hope to have with a serious and bold agitation against the Blairites, and for working class representation by working class MPs willing to fight for our people and for working class policies.

Trade unions can and should use their influence in the Labour Party to de-select existing Blairite MPs and replace them with people loyal to the labour movement and the working class.

That way we can hope to politically re-align the trade union movement on terms a lot more threatening to the Blair project than if we limit ourselves needlessly and artificially to single issue campaigning in a Labour Party increasingly bereft of an active proletarian core.

We are not yet in a position to launch a full scale Labour Representation Committee that could organise the unions to fight to

save Labour as a workers' party and, if we lose that fight definitively, put up trade union candidates in elections.

We are in a situation where we can attempt to pull together the key activists in the unions, CLPs and socialist groups who understand the centrality of mass labour movement politics. If we do that, we will be better able to give the Blairites the answer they

deserve, win or lose at Brighton.

The conference, Unite for Labour Democracy, on 13 September is therefore of enormous importance for serious working class socialists and labour movement activists.

We say: Unite the left to fight for working class representation!

Scotland: Vote "Yes" and prepare to fight

WITHIN limits, the creation of a Scottish parliament would constitute a partial democratisation of British society and its structures of government.

As proposed, it would be elected on the basis of proportional representation rather than the first-past-the-post system. It would transfer control of the Scottish Office's £14 billion budget from civil servants to an elected body.

To that extent, it is possible to make out a socialist case for the creation of a Scottish parliament.

It is virtually certain now that a majority of people in Scotland want Home Rule and will, therefore, vote for a Scottish Parliament on September 11th, ensuring that there will soon be a native government in Edinburgh for the first time in almost 300 years.

For socialists, if a majority of Scots want it, then they are entitled to have Home Rule — or full independence. For us the important question is not the mechanical union of states, but the building up, preservation and development of the unity of the

working class and its labour movement.

That unity must be maintained and strengthened after September 11th.

A Scottish parliament will be no panacea for Scotland's social and economic problems. Inevitably it will be an arena of political class struggle.

The working class in Scotland will benefit from the creation of a Scottish parliament only to the extent that it preserves its identity as a class, rebuilds its organisational strength, and forces its own demands on to a Scottish parliament — and, ultimately, creates a workers' government. For that a workers' party is essential.

Voting double "yes" on 11 September will mean nothing — apart from an irresponsible tail-ending of petty-bourgeois regional particularism — unless it is accompanied now by campaigning to defeat the Blairites' attempts to break union-Labour links. We need a class mobilisation to resist and defeat New Labour's attempt — from London or from Edinburgh — to run capitalism at the expense of the working class.

The IRA "restores its cessation"

THE Provisional IRA has "restored its cessation", and Northern Ireland once again has a ceasefire. Though the old ceasefire ended with the February 1996 IRA bomb in Canary Wharf, a full-scale war was never resumed. The "accidental" massacres that might, nonetheless, have happened as a result of IRA activity, mercifully, did not happen.

The baseline constitutional arrangements now on offer from London/Dublin to the Provisional IRA have been on offer for many years. They were spelled out in the joint Dublin-London proposals published in February 1995, during the old ceasefire: the creation of a Northern Ireland government in Belfast which has institutionalised Catholic-Protestant powersharing; creation of a Council of Ireland linking the Belfast and Dublin governments and taking responsibility for the island's relations with the EU.

Anything more than that in the direction the IRA wants to go, would provoke a certain Protestant Unionist rebellion. We can believe Prime Minister Blair when he said last May in Belfast that his government does not intend to scrap the union between Britain and Northern Ireland.

Can progress be made now towards a stable solution and permanent peace? That depends on the answer to another question: will the IRA settle, can the leaders settle, for a peace in which none of the central objectives it has fought for since 1971 have been realised?

Any arrangement acceptable to most people on both sides would be progress and should be welcome to socialists, whose

first concern is to see the working class in Northern Ireland, and in Ireland as a whole, unite across the murderous communal divide.

The revelation that Charles J Haughey, four times the Republic's Taoiseach, was, throughout his long political career, the recipient of massive sums of money from Ben Dunne, the owner of Ireland's equivalent of Marks & Spencer, is the latest urgent indication of how much overdue is the political unification of the Irish working class, so that it can intervene to sweep away the filth and corruption that is bourgeois rule in Ireland. An end to the futile war in the North would speed that day.

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Editor: Sean Matgamna; Assistant Editor: Helen Rate;
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Business Manager: Alan McArthur.

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phone 0171-277 7217, fax 0171-277 8462, e-mail awl@gn.apc.org.
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