

The crisis of the Labour Party

"It's down to whether the unions dig their heels in"

Ken Coates MEP: Peter Mandelson's pronouncement on poverty is hardly a serious proposal. There may just be some benefit but, in general, it's pitched at a cosmetic level. He has been electioneering for the National Executive elections. We shall see whether Old Labour retain a strong enough position to stop him.



It's interesting that it's Roy Hattersley — a strange personification of the basic values of Old Labour — who has been among the most anguished by the shift to a

socially neutral stance, and among the first to speak out.

Not even the trade unions — who have been comprehensively stuffed by New Labour — have approached things with that kind of determined attitude. I can't predict which way the union leaders will jump on Partnership in Power. It depends on what they're offered. They're certainly fed up at the way they've been taken for granted. You can see that from the way the AEU — which hasn't been in the forefront of radical trade unionism for many years — deliberately withheld £250,000 from the Party.

Even if other unions also withhold money, the Party leaders will be able to borrow to tide themselves over until they institute state funding. They'll probably succeed in that, and in their constitutional changes. They'd have to be very slipshod in packing the conference not to! In the end, it's all down to whether the unions dig their heels in.

A measure of the Party machinery's drive to centralise things can be seen in their plans for Proportional Representation in the European elections, where they want a regional list system. You won't know the relationship between your vote and who gets elected. You vote for a particular party which then gets its corresponding proportion of the seats. The party machine decides who the actual MEPs will be, and which candidates will be deemed to have lost.

Within the Labour Party it is probable that One Person One Vote will select the pool of candidates, but the order of the candidates on the regional lists — i.e. the real decision about who is elected — will be done by Mandelson and his friends in the Regional Offices. The timescale is such that conference won't get to discuss this

"At this stage Labour Representation Committee sounds defeatist"

Glenroy Watson, tubeworker: I'm hopeful about the Labour conference. Maybe the Blairites have galvanised enough people with their efforts over the last couple of years — but I would hope that people can judge how far is far enough. The Uxbridge by-election was an indication that people won't take just anything from Labour. If they go too far — like kicking out the local candidate — people won't vote for them.

Mandelson's recent behaviour, and the leaked document that said private donations now outstrip money from the trade unions, suggest that they think they've won over enough people, but I don't think they have.

We have to argue that we created the link and the Party so why should we be pushed out? At this stage anything like a Labour Representation Committee sounds defeatist. I believe we can win the moral argument on the floor. I don't believe the trade unions will cut their own throat.

Labour's attitude to the Underground has been totally unacceptable. Nothing they've done so far has been

aimed at working people. I don't know how the people who do influence the Government, like the Bank of England, get them to do what they want — but the lessons are they can be bounced and we need more people bouncing them. We need to be clear about what we want.

The Underground needs some serious funding, for example. People working on the tube were rightly outraged that privatisation was being suggested by a Labour Government. A lot of us felt the plan was deliberately leaked to test the reaction. Hopefully now they'll recognise that it's unacceptable. I think London MPs will be too worried about their seats to let it go ahead. Tube privatisation was one of the reasons people wanted to get rid of the Tories.

I'm hopeful about people demanding some change from the Government. At the moment you see some people — like Hattersley — speaking out and getting a reaction. I would hate people to see that as the method to get the Government to do anything — we need real, mass campaigns — but people beginning to question whether the Government has any commitment to change is a start. The key thing is that we can't wait 18 years to start pushing back 18 years worth of damage. We need to start putting the pressure on now.

● *A driver on the Victoria Line, Glenroy Watson is Chair of the Finsbury Park branch of the RMT and a member of the TUC National Race Relations Committee.*

"We have to forcefully push the socialist agenda"

Mark Seddon: Having run a successful PR operation in opposition Labour are doing the same in Government. It's early days, but we need a real commitment to tackle the problems that people voted Labour to have addressed, like unemployment and the crisis in the welfare state. So far it's been very disappointing. Conversely, in certain areas — like foreign policy and overseas aid — things have been quite encouraging.

Labour Party members and trade unionists need to realise that we are in power now — not in opposition — and we only have a limited time to prove ourselves. We have to think coherently about what we want in terms of policies and forcefully push the socialist agenda.

The vacuity of the New Labour project has yet to feed through properly, but opposition has started to happen around the Partnership in Power proposals and other things. It's very significant that it's people like Hattersley who are kicking up a fuss. We need to offer practical policies about how you distribute power and wealth. Hattersley has started a very powerful argument about equality and the redistribution of power and wealth, and it goes to the heart of the socialist argument.

Without the trade unions the Labour Party would have died after the 1983 election. Their financial help and the help of thousands of trade unionists helped ensure the Labour victory. Now the unions have to realise that the Blair-Mandelson project is not inevitable. They can either mount a defence of their position or abandon it. The logic of the latter is giving up on a party they helped to form, and financed. This would signal to union members that the trade union movement is unable to maintain involvement in a political party it helped to form. What sort of message is that about how the trade unions can deal with big companies?

It is difficult to see what will happen at the Labour Party conference. For the first time in a long time there has been a coming together of trade union leaders to find a common approach. There has been a lot of lobbying behind the scenes for the maintenance of the

link and the number of union representatives on the NEC.

There is a very strong fear among constituency activists that the trade unions may wish to do a deal — although the unions and the constituencies are much closer on this issue than they have been for some time. All that seems to be on offer in return for supporting Blair is a White Paper on recognition — and that was a manifesto commitment anyway. Even so, Blair is only suggesting a working group between the unions and the CBI to produce some sort of voluntary code of practice — not necessarily even a White Paper. That's a very, very poor deal.

The first thing we need to do is get left-wingers elected to the NEC — and make sure Peter Mandelson isn't. Then we need to put pressure on trade union delegations at the TUC (many will also be delegates to the Labour Conference), to encourage their General Secretaries to make a stand for party democracy at the Labour Conference.

This is the first conference where the constituencies will have 50 percent of the vote. A lot of pressure will be put on delegates from the CLPs, but feelings are very strong. It wouldn't take that many unions to vote with the constituencies to hold off the leadership's plans. Much of the left have argued that we haven't had enough time to discuss these proposals. Hopefully we can get the decision on the proposals put off. If the decision is taken, and if it goes against us, to all intents and purposes the unions will have been frozen out and New Labour will be a top-down party. But I think if that happened the grassroots would demand that the relationship be reviewed again.

At the moment, it's quite a common thing in the unions to say we'll use our money for better things. At this stage that is a terrible mistake, but understandable. People have to realise that there's still everything to play for. The small, modernising tendency is not all-powerful. They are very frightened of the left and the trade unions, and if we stopped mousing about we could do something. The modernisers think they can do without socialists and the trade unions. But the Labour Party belongs to us; they shouldn't be allowed to walk off with the collateral. The marginalisation of the working class in its broadest sense from democratic politics would be extremely dangerous.

● *Mark Seddon is editor of Tribune.*

until 1998, by which time it will possibly have lost all its powers. If this is what happens, PR will have been used, not to open up democracy, but to shut it down.

We on the left need to deepen the links between one another and focus on our priorities. In my view, our priorities are full employment — there will be no recovery of trade union independence until there is a recovery of full employment — and resolute defence of the welfare state.

To the extent that the Labour Party isn't the chosen vehicle for such a defence we see how our political space is being moved sideways.

I think that there will be a realignment in British politics. I don't really envisage simply the re-establishment of Old Labour and the old left. We need to shift the social mode from one of dog-eat-dog competition. In order to do that, there are huge social forces that — if we can reach them — will help. We need to start the discussion about this now, without any institutional preconceptions. We want the unions to talk about this, but we want the NGOs to talk about it, too, and the professional organisations, and all the manifold groupings which are involved in defending the environment. Capitalism is a continental assault on the natural and social environments, and we need to group together if we are to stand a chance against it.

We are told that the trade unions are smaller than they were and traditional forms of smokestack employment have declined. I know all that, but there is a tremendous expansion of other forms of work and association — and they are not permanently in the keeping of Peter Mandelson. It's up to us to be as inventive as he has been, on a different base of principle.

● *Ken Coates is MEP for Nottinghamshire North and Chesterfield.*

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"I'd like to see Labour talk about socialism"

Bobby Morton, sacked Liverpool dockers: As our dispute nears its second anniversary we're approaching the Labour Party through the official structures of the Transport and General Workers' Union and any other way we can.

The TGWU Conference in July passed policy to call on the Government to use its position as the largest single shareholder in the Mersey Docks and Harbour Company and get us reinstated. Whether Labour act will be down to the leadership. We've been getting the right noises from the MPs we speak to, but up until now the silence from Tony Blair has been deafening.

The Government's honeymoon is now over. The country voted on 1 May for a change of policies, not just a change of the name of the government from Conservative to Labour. With such a huge

majority Labour could legislate anything they wanted — like repealing the anti-trade union laws.

In opposition Labour were quite vociferous in their opposition to the anti-union laws. Now they're in power there are no plans to deal with these laws. That's a great disappointment — and will have a massive effect on party members and trade unionists.

Within the T&G, people at the grassroots are saying: "If the Labour Government does not meet the wishes of the people who fund the party, then why should we fund it?" We want to call the party to account and get something in return for our money. This mood began before the election and it's growing.

Every single one of the 900,000 members of the T&G pays a levy to the Labour Party. We all have a stake in this. By the time of the next delegate confer-

But they face serious contradictions. The most explosive is the pent up pressure for change produced by 18 years of corrupt rule from Westminster. They have to reform the political system but popular pressure is such that they cannot control the process. Scottish devolution is the first example of this. It will gain an increasingly radical dynamic as the Scottish parliament becomes a focus of unrest over the government's failures to deliver on health, jobs, education and the environment. Proportional representation, local and regional government could be other issues on which discontent over social and economic issues could find expression in issues of democracy.

The radical left should be pushing a radical programme of democratic reforms, linking it all the time to resistance to the government's neo-liberal economics. It should also exploit the contradiction between the government's commitments (however reluctant) to democratising the state and its Thatcherite centralisation of the Labour Party.

● *Hilary Wainwright is editor of Red Pepper.*

"Discontent over social and economic issues could find expression in issues of democracy"

Hilary Wainwright: Don't over-estimate the intellectual coherence of New Labour's "project" of modernisation; but don't under-estimate the ruthless organisation with which the Millbank Tendency will seek to exert its control over the people and the Party alike.

Despite the "new dawn" rhetoric surrounding the first 100 days, New Labour's economic project is little more than a variant on Thatcher's neo-liberalism. Its distinctiveness is a more organised alliance with the business elite — witness their leading role in the most sensitive areas of government policy. Instead of introducing social regulations to ameliorate the failings of the free-market they are introducing a Japanese style corporatism — corporatism without the unions. The result could be a consolidation of the gross inequalities created by Thatcher.

ence in two years time it will be a really serious issue — though Partnership in Power means the Labour leaders may get there first.

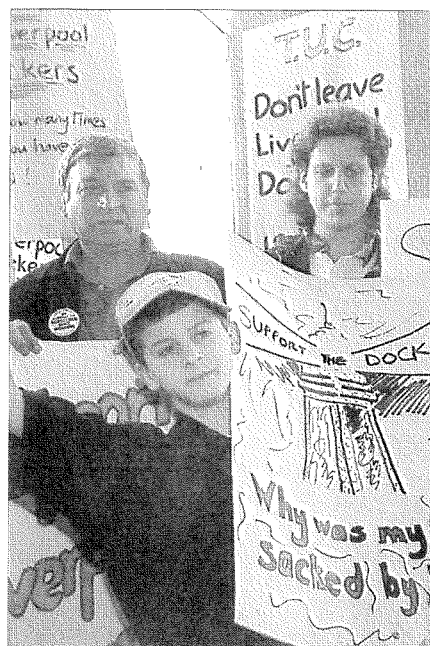
People will start to assert themselves against the Government sooner or later. The revolt on the floor at the T&G Conference in July has great significance, I think. People are not in the mood to be hoodwinked. We won't stand for another 5 or 10 years of Thatcherism.

I've been a Labour supporter all my life but I've let my Party membership lapse. Like a lot of people I'm in something of a political vacuum. I don't think the fight in the Labour Party is over, and I support the idea of a new Labour Representation Committee.

But the strike is a seven day-a-week, long hours job and that's my priority. We're organising an international day of solidarity action on 8 September, calling on dockworkers all around the world to take action. Indian dockworkers' leaders who visited us recently said that they will come out in every port in India. The response from around the globe is fantastic. It will send shockwaves through the shipping industry.

I'd like to see Labour talk about socialism — and, once they start talking about it, maybe they could institute some socialistic ideas instead of just copying the anti-social ideas the Conservative Party brought in over the last 18 years.

● *Bobby Morton is a member of the Merseyside Port Shop Stewards' Committee. Send donations and messages of support for the dockers to Jimmy Davis, 19 Scorton Street, Liverpool L6. Cheques payable to "Merseyside Port Shop Stewards Committee".*

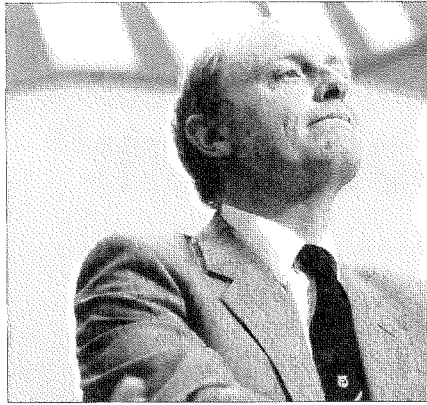


"The stench of Kinnockism was enough for me"

Terry Burns, Socialist Labour Party general election candidate: I want to belong to an organisation that is building for socialism, and that may mean over the next few years the kind of changes and turns and amalgams of organisations that would have seemed impossible ten years ago. I think the people attracted to any kind of Labour Representation Committee should come out of the Labour Party and join the Socialist Labour Party.

The key thing is a forthright socialist programme, not structural links to the trade unions. If you're building a mass party of labour rather than a socialist party that's a different issue — but the trade unions are not vehicles for transforming society. That is the role of the party. The unions are vehicles for progressing some reforms and defending those reforms in the workplace.

I think we still have to relate to the Labour Party because there are still many



people in the party who are winnable to socialism. Its structure is still relevant, too. The fact it still has the union affiliation ties it to some class issues. The struggle that people are putting up inside the Labour Party to stop the link being broken — whether it's a worthwhile struggle or not, I'm not sure — is a battle that I have some sympathy with. But working people no longer see Labour as a party that will deliver socialism.

Within my own union I would still vote for the retention of the link, although I would want to democratise the union affiliations so that they could affiliate to other parties. If I was offered only Labour or nothing as a voting issue then I

would vote for the retention of the link — because it's important the unions continue their political activity. I would still campaign for affiliation to the SLP.

The SLP is not now an alternative to Labour — it's too small — but is an opportunity to build an alternative. I'd also stand for regroupment on the left, so we'd be a bigger alternative and a larger force to struggle against the Labour Party, capitalism and the class enemy. There is nothing that is an alternative to the SLP outside Labour — though there are obviously problems, in relation to the programme of the SLP and its method of work. It needs to build a democratic party and needs a programme more clearly linked to the needs of the working class in Britain. A lot of its formulations are still based in the 1930s and 1940s.

The election itself — though there were some very good votes, both for the SLP and the Socialist Party, in exceptional cases — saw the left vote being squeezed in the drive to get rid of the Tories. That votes were in general small is not the issue. There was an alternative for people to vote for, and that's important. The socialists who stood at the start of the century in Britain only had small votes. We could have stayed in the Liberal Party — as the argument was then — and not created the Labour Party. But the Labour Party had to be created.

Do I think Blair cutting the union link is going back to that situation of going cap-in-hand to the Liberals? Sometimes we create organisations and structures and think we have to bow down and worship them forever. There is a time to say those organisations have degenerated to such an extent the stench is too much and it's time to walk away and get rid of them. An example is when Trotsky finally broke with the Stalinist organisations in the '30s.

There are various arguments about whether Arthur chose the right time to split. Some say during the miners' strike — when you had the struggle by Liverpool Council and some other local authorities showing a little bit of backbone — was the right time. I think ten years ago was the right time, when I broke from Labour. The stench of Kinnockism was enough for me.

I'd like to think that by the time there is any split in Labour the SLP will have built sufficiently to be attractive to people now in the Labour Party. That depends to a certain extent on how the SLP operates. It also depends on what happens in the real world.

● *The Socialist Labour Party's candidate for Cardiff Central in the General Election, Terry Burns polled the second highest vote nationally for a non-Labour socialist candidate.*

"The least we should expect of Labour is neutrality"

Norman Candy, postal worker: If the Labour-union link ever meant anything it was a two-way thing. In the past the Labour Party got more out of it than the unions. We had all the "Don't rock the boat" arguments. I don't think we should stay in a marriage that's broken down — though if there is going to be a divorce it should be on our terms not theirs.

My feelings before the election were that it was essential to get rid of the Conservatives. Now Labour are in power they are operating more or less as I expected. I wasn't expecting much from them in terms of the trade union movement. Obviously there's still the hope that there will be some new legislation on trade union rights, as they said there would be — the right to strike and to join a union, that sort of thing. The general attitude towards

the unions is much as Blair promised when he said there would be no "special relationship."

In the post we have a problem over Quadrant. Royal Mail say they are going to partially privatise it. The London membership don't see why we should take that from a Labour Government when we wouldn't take it from the Conservatives. There's also the question of whether any more counters — local post offices — will be privatised. All sections of Royal Mail should be dealt with under one umbrella. We want a single, unified Post Office. That's the minimum.

The current disputes we have in the post in London developed before the election. People's attitudes haven't changed. The Government should carry out the promises they made before the election. They have argued in the past that they are interested in a state-controlled Post Office. In terms of industrial relations the least we should expect of them is to be neutral. We certainly wouldn't expect them to take a pro-employer position on these things.

● *Norman Candy is the London Divisional Representative for the Communication Workers' Union.*

"We need an organisation that can make coalitions"

John Ennis, car production worker: If it's true that the unions are considering supporting Partnership in Power in return for recognition that's not on. It's not up for barter. Labour should legislate rights at work, simple as that.

The companies have had it all their own way for too long, taking advantage of things like "flexibility". In the car industry we've had lean production. It doesn't make a car better or easier to run, it just makes more profits for companies. They are taking advantage of people.

The union in Cowley is not as strong as it was in its heyday, but it's still relatively strong. We've just secured a fairly good pay deal. The key thing now is that people are fearful of taking action. That won't change very quickly. It will take more than three months to undo 18 years of damage. The organised working class — the people who campaigned for Labour and voted for Labour — will give Labour a long time. Confidence was smashed by the Tories.

For students and unemployed people it's a different matter. There's less leeway there. The ending of free education will mean there's no support for Labour at all

among students now, even though young people probably voted Labour in large numbers. Part of people giving Labour time will be that they may well be prepared to support the Partnership in Power changes.

If they do break the link it will be a major turning point in politics. Maybe they would join with bits of the Tory Party and the Liberals. Then the trade unions have got to look to forming a new working-class party. The worst thing would be a US-Democrats style situation where the unions are distanced from the party but still fund it.

I respect Arthur Scargill and Jimmy Nolan and many other people in the Socialist Labour Party, but I think they went too soon and the party isn't democratic. We need organisations that can make coalitions. The trade union movement is smaller now. We need to talk to people like the environmentalists, which the SLP is not doing. If Arthur was in the Labour Party now he could make some difference. I'm in the Labour Party because of the link. If there is a split from the unions we have to go somewhere else. We're independent unions. I like the idea of a Labour Representation Committee as we have to have a political voice. I want a link not just on paper — handing over money for the election — but where trade unionists and Labour Party members call the shots in the Party.

● *John Ennis is a worker at Austin Rover Cowley and a T&G national executive member.*

"Blair says he wants to govern for all the people. But sometimes you have to take sides"

Shirley Winters, Magnet dispute supporter: Tony Blair and Alan Milburn, who's now a Health Minister, are our local MPs. I got a ten minute interview at one of Tony Blair's surgeries. After a few minutes he asked if I could clarify something for him: "What exactly do Magnet make?"

Before that I couldn't wait for Labour to get in. I've always voted Labour and, suddenly, here was my hero and he wasn't going to do anything. We asked Alan Milburn to table a motion in Parliament eight months ago. We're still waiting for that. He hasn't attended any of our rallies. His usual excuse is that he objects to someone on the platform.

I think it's time the unions got up off their knees and put our case. This is the only country in Europe where you can be sacked on an official dispute. The unions need to tell the Government that we expect them to do something about it. The workers at Magnet were decent, hard-working people. Some had worked there for over 40 years.

The bully-boy management who took over in 1993 — Beresford's — wanted to take £35 off my husband's take home pay of £189 a week — then attack his pension, guaranteed working week and entitlement to sick pay. In the same year the head of the company was on a thousand pounds a day, and one director got a £130,000 bonus.

If the Labour Government are going to stand by and let these people get away with this then there's something terribly wrong. Tony Blair says he wants to govern for all the people. But sometimes you have to take sides. You have to say: "These people are being wronged and I've got to stand on the side of justice" — not just side with somebody because they've got a few million in the bank.

We had to bow down to the bosses for 18 years and you think that when Labour come in it's going to be the happiest day of your life. Then you find you've got another Tory Government.

The trade union movement and the ordinary working people in this country have got to stand up and tell Tony Blair and this Government that we will not go away until something is done.

● *Shirley Winters is Secretary of the Magnet Women's Support Group. Donations and messages of support to: Magnet Families Hardship Fund, c/o Ian Crammond, 109 Jedburgh Drive, Darlington, County Durham, DL3 9UP.*

"The left can still stem New Labour's advance"

Vladimir Derer: The elements which make up the Labour Party are frequently pulling in opposite directions and the extent to which they use their potential strength in any given conflict is impossible to predict. Even if the rule changes proposed in Partnership in Power (PIP) are approved at this year's conference this will only make more clear the direction in which New Labour is steering the party. It will not resolve the underlying conflict.

In the short run the left can still do something to stem New Labour's advance. Resistance can still be organised. The large number of resolutions and amendments critical of the PIP proposals has provided a base for a fightback. Success

depends on whether dissatisfaction can be translated into simple composite resolutions, opposing the most important rule changes.

To survive in the longer term the left needs more than partial successes. Socialist politics can only be based on a scientific understanding of how society, workers and people act. Contrary to Marx's expectations socialists have so far failed to "deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts." The left's insistence on pursuing politics which repeatedly failed has psychological roots. A lasting reversal of its fortunes is therefore not possible until it shows willingness to examine the reasons for its unconscious refusal to learn from experience.

● *Vladimir Derer is Honorary Secretary of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy.*