

*Has reselection been co-opted by the establishment?*

Not yet, but the establishment is certainly trying hard. Those Social Democrats who remained in the Labour Party do not regard reselection as any the less of a danger than those who left the Party to set up the SDP. Only the method of "our" social democrats is different. They hope that the Labour Party can be transformed from within into an SDP Mark II. And they have not been all that unsuccessful. They now have a majority on the NEC — a precondition for doing away with the democratic reforms of 1979-81 which give the rank and file an effective say in policy determination.

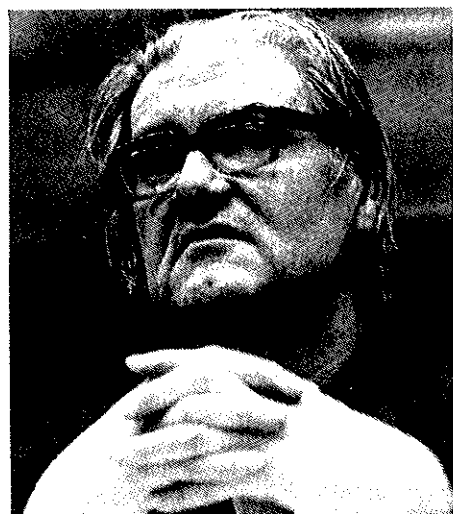
But counter-reformation or counter-revolution has never been easy. The position on the Right is that if the clock cannot be put right back, at least reforms should be neutralised. That is what lies behind the clamour for 'one person one vote'. What they intend to do is to raise MPs above the Party by freeing them from any need to be accountable to those who are the real link between Labour voters and the Party leadership. Once accountability to Party activists is replaced by a purely nominal accountability, albeit to a body which is larger than the GC but one which does not meet the MP on a regular month by month basis, then accountability in any meaningful sense ceases to exist.

The Party's Right-wing understands the importance of this far better than most self-proclaimed Left wingers. This is why the Right raises the issue every year without fail and why currently it is willing to go against a Conference decision which expressly forbade it to do so.

*But was not the PLP's fear of reselection exaggerated and due to the PLP's paranoia?*

It is true that the new reselection procedures had little effect on the composition of the PLP, and only very few MPs were deselected.

It is also true that paranoia within the PLP is rampant. The MPs may have overreacted but this does not mean that they



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## The Labour left today

**Vladimir Derer of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy talks to Workers' Liberty about how he sees the situation on the Labour Left today.**

**Vladimir argues that the main problem for the left is its unwillingness to come to terms with the existing political realities.**

have not grounds for concern.

The number of MPs who were actually deselected is small. But this is partly because those who feared deselection joined the SDP; or opted for early retirement, or in several cases they simply left Parliament to take other jobs. What the abolition of automatic reselection did was to undermine the MPs' security of tenure. It made their continued presence in Parliament dependent on their re-election by a rank and file body. This was something many MPs were not willing to accept. The Burkean conception of the role of an MP is quite incompatible with accountability to a rank and file body.

In any case, CLPD never intended to bring about a mass exodus of Right wing MPs. Even if this were possible, as it was not, it would merely have increased tensions within the Party and put off the majority of Labour Party members from going on with the process of democratisation. To be lasting, the introduction of accountability has to be unspectacular. Only then can the reformers keep the majority support they need. To retain — or regain — its political credibility the Labour Party must remain united. Those unwilling to go along with democratisation must be prevented from engineering a split. They should be put into a position where they have a straight choice between acceptance of accountability or dropping out singly.

It is naive to assume that mere change of the composition of the personnel of the PLP would lead to a radical break with existing traditions. The kind of human material on which constituencies selecting future MPs can draw at present imposes considerable limitations on what can be achieved. Whatever the past record of a PPC, and whatever may be said at selection conferences, what a newly elected MP is going to be like cannot be anticipated. Too many have undergone remarkable transformation after entering the House of Commons and almost all seem to have acquired to some degree the feeling that they are part of an elite. This may be less evident among MPs who belong to the Campaign Group, but it is nevertheless there. The only way to check this tendency is to increase the MP's link with a rank and file body which, of course, is the point of accountability.

*But if institutional changes, can merely influence not effect changes, are not constitutional reforms bound to remain merely of marginal significance?*

It is true that they can never in themselves produce a socialist leadership. The fact that the introduction of accountability by itself is not sufficient, does not mean that its significance is marginal. In the present political context it is a necessary condition for producing a socialist leadership, though, of course, not the only one. Differences about policy and programme (etc.) will not be resolved by making elected representatives more accountable. Democratic procedures can do no more than facilitate certain processes. By involving more rank and file members in policy determination, a milieu can be created in which socialist ideas and socialist strategy have a better chance of being accepted than, for example, mere lecturing to Labour MPs about the benefits of socialism.

Of course the interaction between MPs and the rank and file does not take place in a vacuum. The Labour Party, because of its close link with the mass organisations of the working class, the trade unions, reflects, albeit in a distorted form, the class conflicts within society. Within the Party there are contradictory pressures — one set of factors seeks to make it a vehicle of social change, another seeks to consolidate it as an agency for accommodation to the status quo. Thus internal Labour Party politics to some extent articulate these conflicting pressures. Under the present political conditions the Labour Party is the arena in which these conflicts are fought out. Just how conclusive the outcome is depends on the effectiveness of socialist intervention. This in turn depends on how well socialists understand the conditions they have to work under, viz the opportunities and limitations possible under these conditions. Greater involvement of rank and file members clearly is conceived by the Party's Right wing as a threat to its political dominance, and in turn to its promotion/acceptance of a mixed economy in the country.

We have to bear in mind that the ruling class has always regarded the Labour Party as a safety valve within the existing



Labour Conference '86. Photo John Harris.

order. However, reselection was also seen by it as a threat — a threat to its dominance. The existing (and past) Labour parliamentary leadership suited them. It could be relied on not to go beyond the confines of the capitalist order — when dissatisfaction with the Tories was reflected in the election of a Labour government.

Undermining the security of Labour MPs meant that the Labour Party was opened to the intervention of forces hitherto neutralised by the Labour Party Conference remaining merely a talking shop. Hence the hysterical campaign in the Tory-dominated media against those who were suspected of having the potential to change the Labour Party into an agency of social change.

The candidature of Tony Benn for the office of Deputy Leader in 1981 was perceived as the realisation of this potential. What placed him into this real or apparent role were the democratic reforms. If the ruling class was clear about the threat that democratic reforms within the Labour Party posed to the stability of its own political dominance, sections of the Left were oblivious to it. Set in their ways, instead of acknowledging the central role of the constitutional issues in the Labour Party for the undermining of the stability of the bourgeois order, they gave these issues at best marginal significance, and at worst treated them as sterile and irrele-

vant. In this way they merely demonstrated their role as a safety valve of the system they claim to oppose.

*But if involvement of ever larger numbers of members in the policy determining processes of the Labour Party undermines the position not just of Labour MPs but of the stability of bourgeois rule itself, why is CLPD opposed to the introduction of one member, one vote (OMOV)? Surely OMOV would make for involvement of even greater numbers of people than the present system?*

The problem here is not the availability of institutions for larger participation, but availability of people prepared actually to participate. In fact, OMOV — no matter which of the options in the NEC's 'consultative document' is taken — does not actually provide for wider participation. What is envisaged is a one-off involvement of all Party members in the selection conference or in a postal ballot to be held every four or five years. At the same time any effective process of monitoring of an MP's performance by a rank and file body is done away with. This is the reason why these schemes are so attractive to those who fought tooth and nail against both mandatory reselection and the electoral college.

However, it may be possible to devise institutional structures which would allow for much wider and genuine participation. For example, branches could elect

delegates to a body which would have no other business than to regularly discuss the MP's report and his/her work in Parliament and the PLP. This would clearly be a better arrangement than the present one where the MP's report is somehow squeezed into an already overcrowded GC agenda. The question is whether enough members would be prepared to attend and to make this a viable proposition. It means setting up another body — parallel with GCs and more numerous than GCs. However, while it is possible to make institutional provisions for wider participation, it is not possible to decree it. For example, universal franchise provides for the participation of all citizens. This does not mean that all citizens actually take an active part in the affairs of the state. In fact such choice as they really have is limited and only made available by intermediaries, i.e. the minority of citizens who are organised in political parties.

It is not possible to escape the burden of our cultural inheritance simply by devising new institutions. The fact is that the great majority of people in our society are generally passive. They have been conditioned by their whole life to passivity by the family, the school, the regime in factories or offices, and generally all the institutional structures of class society. Experience shows that large numbers of people are capable of bursts of activity but these last only for brief periods of time. This is why mass organisations are generally run by relatively small minorities and participation in political structures is limited to a mere fraction of those who have the right to participate. To create organisational structures for mass participation when those prepared to participate are relatively few, merely means that mass organisations are run by small committees which make decisions on behalf of mass membership.

To come back to OMOV: To seek involvement of all members in the choice of parliamentary candidates may sound democratic until it is realised that because of the absence of continuous involvement by mass membership in the MP's political work, the mass membership can make no informed judgement on the MP's political performance and such judgement the membership can make is based primarily on the MP's PR skills.

*What conclusions can the left draw if, as you imply, the masses have been conditioned to passivity and the political involvement of the Labour Party membership is only marginal.*

The main problem for the Left is its unwillingness to come to terms with the existing political realities. To do this does not, of course, mean their uncritical acceptance. But before we can effectively change something, we must acknowledge that it exists. Once we begin to substitute fantasy for reality, or mistake reality for a distorted image of it, the task of changing reality becomes more difficult and gross

errors are likely to occur.

As Marx sums it up at the beginning of his 18th Brumaire:

"Men make their own history, but they do not make it first as they please; they do not choose the circumstances for themselves but have to work upon circumstances as they find them, have to fashion the material handed down by the past."

To misconstrue the environment in which one operates may easily result in producing results opposite to what was intended. Let us take the existing political structures. Following the Russian revolution of 1917 it became part of the conventional wisdom of the Left that capitalism is on its last legs and that the material base for most developing bourgeois political structures — above all bourgeois democracy — is fast disappearing. Whilst the experiences between 1918 and 1945 seemed to confirm this diagnosis, subsequent events failed to do so. The existing political structures exhibited unexpected stability. Clearly a Left strategy based on the expectation of their fast disappearance should have been revised.

However, those who went for revision generally ended up by abandoning the socialist 'perspective' altogether. Those who remained 'faithful' stuck with their original, now completely untenable, positions, or created new theories explaining how capitalism had unexpectedly managed to develop a new lease of life — an eventuality that socialists of the 1940-45 period had never anticipated. The two latter positions freed the left from the need to seek in its own political practice an explanation for the continued existence of capitalism. It had to fall back on the view that change would come with the emergence of new forces originating outside the existing political framework. Whether these forces were detected in every current extra-parliamentary movement, or delegated to an indefinite future, makes little difference in practice. The result of both positions is that no use is made of opportunities offered by the ex-

isting political structures.

*But if a frontal attack on bourgeois-democratic states in a situation of dual power is highly unlikely, by what mechanism will the dismantlement of the bourgeois state be achieved?*

Engels, whilst describing a democratic republic as the form of bourgeois state most advantageous to the working class, at the same time characterises it as 'a state in which wealth wields its power indirectly, but all the more effectively'. The bourgeoisie's indirect rule depends on the ability of a bourgeois party to maintain political credibility for its dominance.

The emergence of mass working-class parties provided the ruling class with a further safeguard. This, however, applies only so long as the leadership of these parties is not prepared to move beyond the limits of the bourgeois status quo.

However, the more democratic the structure of these parties, and the greater the opportunities for the rank and file to influence party policy, the less reliable these parties become from the point of view of the ruling class.

The stability of bourgeois-democratic institutions is, of course, not accidental. The relative passivity of the masses means that bourgeois representative institutions provide a mechanism which diverts their dissatisfaction into 'safe' channels. Meagre though the opportunities are that these mechanisms may offer, they have proved effective in stopping the masses exploring other political avenues through which to express their dissatisfaction.

Nevertheless, the hold of bourgeois ideology on the masses has been steadily weakening. In Britain, all the agencies of indoctrination failed to prevent the electorate from voting in majority Labour governments. It would be a mistake to try to explain this by treating the Labour Party as just another bourgeois party and therefore quite 'safe' from the point of view of the ruling class. This overlooks the fact that the 1945 Labour government, for example, was elected despite a concerted

and vitriolic campaign by the bourgeois-controlled media.

The political credibility of the Labour Party, therefore, is not governed by the requirements of the ruling class. A Labour government can be returned even when the ruling class may no longer be certain it will act merely as a safety valve. This in turn depends on the Labour Party's internal politics: balance between the Party's right and left wings.

The experience of 1979-81 has demonstrated that the left can gain majority support within the party. How then do we account for the fact that as a rule the party's right wing is in command? This is to a large extent due to the strategy that the Labour left and the left in general adopt — that is, if 'strategy' is the appropriate description of what the left is doing. Were the Labour left to gain a dominant position within the party, and were a Labour government to make significant inroads into capitalist property relations, bourgeois democracy would cease to be a state in which 'wealth wields its power more effectively'.

The contradiction inherent in a bourgeois democratic structure between its representative institutions and its 'special bodies of armed men, prisons, etc' trained and organised to defend the existing property relations, would assume crucial political significance. The chronic social crisis of the capitalist system would find expression in the crisis of its political regime. The crisis of the political regime is, of course, a necessary condition, if the latent crisis of the social regime is to become manifest.

The fact that the hold of bourgeois ideology over the masses has been steadily weakening does not mean that it has disappeared. At their present level of consciousness the masses are only prepared to accept partial solutions of problems produced by the contradictions of the capitalist system. It follows that the programme on which a Labour government is able to get elected must reflect this. Measures beyond the framework of capitalism will inevitably be limited. It is only the experience of the inadequacy of these measures from which the masses can learn and Labour voters appreciate the need to go further.

The Labour left, let alone the left in general, is not only slow to appreciate the importance of 'constitutional issues'. The left also completely disregards the need to give high priority to 'a significant extension of public ownership' — the single most important item that would take Labour's programme beyond the capitalist status quo.

Equally serious is the left's failure to appreciate the need for a concerted and continuous campaign within the party for the adoption of these priorities. Only the pursuit of a radical reforming programme by a Labour government, as against fantasies about extra-parliamentary forces, will succeed in triggering off a crisis of the bourgeois political regime.

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