

THE LABOUR PARTY AND THE FUTURE OF THE LEFT

David Coates

In the months to come we will, no doubt, have to argue many times in public that the **1983** general election was not as significant a landslide as Margaret Thatcher will continue to claim. We will need to stress over and again that her popular vote actually fell, and that of those who voted, **57.6** per cent actually voted against her. We might even, to sustain ourselves in difficult times, explain away the Labour Party's dismal **performance** by remembering the treachery of a Callaghan, the disloyalty of a Chapple, even the vote-splitting impact of a perfidious Alliance. But there will be no getting away from the fact that the election constituted a massive defeat for the Left as a whole, a defeat from which we will have to recover, and a defeat whose origins lie deeper (and whose causes are more structural) than these easier explanations and rationalisations will allow. Indeed if the Left is to recover—if history is not to come on us once as tragedy and twice as farce—we had better be honest now: about the weakness of the Left as a whole; about the problems of the Labour Party in particular; and about the dangers which will face us if we do not draw very radical lessons indeed for strategy and policy from the **Thatcher**-**victory** and her **144** seat majority.

To do that, we must begin with the election result—a result which certainly indicated the severity of the crisis now facing the Labour Party as an institution. That party is an electoral body, pure and simple. Its solution to the classic dilemmas of socialist transition is, and always has been, straightforwardly parliamentary in focus. What the election result then indicates is the quite extraordinary extent to which the Labour Party is waning as an electoral force. The average vote per Labour candidate in **June 1983** was lower than at any election since **1900**. The Party's share of the vote is now lower than at any election since **1918**. At under nine million, Labour's absolute vote is lower than at any election since **1935**; and in both absolute and percentage terms, the Labour Party's grip on its electorate (which has diminished steadily since **1966**, and **1966** apart, consistently since **1951**) is now declining at an accelerated rate. The Left was quick to point out in **1979** that the Tories were creating an island of two nations—with their support strong in the South and weak in the North. But we must observe now that it is the Labour Party who in electoral terms are creating two nations. In **1983** the Party was virtually

obliterated in the South—outside London, taking only three seats in the area south of the line from Bristol to the Wash. The Labour Party has now been driven back for electoral support into the industrial and urban heartlands of a decaying northern capitalism. It is true that a tiny bedrock of Labour support remains in the South; but its job there is not to win seats but to save deposits, and the arrival of the Alliance has made even that problematic.

Even in the industrial heartlands of northern Britain, the Labour Party is now being challenged by an Alliance vote which has already cost it seats and deposits on an unprecedented scale. In June Labour lost **119** deposits, and came either first or second in only **341** of the **650** seats. Yet it is not enough to blame the Alliance for splitting the progressive vote, tempting as that is in the immediate aftermath of defeat. The Liberals levelled that criticism against Labour itself only three generations ago, and still Labour rose apace. For there is nothing to suggest that the problem of the Alliance will go away. On the contrary, it will stay and no doubt grow, and it will do so because it feeds on widespread electoral scepticism not just about Thatcherism but about Labour too.

Labour's problem (in places like Oxford East and Birmingham Northfield no less than in Nottingham and London) is that significant sections of its traditional electorate are sceptical about the ability of the Labour Party to solve unemployment, and are fearful of Labour Party radicalism on defence, Europe and industry. The problem the Labour Party has, in simple electoral terms, is that it faces a population strongly influenced by media presentations of its personalities and policies, and by one easily swayed by Opposition parties that are understandably quick to exploit that media to draw attention to Labour's internal difficulties. It faces an electorate too with sufficient political memory to recall both the failure of Labour Governments in the past and the bitterness of inner-party wrangling to which those failures gave rise. And it faces an electorate large sections of which are profoundly conservative, jingoistic, sexist and racist in their attitudes and practices. Tragic as it is, such an electorate responds more easily to the jingoism and tough-minded realism of an Iron Lady than to the compassionate intellectualism of an old Liberal-Radical; and certainly in **1983** the Labour Party found no solution to electoral indifference, no matter how hard it fudged its internal disagreements and no matter how far it softened the radicalism of its appeal.

Those outside the Labour Party and to its Left might draw some sectarian comfort from at least part of this. But we delude ourselves if we think that this kind of defeat opens an easy route to political realignment and mass radicalisation on the contemporary Left. It does not. The **1983** election result was not just a defeat for the Labour Party. It was a massive victory for the Right, and we are all going to have to live with the consequences of that. We certainly face new government attacks on trade-union

rights, on civil liberties and on the position of women. We can certainly expect further significant erosions of welfare provision, rising unemployment and the systematic export of industrial capital. We can certainly expect the arrival of Cruise missiles, and a toughening of police and court handling of civil disobedience in the peace campaign. The Left in general is now definitely on the defensive, facing a government confirmed in its reactionary face by the size of its majority in parliament, and underpinned by its own success as an ideological, even hegemonic, force. There may not be a popular majority for every detail of Thatcherism. Indeed, particularly in the area of welfare provision, there is not; and support for her whole project may well decline as we move out of the middle class proper into the manual working class and the proletarianised and unionised sections of white collar employment. But the ideological sweep of Thatcherism cuts both wide and deep. It cuts wide—in that it sustains a generalised sense of helplessness, inevitability and the absence of an alternative—in strata and classes uncommitted to it. And it cuts deep, because Thatcher's own class allies gain in stridency, self-righteousness and confidence from the size of her electoral victory. The balance of class forces has been shifted, as Thatcher is committed to shifting it, decisively against the Left by four years of recession and by a parliamentary landslide; and the job of the Left is to push that balance back and to stem the tide.

Put that way, it is possible to situate the Labour Party and its problems where they should properly be—on the terrain of class and popular-democratic struggle as a whole, and not just in the arena of parliamentary debate and posturing. At its most obvious, what the election defeat does is to render the Labour Party at national level largely *irrelevant* to the struggles against Thatcherism over the next three or four years (or even indeed over the next seven or eight, given the scale of the electoral swing now required to put Labour back in power at Westminster). In these circumstances the centre of gravity of struggle and resistance must and will shift, to the factories, communities and streets where the daily reality of Tory reaction is experienced and lived. That in its turn will oblige the Labour Party to clarify its policies in relation to these struggles, and **not**—as in the previous eighteen months—to insist that those struggles subordinate themselves to the emerging rhythm of Labour Party electioneering. One question to be put to the Labour Party, therefore, and something to be discussed in detail a little later, is what the Party's attitude to, and involvement in, these inevitable struggles is going to be. The peace campaign will be its first test here, but it will not be its last. For as, and to the degree to which, industrial recession eases, working-class self-confidence will and must grow again, and the industrial struggle for jobs and wages will be renewed with greater vigour. One test for the Labour Party, and one crucial question facing the Left as a whole, will be its

ability to mobilise around those struggles: to give support even to isolated pockets of resistance, to assist in the building of strong working-class industrial organisation, and to link activists in industry and civil society across their separate issue-areas, in an emerging coalition of protest outside parliament against Thatcherite excess orchestrated from within.

For even in electoral terms there is a strong Left constituency in this country to be tapped and developed. It is too early yet to give a detailed breakdown on the *1983* vote, and in fact the detail—though intriguing—will probably be less important than the general relationships it will doubtless confirm. For we know already of the existence of well-established left-wing audiences. The peace movement and the women's movement constitute two such: each drawing disproportionately on a middle-class Left entrenched in the bureaucratic structures of the welfare state, and each peopled too by a slightly younger generation of a similar kind, often the product of higher and further education, a generation now largely excluded even from welfare employment and driven back instead into the artisan economy, into domestic production, and into the reserve army of labour. In addition we know of the existence of an activist layer in the trade-union movement, in both the manual and white collar proletariats of Late Capitalism, an activist layer whose members dominate Constituency Labour Parties and who reappear on other nights of the week in peace meetings, union branches and women's caucuses. (It is these people, after all, who most of all aren't deterred from politics by Oscar Wilde's famous complaint that socialism would take a terrible toll of one's evenings.) We know too of the existence of a layer of black activists, and of the potential mass anger of entire ethnic communities locked into urban poverty by racial oppression and capitalist crisis. And we know also of the existence across the working class as a whole not of Thatcherite mendacity but of a mixture of conservative and radical attitudes, an amalgam of ruling-class orthodoxies and anti-system values, there to be burst apart and recast in a left-wing form by a socialist movement as hegemonic in its impact as Thatcher has been since *1979*.

It is true that all is not well for the Left in this its traditional constituency, and that the Labour vote slipped more seriously here than anywhere else in *1983*. More skilled manual workers voted Tory than voted Labour this time; and even among trade unionists, the Labour vote was apparently only *39* per cent. An overall manual working-class vote of *38* per cent is poor even by recent standards, but is indicative nonetheless of a bedrock of Labour support in the traditional proletariat which Thatcherism has not yet managed to penetrate. The Labour vote held up best—and even then not too well—among council house tenants, ethnic minorities and pensioners; and this reminds us that in other crucial groups (the young unemployed, the less organised sections of the manual working class, women isolated in domestic production, and technicians and lower

management) left-wing views are dangerously absent. Yet the very listing of these constituencies gives a first indication of the character and scale of the task ahead for the Left as a whole: and by the Left here I mean not just socialists within the Labour Party, but also the non-aligned Left within the peace and women's movement, and the revolutionary Left most notably in the SWP. It is to aid, encourage, defend and build upon the extra-parliamentary struggles that these groups wage against Thatcherism in its second term, to link together our existing constituencies in common support and struggle, and to consolidate among them a renewed commitment to a democratic socialist alternative which can then be extended out into uncharted social strata whose perspectives now are dominated by cynicism, apathy or Thatcherite dross. That task is, of course, a truly enormous one, but is set for us by the character of the recession and its resulting ruling-class strategy embodied in Thatcherism. What the election result then does in addition is to raise again the question of where the Labour Party fits into such a scenario of extra-parliamentary resistance, left-wing consolidation and potential political radicalisation.



The answer to that question is that, unless things inside the Labour Party change dramatically, then it will hardly figure at all. It is already clear that the major response at leadership level within the Labour Party to the **1983** defeat will be grotesquely inadequate. The disease of the Bourbons is rampant again in Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) circles—an inability to learn anything, to see anything, to break free of the past. Take the Right and Centre of the Labour Party for example. They will, and already are, blaming the defeat on the radicalism of the programme and the assertiveness of the Left, and are hard at it trying to pull the Party's policy commitments back to levels acceptable to the editor of *The Sun* and to their own well-established identification with the logic of private capital accumulation and US imperialism. In response to them, the reaction of the 'soft Left' is even more tragic. The Left is presumably well used to watching Terry Duffy in retreat; but to see Neil Kinnock reducing major political and strategic problems to a series of merely technical issues is particularly galling. He, and others like him, are already saying that the election defeat occurred, not because the programme was too radical, but because the party did not get the message across to its people. For the soft Left, in this age of Saatchi and Saatchi, presentation is all; and they would have us believe that a further debacle can be avoided if more charismatic and articulate leadership is forthcoming, and if the Party can avoid the kind of internal wrangling that put that programme together after **1979**. Long experienced in putting the class struggle off until after the next election, the soft Left is now all for putting the party struggle off too; and is joining its Right and Centre 'partners' in the 'broad

church' of the Labour coalition in planning to start the *politics of fudge* even earlier this time than is normal in Left Labour circles.

For Kinnock stands in a long tradition of Left Labourism. It is a tradition that, when dealing with questions of tactics and programme within the Labour Party, invariably moves from a correct premise to a false conclusion. It invariably begins with the correct observation that divisions within the party coalition will cost votes if they persist, only to go on to draw the same mistaken conclusion that it is the division and not the coalition which is the problem. Instead of deducing from that premise the recognition that the Labour coalition is too wide to be useful to the Left, that Callaghan and Chapple are not actually on our side, they deduce instead that the problem lies in the fact of public division. If first utterances after the election are any guide, the soft Left is poised to begin even earlier this time a process at which down the years they have become particularly adept, namely that of building a specious unity across the gaping chasms of party division by the generation of clever verbal formulae and the incremental surrender of radical positions. That was always a ludicrous and ultimately tragic process; but if it happens this time it will be close to criminal. For if the 1983 election result proves anything, it is that the politics of fudge have had their day, that there is no longer a constituency to be impressed and held together by the verbal uniting of incompatibles, and that the depth of division that now exists in the Labour Party is sufficiently well known to make 'fudging' so unpopular, so lacking in credibility, as to *cost* the party large numbers of votes. And this is true in spite of the fact that we can now expect Fleet Street to change its line on the Labour Party completely, no longer bewailing its divisions but instead praising the range and diversity of the views represented within its tolerant ranks. It is time for the Left to stop listening to the press, who are not its friends, and to examine instead the difficulties created for its project by trying to hold that cumbersome coalition together.

The attempt to hold the coalition together under Centre-Left leadership can be expected to be self-defeating in two related but different ways. It will fail first because the loyalty of the Right to any programme shaped by left-wing pressure will inevitably and necessarily snap, and in consequence will discredit the unity attempt as a whole in the eyes of the electorate, just when it matters most—in the run up to the general election. Of course the public intervention this time by Jim Callaghan may be *dismissable* as the product of an old man's bile. But bile is not the party's only problem. The fact that right-wing dissatisfaction surfaced when it did also reflected the incapacity of paper formulae to remove *real* and *profound* disagreements of a basic kind within the party. Those disagreements have always been there, but are made more acute now by the way in which the current crisis in Late Capitalism is also a crisis of social

democracy—a crisis of that Keynesian corporatism around which hitherto some apparently credible party unity could be constituted. In years gone by, and when the Right ran the Labour Party, left-wing **dissension**—though exploited by the Tories to their electoral advantage—was containable and cost few votes because the Left remained marginalised both in the PLP and the country. But with the Left more dominant in the formation of party policy, an enormous gap opens up between the preoccupations of the activists and the attitudes of the electorate as a whole. This is a gap which the Labour Left's weakness outside the party precludes them from bridging; and it is a gap which, as a result, inspires the Right to speak out against the programme as part of their struggle to roll back the Left. The result, of course, is a visible plethora of Labour Party positions laid before the voters, a range of disagreements then picked up and amplified by an unsympathetic media and a hostile set of Opposition politicians, and a range of disagreement which, by its very existence and regardless of its content, drives many voters away from a party which seems too split to govern itself, let alone anybody else.

In seeking to hold together a coalition containing disagreements of that severity, any Centre-Left leadership of the Labour Party in the 1980s will also experience a second blockage on its project—a second impediment even to successful electioneering, let alone to any formation of mass enthusiasm for socialist transformation—a blockage which arises from the necessary inability of that leadership to present the socialist case with sufficient conviction. For Thatcherism's sweep through the popular consciousness is not just a product of good advertising. It has happened only because the general credibility of old style social democracy—of Keynesianism plus welfare corporatism—has been eroded by two long spells of unsuccessful Labour government. And it has happened too because the Labour Party's own reassessment of where its programme should go as a result has been insufficiently radical in its content, **insufficiently** explanatory in its presentation, and insufficiently honest about the failures of the past—and necessarily so. Tony Benn apart perhaps, few leading Labour politicians have been able publicly to break with their own past. They have all had a collective interest in presenting their new policy as but an incremental outgrowth of their old—and that has never been a very credible posture, alienating left-wing voters by suggesting that old habits will in practice die hard, and alienating right-wing ones by implying that the radical new Labour Party is just posed to repeat the disasters of the old one.

Worse than that, the Left in particular within the Labour Party has a real problem in presenting its radical programme with sufficient clarity and enthusiasm to undo the damage of the past and to win sizeable numbers of new converts. For radical programmes need a lot of explaining. They require honesty about past failures. They require detail on what is now

to be done, and why more moderate policies will no longer suffice. They require a clear specification of the problems any Left policy will necessarily encounter, any likely oppositions that will arise, and some indication of how those problems and oppositions will be handled. Such honesty is particularly vital too because the radicalism of the programme will leave the Party open to accusations of communism and totalitarianism, accusations whipped up into frenzy by a Tory press able to capitalise on **30** years of Cold War ideology in the popular consciousness, and accusations that have a particularly potent impact on the undecided voter when defence is itself one of the major areas of the new radicalism. In these circumstances it is not enough to reduce Trident to a question of costs, to fudge on Polaris, and to try to sell membership of NATO as compatible with unilateralism. In those circumstances only an honest, regular and full confrontation with the whole set of assumptions and practices of the Cold War can begin to erode the basis in popular consciousness on which the Tory smear tactics of 'gambling with the nation's defences' are so solidly grounded.

But it is just that kind of argument that the Labour Left cannot put in the name of the Labour Party as a whole if it wishes to keep its unity with the Labour Right and Centre. To do so would be to break decisively (and hence to criticise explicitly) the role of the Labour Party itself as the major post-war architect of that very system of alliances, and to jeopardise the ability of a Healey or a Callaghan to remain in the Labour Party at all. The capacity of the Labour Party under Centre-Left leadership to roll back Tory hegemony in an area as vital as defence is thus eroded from the outset, because so much of the Labour coalition is at best a reluctant and silent partner in the new radicalism and at worst actually agrees with Thatcher and the Alliance on the question of Russian expansionism. In such circumstances, to speak out clearly is to threaten the unity of the whole coalition. Yet to be silent is to lose the case by default, and to see the electorate remain sceptical of, or even hostile to, Labour radicalism as Tory propaganda and **30** years of Cold War rhetoric take their inevitable toll. It is also to see the radical constituency beyond the Labour Party grow in despair and disillusionment at the shilly-shallying and backsliding of Labour leaders who were thought to be on our side. As a strategy for winning votes, the politics of fudge got the worst of all worlds in **1983**. It didn't stop disunity. It didn't protect even existing levels of Labour voting; and it seriously alienated sections of an already mobilised Left (not least in the peace movement). And now we find that the Labour Left, if Neil Kinnock has his way, is going to start that fudging all over again. But what Kinnock and others like him do not seem to realise is that to unite the Labour Party now on the terms set by Hattersley and Healey will not so much prevent a repetition of **1983** in **1988** as guarantee its certainty.

III

For what the Left actually has to do, if it is ever to win a popular majority again, is not something that the Labour Party can do without driving significant sections of the Labour Party off to the Alliance where they belong. What it has to do is to establish a very different relationship with its entire electorate than that possible or conventional under social democratic parliamentarianism. The politics of the Labour Party hitherto have been the politics of the *carpetbagger*. Wholly preoccupied with the electoral battle, the Labour Party has offered no extra-parliamentary leadership to, or indeed support for, a whole range of struggles that go on outside parliament and between elections. Instead, as a machine and as a presence at grass roots level, it has lain dormant between elections, only to swing into frenetic activity in the three or four weeks before voting is to occur. In those moments it has insisted—always by implication and often quite explicitly—that everything else be put on one side, and that the whole task of the Left be turned into door-knocking and vote catching. Of course the very fact that the Labour Party in the vast majority of constituencies hasn't crossed any door steps since the last election tends to mean that fewer doors open to it, and that doors open to it with increasing indifference, except in circumstances of Tory crisis that the Labour Party can do little itself to precipitate. Not surprisingly then, Labour majorities when they come tend to be accidental rather than created, and invariably prove to be as tenuous as they are fortuitous. And as they slip away, the growing resistance met by canvassers on the door seems only to encourage Labour's inveterate door knockers to knock even more frenetically, as though a better canvassing *technique* could resolve what in fact is a profound *political* weakness in the whole Labour Party strategy.

Door knocking can be a party's main form of contact with its potential constituency only if that party is set on building an inherently intermittent, passive and instrumental relationship with its base. Such a relationship is ideal for conservative parties bent on consolidating mass loyalty to the prevailing order whilst seeking to discourage any mass active participation within it. But it is useless for socialist parties seeking to radicalise a mass base for participation in qualitative social change. The Labour Party down the years has not tried systematically to build a socialist counter-culture around its people. Instead it has left hegemonic politics to its opponents, and then has dashed in periodically to see if its supporters have managed to stay loyal in spite of all the Tory pressures working upon them. Not surprisingly it has found that, in its absence, its electorate, if still loyal at all, has drifted steadily away to the Right. Instead of building a socialist connection with its base, the Labour Party has simply offered itself as a *better* kind of system manager, better at getting economic growth, better

at providing national strength, industrial competitiveness and so on. It has even restricted its vocabulary, and its criteria of success and failure, to those given to it by its Tory opponents. Labour's presentation of the 'national interest' is not qualitatively different from that of the Conservatives. Its commitment to a world role within the US alliance is as great as theirs. Its identification with the whole paraphernalia of the modern capitalist state and its dominant symbols (from the monarchy to parliament) is just the same as the pro-capitalist parties it faces across the Despatch Box. And like them, the Labour Party has repeatedly invited its electorate to judge its performance against these conservative criteria: and of course they have, to the Party's immense cost. For its discovery repeatedly in government that you cannot run and reform capitalism at the same time, and that a weak British capitalism cannot be revived by shifting power away from capital to labour, has cost it dear in votes. Having claimed so much and delivered so little, and having consolidated only a voting relationship with its base that invited a purely instrumental reaction to that pattern of failure, the Party has seen its vote drift away, with only itself to blame.

For we are now, and we will remain, in a deep capitalist crisis of a very special kind. Since that crisis is world wide, we can expect no easing of foreign competition. Since it is a crisis of state spending as well as of private profit, we can expect no Keynesian solution. Since it is a crisis of accumulation and not just of realisation, we can expect no industrial recovery without severe curtailments of union rights and welfare provision. And since the British experience of that crisis is so acute, we can expect too that the attack on the working class here will be particularly great. In that context, and with the Alliance here to stay in some form, the Labour Party has no choice but to offer a *radical* programme if it is to avoid slipping away into political oblivion. And if it is to sustain that radicalism effectively, it has to find new ways of penetrating the popular consciousness, and of rolling back powerful tides of Conservative propaganda and prejudice. The intellectual filth of British imperialism has to be cleaned off the beaches of the British mind. Speeches alone will not do that, however charismatic the speaker. Only a party that is capable of building *organic* links with its class base will have a chance of consolidating institutions, attitudes and practices across the entire working class (old and new, manual and white collar) that can act as an effective shield against right-wing pressure; and that organic link can only come through the immersion of the Labour Party, on a daily basis, in the extra-parliamentary struggles of its people.

The Labour Party linkage with its base is now so thin that such an organic connection has not so much to be consolidated as created afresh. The Labour Party will not be able to make that fresh connection unless it is willing also to make a qualitative and unambiguously distinct break

with the defining features of its whole politics hitherto. The odds against it making that break are, of course, enormous; but at least the break that is now required is starkly obvious. If the Party is ever to build an organic link with its people, if it is ever to make a major contribution to the creation of a mass movement for socialist change in Britain, and if it is ever to re-establish its credibility as a serious political alternative in the eyes of the working class as a whole, it has to throw itself unambiguously into the support and encouragement of factory occupations, peace campaigns, black struggles and women's resistance. It has to so immerse itself in the daily lives of the people it would represent that it will be in a position to recast its policies in ways that link the immediate preoccupations of the dispossessed with the longer term process of shifting class power on a permanent basis. It has to open discussions with its real allies—in the movements already in existence to its left and with the revolutionary socialist current—on ways of working together to consolidate a new broad alliance of radical forces. And it has to resist with enthusiasm the hysterical opposition that this will provoke from the Tory press and the Party's own right wing, and live with the internal party divisions and short-term electoral costs that such a radicalisation of its whole politics will involve.

Of course, such a strategy will require enormous courage and extremely strong nerves, for in the short term the Labour Party will look significantly weaker, and the Alliance stronger, as the Right and Centre of the Party defect. But the Labour Party is now so weak that even the short-term costs of such a realignment are not as real as they once appeared. On the contrary, the old argument of the Right (that the party must tailor its policies to the existing preoccupations of the people, because that alone was the route through which a Labour Government could be returned to end the ravages of Toryism) must now be turned back against it. The electoral route to power through policy-moderation is now blocked by the Alliance, and is no longer a short-term solution when Margaret Thatcher has a majority of 144. Nor will the local government enclaves of Left Labourism in London and Sheffield survive easily the attacks now planned upon them by the Thatcher government. In these circumstances, the only effective defence against Tory ravages this side of 1988 will come from the extra-parliamentary struggles waged by workers, ethnic minorities, peace movements and the like; so that if the Right is genuine in its commitment to the protection of its people, it is in those campaigns that it too will immerse itself. The Right will not do that of course, and if left-wing forces inside the Labour Party insist on trying, the internal battles will be fierce, and temporarily costly for all the parties involved. But the price will be worthwhile if a clear realignment on the Left is the outcome. For we cannot avoid the fact that realignments of this order do take time. Time however is the one commodity which, after 9 June, the Labour Party

now has in abundance. The Labour Party is no longer so close to electoral victory that it needs to worry over-much about short-term marginal adjustments in its popular standing. A **12.8** per cent swing takes one hell of a lot of getting. Far from offering the Labour Party the prospect of political power even in the medium term, the election of **1983** has really put a much more basic strategic choice before the Party: either to go for a new form of politics altogether, or to dwindle away into an even paler shadow of its always inadequate former self.

Now the Labour Party, sadly, is very good at dwindling away; and the odds are that the soft Left's propensity for the politics of fudge will prevent it from undertaking the kinds of changes required. It is much more likely that the bulk of the Labour Left leadership in parliament—no matter who leads the party—will continue to preach the virtues of party unity, will 'hang on in' with the Healeys and the Hattersleys of this world, and will peddle again a programme of radicalised Keynesianism, a sort of Wilsonian modernisation programme Mark II, with appropriate left-wing rhetoric. The fact that such a programme is unlikely to be electorally convincing, and that it would be wholly ineffective if ever applied, is not likely to stop the powerful party pressures for unity from winning the day. And if unity comes on those terms—and it can come on no other given the intransigence of the Labour Party's Right and Centre—then we can guarantee plenty of repetitions of past failures in the years to come—repetitions, that is, not just of **1983**, but of the disasters of **1974-9** as well.

However, I suppose this is still just an open question, one for socialists in the Labour Party to explore in the months ahead. Now is the moment for socialists to test the true credentials of the Labour Party against the scale and character of the task before us. For out of the ashes of this enormous defeat we have to consolidate a new Left, by bringing **together**—first in campaigns of common action and mutual support, and later in a formal political coalition—the three currents of socialist activism that now exist. Two of those are already in place: the revolutionary Left, and the non-aligned Left in the unions, CND and the **women's** movement. The time of choice for the third—for socialists in the Labour Party—has been brought forward by the result on **9 June**. If the Labour Party can be persuaded quickly to make a sharp break with its own past, then socialists within the Labour Party will be able to deliver a vital component to that new grouping on the Left. But if, as seems more likely, the politics of **fudge** predominate again, then socialists will have to leave the Party and take on the undeniably more difficult task of consolidating a new Left that has no official Labour Party presence within it at all. The future of the Left lies in the consolidation of a new strength outside parliament. The question for socialists inside the Labour Party, now more acutely than ever, is whether and how they can participate in that consolidation, and how they can avoid being drawn instead into yet another attempt to

bolster the bankrupt electoral politics of old-style Labourism.

The arguments in this paper derive from, and are developed further in, chapters by Gordon Johnston, Robert Looker and myself in volume 2 of A Socialist Primer (published by Martin Robertson under the title Socialist Strategies). Earlier drafts of this paper were discussed with John Kelly's students at the LSE, and with Gordon, Bob, John Charlton and Ralph Miliband. Arthur Lipow, Sue Thomson, Lewis Minkin, Morris Szeftel and David Beetham also commented on, and often disagreed quite sharply with, an earlier draft. So I must stress that responsibility for the final version is mine alone.