

The slow death of Labour England?

As the Labour Party begins its leadership battle, Alan Ryan looks at the lessons of the election

Of course we mustn't exaggerate. Not only did Mrs Thatcher pick up a smaller percentage of the popular vote last Thursday than she did in 1979—42.4 per cent to 43.9 per cent—but she got a smaller percentage of the vote than the Tories got when they narrowly lost in 1964—when they picked up 43.4 per cent of the vote—and a bare ½ per cent more than they got in 1966 when Labour had a majority of 96. There hasn't been a stampede to Conservatism, and there hasn't been a wild love affair between the working class and Mrs T. The "nanny theory" of the electorate—that it longs for the government of firm smacks—is an amusing but silly piece of sociological journalism.

There hasn't exactly been a stampede out of the Labour Party either. It is self-evident that what gives Mrs Thatcher her "landslide" is the operation of the British electoral system on an evenly divided non-Tory vote. It is equally evident that what's been happening is a crumbling of the Labour vote in recent years in favour of the Liberals and latterly the SDP. But it is not a stampede. It is more like an embarrassed shuffling away from a boring and elderly relative. We must not exaggerate the pace of change.

It is true that, at 28 per cent, the Labour share of the vote last week was lower than at the debacle of 1931, lower than at any election since 1918. But it was only 9 per cent down on 1979, and 11 per cent lower than in 1974—and the Tory vote since the war has gone up and down by a good deal more than 10 per cent, as the chart shows. Should members of the Labour Party be

offered a comforting glass of hemlock? Or would that be to encourage the merely injured to despair prematurely? There are certainly grounds for caution.

Twenty five years ago, all sorts of people queued up to give the Labour Party its death certificate. Jo Grimond thought Harold Macmillan's triumph in the 1959 general election showed, once and for all, that the marriage of trade unionism and classless progressivism had shot its bolt. The Liberals, he thought, would duly inherit the non-conservative (or non-Conservative) vote. In 1960 Mark Abrams's book, *Must Labour Lose?*, offered a qualified Yes in answer to its own question. At almost the first political meeting I ever attended, I heard Dick Crossman arguing that the Labour Party would never again form a government, and should see its main task as agitation and propaganda, keeping up a socialist critique of capitalist affluence as managed by Macmillan.

The corpse may dance

But at the tenth or eleventh meeting I ever went to, I heard him announce that Labour was the natural party of government, a view which David Butler and Donald Stokes seemed to support in 1969 in their *Political Change in Britain*. They argued that the Labour vote ought to get more and more solid as more and more children grew up in families with a tradition of voting Labour. So there is at least a sporting chance that the corpse will get up and dance in 1988.

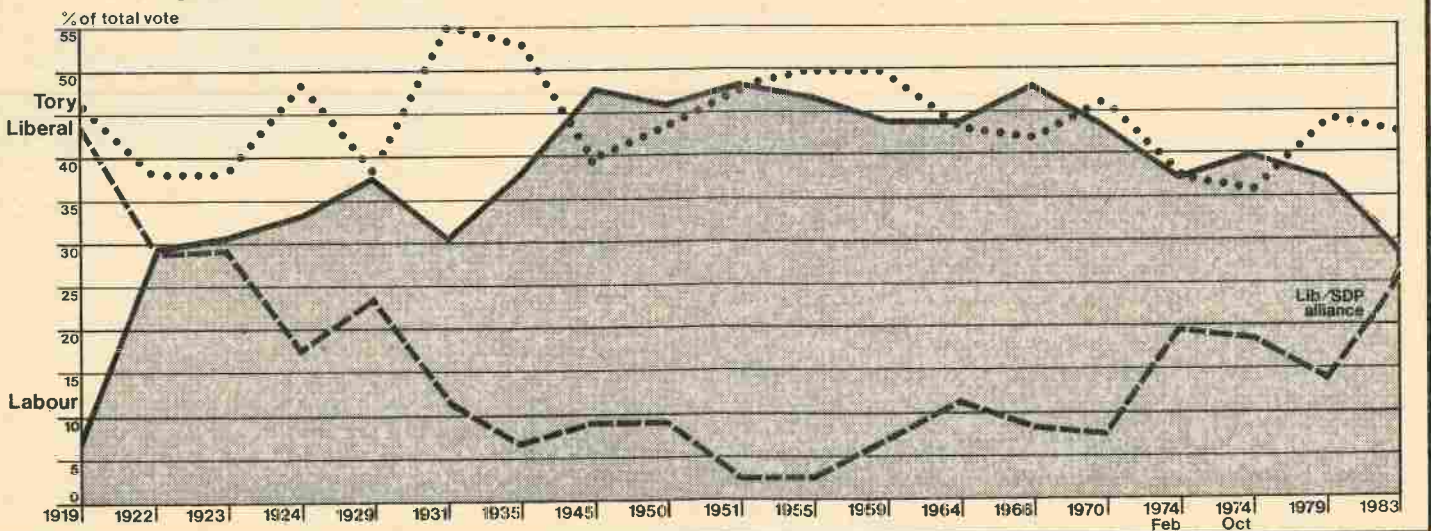
All the same, I think the gambling man would do well to put his shirt on the pro-

position that the old Labour Party is dead on its feet, and that if an animal called the Labour Party forms another government, that animal will be a lot more like the German Social Democratic Party or the American Democratic Party than like what Alan Watkins, writing in the *Observer*, affectionately calls TIGMOO, or "this great movement of ours." Party organisation, the advantages of union backing, the idiosyncracies of the electoral system, can hold out against economic and demographic changes for so long—25 years at least, so far, and perhaps another ten. But once old Labour Britain is thoroughly dead, the old Labour Party is on borrowed time.

The first thing to reflect on is that the Labour Party always was a mistake by the Liberal Party. Socialism as such is a minority taste, and there was never any ideological barrier to the late 19th century Liberal Party forming an alliance with labour. Any votes the Liberal Party lost to the Tories as some employers switched sides would have been handsomely recouped with the expansion of the electorate in 1918, when all adult males, and most women, got the vote. But working class candidates would have cost local Liberal Associations a lot of money. Until 1912, unpaid MPs would have had to be kept alive somehow. The Liberals blew it. The political result was chronicled by Stanley Dangerfield in a famous book, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*.

"Labourism"—the doctrine of giving the workers what they want, so far as you can afford it—wouldn't have stuck in the Liberals' throats at a time when unions were

The popular vote at all elections since 1918





very obviously *defensive* organisations. A Lib-Lab Party would have done a great deal better than either the Labour or Liberal parties have done since in practice: only from 1945 to 1950 and from 1966 to 1970 has there been a left-of-centre government with a decent parliamentary majority (or any majority at all). Friendship with, but independence from, the unions is still the ideal relationship.

Because the Labour Party was invented by the unions, it is easy to think of the trade union movement as a socialist movement. After all, the constitution of the Labour Party, adopted in 1919, is undeniably a socialist platform. But you only need to reflect for five minutes on the ambivalence of trade unions about worker co-operatives to see that trade unions in Britain are still organisations for the defence of wages and job security.

Unions and their members

Because they are defensive organisations, they have probably been much less good at doing what they are in business to do than they might have been. But that is beside the point. The point is that *once* they were also good at instilling political solidarity, and at making sure that voters got out and voted for "our man." Now they aren't.

Union members evidently treat their unions with a much cooler and more utilitarian attitude than the old ethos of "us and our mates right or wrong" would suggest. The evidence of last Thursday is that neither the socialist rhetoric of union leaders, nor appeals to solidarity in self-defence, translate into votes any more. Union members value their unions for specific tasks. They don't take much notice of them in politics.

The Abrams-Grimond view that the old Labour Party had had it by 1959 wasn't entirely contradicted by the Harold Wilson era. The Wilson appeal was technocratic and managerial. 1964 was the election when Tony Benn stood for the white heat of technology, beautiful bigness and corporate mergers. The Wilson government was not in the least socialist, nor particularly friendly

to the sectional interests of trade unions.

The tension between what Wilson was after and the nature of the party, was disguised by a host of things. His reputation for socialist virtue went back to his resignation, with Aneurin Bevan, in protest against prescription charges in 1951, and his defence of Clause Four against Gaitskell. But by 1968—when the union legislation set out in the white paper, *In Place of Strife*, was sabotaged by Jim Callaghan and the union leaders—it was obvious that you can't run a party committed simultaneously to doing whatever unions want and being the party of "modernisation."

Labour Britain has never, of course, been just working class union-member Britain. Labour has always needed to call on a crucial section of middle class opinion—or, in a way, two sections.

The most important section is what you might call the loosely progressive middle class. These are the sort of people who want "greater social justice," or some equally unspecific goal. They are not people who think naturally in class war terms, or who see the people's party as defending Us against Them. They are people who think governments ought to do even-handed justice between classes, and don't think such governments are impossible to get.

This section of opinion is, on the whole, easily convinced that Conservatism is just the defence of vested interests, and the reinforcement by politics of unwarranted inequalities of one sort and another. But it is essentially unideological—or, to put it differently, it is essentially liberal in its ideological views, and has for a long time supposed that the Labour Party is the vehicle of liberalism. Now it doesn't. It doesn't because it is susceptible to the view that trade unions have moved from being licit and useful means of defence to being merely obstructive and damaging. It doesn't, because it is also susceptible to the view that Labour has boited from internationalism into isolationism.

The less important segment of middle class opinion on which the Labour Party always depended was the committed socialist segment. This segment still exists. Sometimes most of it seems to be staffing committees of the GLC, but it is doubtless a bit more substantial than that. Its impact on the organisation of the Labour Party itself is out of all proportion to its capacity for pulling in votes.

Any party of the left depends on the existence of people who aren't deterred by Oscar Wilde's famous complaint that socialism would take a terrible toll of one's evenings. A party faced by Britain's electoral system cannot afford to let the committed socialist middle class produce either the platform or the candidates. In the old Labour Britain they were simply *used* by the reformers and the solid union men, and they were comprehensively sat on by the likes of Bevan, Citrine and Deakin if they thought that their labours in the constituency parties entitled them to choose the leader, dictate the programme or bully MPs.

The alliance of labourism and middle

class progressivism depended on keeping the socialists in check, and ensuring that they did it where they wouldn't scare the horses. Now the sort of people who would formerly have provided the necessary ballast don't go to meetings of an evening. So union funds end up financing a politics which perhaps one union member in five approves of.

Many people lament the death of Labour Britain. Goldthorpe and Lockwood's *Affluent Worker* studies were elegant and effective in destroying the idea that the affluent worker would instantly translate his car and mortgage into a Conservative vote. But they also painted a picture of a new working class which was less emotionally appealing than its father's generation. Instrumental and calculating in its politics, it might well vote Labour, but out of self-interest, rather than loyalty to its class. Behind the cool sociological argument lingered a sort of nostalgia for the closed community of the mill town and the mining village, where socialism wasn't a matter of conviction but an extension of the cooperation which was a necessity of everyday life.

But there is a much more cheerful view of all this. The price of old-fashioned solidarity was high. At the least, it required a cultural narrowness and conformism which nobody who escaped it ever minded escaping. That sort of narrowness has been irreparably destroyed by postwar affluence.

In the same view, the paternalism of old-fashioned Labour local authorities was no



Judah Passow

accident. Council tenants who wanted to do such astonishing things as painting their doors a non-approved colour were treated like ungrateful children, precisely because they were felt to be ungrateful children.

The rhetoric of freedom as employed by Norman Tebbit sounds pretty dreadful in the face of three million unemployed. But the desire not to be beholden to authority isn't intrinsically a bad thing. It feeds on, and fuels, the instinct of the new working class to get and spend as it chooses and how it chooses.

This doesn't mean that the motto of the new working class is "devil take the hind-

most." Nor does it mean that you could sell the electorate the abolition of most of the social services in return for a small cut in taxation. Nor does it mean that Mrs Thatcher is safe until 1999, or whenever. Indeed, this new independence and individualism means that if the Conservatives make as big a mess of the economy as they have for the past five years, a half-way competent-looking opposition, whether it's Labour or Liberal led, will pick up every by-election vacancy.

But it does mean that what the psephological trade calls "partisan de-alignment" is here to stay. That is, it is no good the Labour Party—under whatever leader it chooses to fill Michael Foot's shoes—trying to fight an election by appealing to what it did in the 1930s to defend British workers against Baldwin and Chamberlain. Even if the British are a "traditionally minded" people, they aren't interested in fighting about who was right 30 years before most of them were born.

The social basis of the old Labour Party is dead, therefore, and to lament it is a terrible mistake. It is, after all, just because many of its hopes have come true that it is dead. Who, except perhaps Jeremy Seabrook (who *escaped* from the working class), is going to lament the decline of the role of human muscle in industry, even though it does mean that there are only about a quarter as many manual workers in the British workforce as there were at the turn of the century?

The world of the computer may threaten terrible technological unemployment. It also opens up the world to people who would otherwise have been stuck with drudgery all their lives. Progress has its social costs. No doubt the British housewife with a washing machine interacts less with her neighbours than the third-world woman washing at the communal trough. But then, again, she lives 30 years longer. The warmth, as well as the squalor, of *The Road to Wigan Pier* is less in evidence.

The way forward?

But the non-Conservative electorate is very visibly a forward-looking one. It is attached to competence; social justice at not too high a cost in individual freedom; and security against the miseries of old age, unemployment and crime. "Capitalism" provokes no shudders, "socialism" no enthusiasm.

It has been getting truer for 40 years that the humane management of bread-and-butter issues is what the left-to-centre vote is about. Last Thursday rather more than half of such voters plumped for Labour candidates; rather under half for Liberal/SDP Alliance candidates. By 1988, nobody—well, almost nobody—will be able to kid himself that a buried demand for Bright Red Radicalism is waiting to be tapped. If the point *is* taken by the Labour Party, it will be a party with a programme more like the Alliance than the one which has just lost so heavily. If the point *isn't* taken, then presumably the steady growth of an alternative will continue.

How do they know what's good for you?

Bernard Dixon on whether eating should induce such guilt

"But all our restaurants in Germany are now pizza restaurants..."

Dr J. M. Diehl was replying to a questioner during the fourth European Nutrition Conference in Amsterdam. He may have been exaggerating. But this reminder of how far national cuisines have crossed national boundaries since the last war certainly contrasted with the gloomy mien of many of the health educators he was talking to. Hell-bent on the idea of persuading everyone to eat sensibly, they talked more about the obstacles facing such crusading efforts than about evidence that people alter their diets radically if enticed to do so.

Pizzas in West Germany, burgeoning fruit juice sales in Sweden (since the stuff began to be displayed next to supermarket milk rather than alongside organic oddities), and even Britain's boom in bottled water (a surprising feature of the recession), all confirm that human guts and palates are by no means resistant to change.

It is true, of course, that well-intentioned nutritional educators confront certain barriers. Françoise Bequette, who spends her days seeking to adjust the eating habits of the French population, listed several of them in Amsterdam. "Commercial interests, supported by impressive publicity investments, tend to influence choices which are not necessarily the healthiest ones," she began. Moreover, "economic interests are not always in keeping with health—the promotion of butter consumption within the EEC, for example." Add to these irritants the "scandals that sell," which are purveyed by newspapers instead of the "objective, accurate dossiers" she would prefer to see, and people like Mme Bequette definitely require perseverance if they are to succeed in broadcasting wholesome notions.

As she also noted, even the Common Market's nutrition experts cannot agree whether children ought to receive free school milk. The EEC was happy with the skimmed variety which used to be distributed in continental schools. But the gratis distribution of whole-milk (as in Britain) has become a formidably contentious issue.

Should growing youngsters be given such an excellent source of protein and other nutrients to compensate for possibly inadequate nourishment at home (the line taken in Britain by the Black report and the Child Poverty Action Group)? Or should they be deprived of this daily slug of animal fat both to protect their immediate health and as implicit dietary education for the future?

Contrasting views of this sort must give pause to all keen evangelists for sensible eating. There are so many, and such profound, disagreements in this peculiarly personal branch of applied biology. Is the

feverish pursuit of nutritional education really justified? And what about government policies—those of Norway, in particular—which go much further than propaganda and seek to *ensure* that we ingest only that which is currently deemed good for us and are denied the rest?

As it happens, the conflicting voices at the Amsterdam conference last month have been supplemented by scientific papers published recently which reflect a marked degree of uncertainty about other relationships between diet and health. Take, for instance, the cause and treatment of obesity.

At Amsterdam, the participants listened to one speaker, Professor M. Berger from the University of Dusseldorf, whose opinions are by no means universal among specialists dealing with overweight. "I am sceptical, surprised and disgusted," he said, "when I see that nutritionists in rich industrialised countries view obesity as one of the main problems of our time." Berger rejects this view. He does not deny the risks associated with severe obesity. But he believes that only patients who are as much as 35 to 40 per cent above the so-called "ideal" poundage given in height-weight tables need dietary action.

Obese but longer-lived

Professor Berger (a man sufficiently sure of himself to announce on this public platform that his fellow-Germans are now more obese, yet live longer) takes a position considered somewhat extreme by many other clinicians. Yet two of his arguments are certainly telling. First, health campaigns are far more potent in fostering guilt among individuals who are only slightly too heavy than in driving the grossly fat to get rid of their excess flesh. Second, we do not understand the fundamental nature of obesity, and its victims may well belong to various genetic subgroups. Until scientists delineate these underlying causes, attempts at treatment cannot be firmly grounded.

The extent of our knowledge and ignorance about the basis of obesity was described in Amsterdam by John Garrow from the Clinical Research Centre, Harrow. Dr Garrow, who also reviewed this subject recently in the *British Medical Journal*, highlighted both the simple and not-so-simple aspects of the problem. People undoubtedly become fat because their energy intake exceeds their energy output. But within any group of obese or lean individuals, there is a wide range of energy requirements. So a diet on which one person gains weight can cause someone else to shed weight.

Beyond those basic statements lies a welter of confusion. Obesity must result from