CAMDEN TRIBUNE

Issue no 3

Labour's Independent Voice for Democratic Socialism

ELECTION FALL-OUT

*Labour's renewal must go on

The 1987 General Election, Labour's third defeat in a row, contained many paradoxes. We ran an outstanding campaign, yet received our second lowest share of the vote since 1918. We made spectacular gains in Scotland, yet lost seats in London and the South East.

* Appeal

Labour's appeal on specific issues - health, education, housing - was a potent force which worried Tory Central Office every time the gap in the polls narrowed. Yet, despite Labour's popularity on these issues, we were undoubtedly dogged by an unfavourable 'image' - an image of divisions, on incompetence, and of the "loony left".

* Choice

We made inroads into the Conservative ideology of "choice". Increasingly Labour challenges the myth that we are the Party of uniformity and lack of choice, but we have much further to go. We must reassert our Party as the Party of freedom. We must recognise the extent of the "consumer revolution", and the popular desire for real and effective choice.

* Monoliths

This has important implications for the way Labour runs some local authorities. As long as we run bureaucratic monoliths controlled from the Town Hall (no matter how well-meaning or 'left-wing' they are) local people will not want to defend local services. Badly managed local services undermine people's faith in collective provision. Well managed local services enhance ande develop individual choice and individual freedom.

In some parts of the country this is better understood than others. In the North and Scotland 57% of the working-class voted Labour; in the south-east only 28%. Yet only 32% of working-class owner-occupiers (as against 57% of Council tenants) voted for us - Labour's image once again let us down.

* Debate

The defeat of June 1987 will properly be followed by a period of debate and reflection within the Party - demographic change, policy, constitutional issues, the "London factor" will all be discussed by the Party. We must start now to analyse how our Party can appeal to the 2/3rds of the population who chose not to vote for us.

We must develop the Party as a mass campaigning organisation, a Party which enthuses as well as a party which listens. Laying the basis for victory in 1991 starts now.

Martin Plaut
Chair

Gareth Smyth
Newsletter editor

The July issue of Camden Tribune will attempt to take forward the wider issues of Labour's renewal in the wake of the General Election result. We hope to cover

* view from the new House of Commons
* the financial crisis in the inner-London authorities
* the "London factor" - can it be turned to Labour's advantage ?

If you would like to write for Camden Tribune or help with its production, please don't hesitate to contact Gareth Smyth, newsletter co-ordinator, on 482 1583.

THE CHRIS SMITH COLUMN



Making socialism relevant again

ON ELECTION night, I was euphoric. In Islington South, against one of the strongest SDP challenges in the country, we had won – with an increased majority, an increased share of a much larger poll, and a Labour vote that had gone up by nearly 25 per cent.

It was only gradually that the full horror of what was happening around the rest of England began to sink in. Seat after seat that we should have gained remaining resolutely in Tory hands. Good friends and comrades like Alf Dubs and Nick Raynsford going down to undeserved defeat. Above all, the need to adjust our minds to the cold unlovely reality of another term of rampant Thatcherism.

Why did it all happen? Inevitably, there are many answers to that question, and the next few weeks will be filled with attempts at analysis. I offer one explanation in particular, and it is a sobering one for all of us in the Labour movement. *Thatcher's victory was a victory for the politics of self-interest.*

She has convinced a substantial slice of the population – working-class people as well as those of comfortable middle-England – that they have a personal stake in capitalism. The sale of shares in privatised enterprises; the sale of council houses; the deliberate generating of fear about Labour's taxation proposals: all have been designed, quite deliberately, to make voters think they ought in their own interests to vote Tory.

It has been dressed up in a bogus morality about choice and freedom, of course. But it is a naked appeal to financial interest, nonetheless. The sadness is that it's all a glossy illusion, built on credit, the sale of assets that are running out, and an economy floated on oil. It can't last.

Against the politics of self-interest, we counterposed the politics of compassion, we talked ceaselessly about health, jobs, schools and pensions and we did it brilliantly.

Everyone who has said that the Labour Party ran a marvellous campaign is absolutely right. We did. The trouble is that the politics of compassion is not enough. It galvanises one-third of the electorate, yes. Our voters were coming out in droves, eager to vote, far more enthusiastic than they were four years ago. But it doesn't begin to erode the "We can't vote Labour because it will damage our interests" argument.

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LABOUR'S INDEPENDENT VOICE

FOR DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM

Those who are sufficiently conscience-stricken but nonetheless fearful of financial disadvantage end up voting SDP: not for nothing did it run its advertisement saying you can have your head *and* your heart with the cuddly Alliance.

This, then, strikes me as the central dilemma for socialists in the coming months. How do we fashion a political appeal that sustains our commitment to eradicate disadvantage and enhances collective provision as well as addressing the perceived need of those who are not disadvantaged to protect their own interests?

IT CAN be done: the commitment of the overwhelming majority of the population to the health service is an obvious example. The increasing level of concern about the need to curb exploitation of the environment (in the interests both of individuals anxious about themselves and of the community as a whole) is another. The same link needs to be created in all other areas of policy too.

I'm not arguing for a moment that we should cease to be an altruistic party, and try to play the same selfish game as the Tories have been doing for centuries. I'm arguing that we must make our altruism relevant to those who at present are simply not responding to the call to have a conscience.

The finest speech of the whole campaign was Neil Kinnock's first – about the thousand generations who had had no platform.

It set out graphically the case for socialist *values*. It took head-on all the tawdry Thatcherite moralising about choice and it made the case for enabling community provision come alive. We need a lot more of that: a lot more explaining about what we stand for, deep down, as a party over the next four years.

I'm disappointed but not downhearted. The opportunity is there, infinitely more accessible than it was in 1983, for us to transform the political argument and the direction of political thinking in Britain.

If we think intelligently about *how* we make our socialism relevant to the great mass of ordinary people, we'll derive rich rewards in popular support. If we don't, we'll be here again in four years time – and the analysis will be far, far more difficult then. It will be far less hopeful too.

● *Chris Smith is Labour MP for Islington South and Finsbury.*

-The Third Tory Term

* A Strategy for Camden Council ?

The overwhelming Tory election victory on June 11th brings to an end an era in local Government. Onimous remarks about the 'inner cities' from Thatcher on election night and the Tory commitment to 'tackle' education and housing bode ill for the future of authorities like ILEA and Camden.

▪ Strategy

To deal with this situation as successfully as possible the Councils need to adopt a strategy. Too often in recent years Camden Council has drifted along with no definite direction, buffetted by pressure groups and steered by a leadership group unable or unwilling to take tough decisions. The 26% increase in Council spending since 1985 has been the result - making future decisions even tougher.
We must now look for a strategy for the next three years leading up to the local elections in 1990.

▪ Priorities

In consultation with the Party, Camden Labour Group must adopy clearly defined priorities as to what we want to achieve. The fiasco of sending the Party 4-inch thick "consultation" documents based on line-by-line committee budgets must be ended. The Party is here to take strategic decisions, not to be bamboozled.

▪ Avoiding disqualification

A speedy consensus is emerging that, at least for the immediate future, the Council must stay within the law. This will avoid immediate disqualifications and permit strategic planning to take place. Handing the Council over to the Tories at this stage will not be thought of well by our supporters, and the time for posturing is well and truly past. The Council must avoid any drift into disqualification brought about by lethagy or excessive caution.

▪ Front-line services

The Priority over the next three years has to be the maintenance and improvement of front-line services to working-class people. It is in this context that the call for a full review of the Council's system of management is growing -

1. It is far from easy to identify savings which can be made in the Council's Town Hall bureacracy. Savings in front-line services, by contrast, are relatively easy to identify. Cuts in housing which have already been made - like in decorations for OAPs and charging tenants for certain repairs - bear this out.

2. Council services need to be improved in quality. Fundamental problems must be tackled - including absentee rates of up to 40% in some departments, poor industrial relations, Councillor/ officer demarcation and responsibility.

Options must be brought forward now for such a review. A combined team of, eg, private sector consultants, Councillors from northern authorities with far lower rates bases than Camden, senior officers from Scots authorites, may provide insights into the workings of our system from which we can benefit.

▪ Collective provision

It will not be easy to develop and improve front-line services in the difficult times which lie ahead. This will not be a period of leisure.
But the restoration of popular faith in collective provision will be an important part of our Party's wider revival. Camden spends more per head of population than any other borough in the country, yet there is significant working-class consumer dissatisfaction with the services provided.
We have now to work to put that right in extemely difficult circumstances which are not of our own making.

Cllr Patrick Denny

LABOUR
PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

LABOUR CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE CONFERENCE

LABOUR'S RENEWAL — THE NEXT STAGE

Saturday 4 July 10.30am – 6.30pm

South Bank Polytechnic

London Road, London SE1

(Elephant & Castle Tube)

LABOUR CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE

Speakers include: DAVID BLUNKETT, SARAH BENTON, ROBIN COOK, BRIAN GOULD, MARGARET HODGE, ROBIN MURRAY, BEN PIMLOTT, TOM SAWYER, CHRIS SMITH, BILL SPIERS, NIGEL STANLEY
(other speakers to be announced)

Sessions on: WINNING NEXT TIME, BUILDING AN ANTI THATCHER MAJORITY, THATCHER'S THIRD TERM, LABOUR & DEFENCE, LABOUR'S ECONOMIC PROGRAMME, LABOUR & SEXUAL POLITICS, LABOUR – UNIONS & THE WORKING CLASS – WEAKENING LINKS?, THE FUTURE OF MUNICIPAL SOCIALISM

Creche available only if notice given by June 28th.
Registration fees — £2.00 unwaged, LCC members: £3.00 out of London, £5.00 London, £7.00 non LCC members.

Further details and registration forms from:
Ken Hulme, LCC Organising Secretary, 9 Poland Street, London W.1. Tel: 01-734 9520