
LABOUR AT THE CROSSROADS

Kinnock shows his way ahead

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Extracts from Mr Neil Kinnock's lecture at Prestonpans Community Centre on Friday evening, delivered on his behalf by Mr Robin Cook, Labour MP for Livingston.

In his last published article* John Mackintosh remarked: 'It has often been said that the Labour Party in recent years has lacked books, theories, ideas of what it should be seeking in politics.'

It is therefore fitting that in the wake of the most important and, for Labour, the most cataclysmic election since the war, we should take heed of this remark and take stock of our future in the light of our recent and not so recent history.

It is a fact and a measure of our difficulty that the Labour Party has been losing the support of even those groups which we traditionally have claimed most and have tried hardest to represent.

We have now had the awful lesson of June 9, 1983. Then two out of ten of the total electorate voted Labour. It is too early for an exhaustive analysis of the class composition of Labour's vote to have been compiled. But what evidence exists simply confirms our sense of smell — that the majority of those voters who earned their living from manual work did not support Labour.

Trends have prompted some commentators to suggest that the growing volatility of electors means that we now have the 'independent voter': the elector who offers no loyalty to any of the parties and who hovers between parties at each election.

I have never believed that this process is inevitable. Loyalty has to be earned and retained from generation to generation. Even if the pundits are correct that the 'floating voter' is now more numerous than before, it does not follow that this is an irreversible process.

SUFFERS

From 1945 and up until relatively recently, British society has been increasingly composed of those for whom the Welfare State and an annual increment in their standard of living has been taken more or less for granted.

Their personal experience has precluded the necessity of tooth and claw struggle for a decent wage, working conditions, basic human rights and access to education.

In a sense, therefore, Labour suffers in some ways from the success of a mere century of organised Labour and from the necessary adjustments which have been

forced on the 'free enterprise' system — often involving State intervention — in order to ensure its survival.

Labour now stands at the crossroads. Disenchantment, whether by misconception or direct antipathy, with central planks of Labour's perceived programme, an apparent difficulty in establishing legitimacy of intentions and purposes in public mind and the superficial abatement of social conditions have up until recently undermined the capacity of the Party to maintain an onward surge.

I do not personally believe that this is merely a matter of choosing between the 'Left' or the 'Right' — and certainly not as these classifications have been used over the past few years by media shorthand thinkers and self-appointed spokesmen of the factions working in unholy alliance.

BIGOTRY

That is a parasitic inter-dependence in which the editors require devils of extremism, the factionalists need demons of a persecuting Press and the deserting Right grossly inflates the significance of sectarianism in order to alibi their act of wilful treachery in forming the SDP.

Anthony Crosland's description of Toryism is perhaps the most apt of the present Government in its leadership, its monetarism, its selective and smug homilies on 'Victorian values', its aim to destroy the Welfare State and its use of the hidden boot of unemployment as well as the hidden hand of *sozialmarkt wirtschaft*.

If and when the Tory Party is ever rescued from its present bigotry I hope that no one, even in the most unguarded moment, will ever forget that it is only when the Tory Party is in the hands of the people who do not worry too much about money because they have always had it, that it takes on the image of a party of kindly complacency, a party that hasn't the energy to put its beliefs into practice.

When that party is in the hands of people who worry about nothing except money, it is a political python with a cobra's instincts.

Britain is in many ways as unequal a society today as it was 20 years ago. The top social groups are only half as likely to be in ill health as unskilled or semi-skilled workers. They are four times as likely to have sons who gain white collar jobs. And they earn twice as much on average in wages.

The socialism we seek aims to give people the maximum possible freedom to control conditions under which they live and work. It aims to provide a freedom that people will no longer need to be 'given' anything.

People will stand free of handouts, paternalistic interference and bureaucratic indifference. Socialism stands, in short, for the freedom of everyone, in contrast to the Conservative freedom for the lucky few who climb a ladder and then kick it away in order to guarantee the superiority of their liberty.

STRUGGLE

Let everyone heed what most know already, that socialists have enough of a task on their hands in winning people away from deference to capitalism without having to fight on the other front of reassuring them that socialism is neither malevolent extremism nor tepid Toryism.

That task is difficult enough when capitalism slanders socialism as a conspiracy against democracy, Christianity and the family.

But when some socialists give the impression that all of the aims are destructive and aggressive, or others appear to be indistinguishable from the enemy, the problems of socialist persuasion become even greater.

We owe ourselves and those who gave us democratic socialism better than that. And by reason and radicalism, through the very common-sense of socialism, we can work with them and for them to rescue and revive our country and fulfil obligations to the wanting of the world.

We shall enjoy the struggle. And we shall win.

* "Has social democracy failed in Britain?"

From: *The Political Quarterly*, July — September 1978, pp. 259 -270