STRATHCLYDE PAPERS ON GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

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DEALIGNMENT AT THE TOP: THE NATURE, ORIGINS AND CONSEQUENCES OF LABOUR'S CRISIS

W. L. Miller

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ORIGINS AND CONSEQUENCES OF LABOUR'S CRISIS

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And this is law I will maintain
Until my dying day, sir!
That whatsoever King shall reign
I'll still be the Vicar of Bray, sir!

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Double Dealignment

One simple model of elite-mass interaction portrays the
composition and structure of the political elite as dependent upon
social conditions, social cleavages or the patterns of mass attitudes.
Changes at the elite level are viewed as the result of changes at the
mass level. Certainly, elites can generate policy outcomes which
change social conditions or social attitudes, but it is only in this
indirect way that elites influence mass alignments. By contrast, mass
alignments affect the elite immediately and directly. So, for
example, the poor electoral performance of the Labour party in recent
years is explained by changes in occupational structure which have
increased the size of the middle class and reduced the size of the
traditional working class. Or Labour's decline is attributed to a
swing of public opinion against socialism, welfare-statism and big
government. Such changes in social structure and/or changes in public
opinion threatened to end the Labour/Conservative duopoly that had
dominated British politics since the thirites: at the 1983 election,
the Conservatives won 43% of the vote, Labour 28%, and the new
SDP/Liberal Alliance 26%.

But that model does not fit the course of British political
history. In particular, it does not explain the major realignments of

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1885-86 and 1918-31. The last two systems of party alignments in Britain were created by elite initiative at least in the negative sense that they were created by a party split at the highest level. Chamberlain's split with Gladstone over the issue of Irish Home Rule produced the Unionist versus Liberal Party system of 1886-1915. Similarly, Lloyd George's split with Asquith over the conduct of the war provided the opening for a previously unambitious and electorally unsuccessful Labour Party. On both occasions the dangers inherent in a Liberal Party split were exacerbated by an extension of the franchise and the inclusion therefore of large numbers of new voters with specially weak party attachments. Weak party identification at the mass level helped make realignment possible, but it was intra-party divisions amongst leaders and activists that provided the driving force for a reconstruction of the party system.

In the early 1980s, the British party system appeared on the brink of another upheaval. But even more than in the past, the cause appeared to be intra-party quarrels. Social and attitudinal change had not had a major impact on changes in the party system. In England at least, there had been no new issues equivalent to Irish Home Rule or the First World War to stir the passions of the mass electorate (in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland new issues were apparent but collectively these areas held less than a fifth of seats in parliament). And although the minimum voting age was lowered in 1970, increasing the electorate by about ten percent, there were no social changes within the electorate in any way equivalent to the change brought about by the franchise extension of 1918 which tripled the

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pre-war electorate and dramatically changed its social profile.

In the 1980s the role of the mass electorate was essentially passive and responsive. The political action, the springs of causation in the alignment crisis lay within the parties themselves at activist and leadership level. The electorate in the 1980s resembled that in 1886 and 1918 only in one respect: the level of party attachment in the electorate was low, and the potential for voter volatility correspondingly high.

In 1886 and 1918, actions by political elites determined the options open to the electorate and largely determined both the political agenda and the cleavage structure within the electorate. In the 1980s this happened once again. If we want to understand the possibilities for political realignment in the 1980s we need to focus not so much on British voters' disenchantment with governments of both parties, but instead on party activists' disenchantment with the leaders of their own party.

Over the last two decades, British politics have been characterised by a decline in deference towards leadership and a growing sense of individualism. So trade unionists, and especially trade union activists, have become less willing to follow the advice of trade union leaders, party activists have become less deferential to MPs and party leaders, while MPs have encouraged this trend by asserting their independence of the party leaders in parliament.

The central feature of Labour's recent troubles has been that the intra-party struggle was not about policy but about deference, that is about the power and tenure of its parliamentary representatives. Right-wing Labour MPs feared they would lose forever their rights to choose their own leader, control policy, and enjoy security of tenure. They would be reduced to the same position as the Vicar of Bray: able to retain their livings only by supressing their political opinions. MPs who had so recently asserted their independence of the whips in parliament were hardly likely to react kindly to new controls imposed on them by activists outside parliament.

This attack on the powers and tenure of MPs, often degenerating into a simple attack on the MPs themselves, added an unprecedented degree of personal bitterness to intra-party debates. Without control of policy, without security of tenure, and with no prospect of regaining either, MPs commitment to the party was shaken. Some left the party, to form or join the new Social Democratic Party. Others remained within the Labour Party but did not shrink from sabotaging its election campaigns. If dealignment at the bottom provided the potential for voter volatility, dealignment at the top provided the impetus towards reconstruction of the party system.

2.   NATURE

2.1 Electoral Dealignment: Creating the Conditions for Realignment

Ever since the mid-sixties it has been apparent that British voters have become significantly less constrained in their voting

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behaviour. Until the 1980s there was little evidence of realignment but plenty of evidence of dealignment. During the 1950s the swing (between Labour and Conservative) at General Elections averaged 1.6%, but in the 1960s it averaged 3.5%. At the same time the swings at by-elections increased sharply. Partly that was the result of public disappointment with the 1966-70 Labour government and merely foreshadowed the 4.7% swing against it in the 1970 General Election. But it also reflected sheer unconstrained volatility. The variation in party support within each year's set of Gallup polls also increased sharply during the sixties (Butler and Stokes, p.207); and if the government lost more support than usual in the parliamentary mid-term, it also regained support faster than usual in the run up to the next General Election (Miller and Mackie).

Conservative/Labour swings were low at both elections in 1974 but the electorate demonstrated its volatility by discovering a sudden affection for minor parties in the autumn of 1972. At by-elections between October 1972 and November 1973, 5 Liberals, 1 Scottish Nationalist and 1 Democratic Labour (Dick Taverne) took seats from Labour or Conservative although no seats changed hands between the major parties (Craig, British Political Facts, pp.63-64). At the General Elections of 1974 the Liberal Party won 20% of the vote - almost three times its 1970 share.

In 1979 the Liberal vote collapsed but the Conservative/Labour swing, at 5.3%, was the highest since 1945. Even more remarkable, Gallup polls showed that between November 1978 and February 1979 a

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Labour lead of 6% had been turned into a Conservative lead of 23% (Butler and Sloman, p.241). And after their victory in the 1979 General Election the Conservatives lead in the opinion polls disappeared within three months of their election: the traditional post-election honeymoon period of popular support had been wiped out by a new restlessness in the electorate (Worcester, p.4).

A series of surveys, first by Butler and Stokes, then by Sarlvik and Crewe, charted the decline in the electorate's psychological sense of identification with the parties. In Butler and Stokes surveys from 1964 to 1970, 40% of the electors claimed they identified 'very strongly' with either the Labour or Conservative parties. By contrast Sarlvik and Crewe found only 27% in February 1974, 23% in October 1974 and 19% in 1979 (Sarlvik and Crewe, pp.335-336). Despite the decline of Liberal and Nationalist voting in 1979 and the resurgence of Conservative/Labour votes, the sense of strong commitment to the major parties did not return to its earlier levels; it continued to decline. On the other hand, the figures show that the degree of 'very strong' identification with the Liberal Party also declined in the seventies. It too was less in 1974 when Liberal votes peaked, than it had been in the mid-sixties (down from 4% to 2%). The surveys revealed dealignment, not a change of alignment.

These survey findings on the strength of psychological party identification need careful interpretation. Although they suggest that partisan dealignment occurred suddenly, in 1974, other surveys by Butler and Stokes show that the strength of party identification was

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weak in the non-election years of 1963 and 1969 - which fits the evidence from by-elections and monthly Gallup polls (Butler and Stokes, p.470). Second, the sharp rise in strength of identification in 1963-64 and 1969-70 cautions against the argument that the strength of partisanship is immutable (the direction is likely to be much more resistant to change than the strength). Third, the declining numbers with 'very strong' identification were partially offset by increasing numbers with 'fairly strong' identifications: so we must not overstate the amount of psychological change.

Nonetheless, whatever the problems of detailed interpretation, the weight of evidence suggests that by the start of the eighties partisanship in Britain was no longer a severe constraint on voting choice. Perhaps of equal or greater significance, this concept of dealignment gained widespread publicity during the seventies, and influenced the political elites' view of the constraints upon them. On at least one important occasion Professor Crewe attended a meeting in Shirley Williams' flat with those Labour politicians who were pondering their chances of success should they break-away and set up a new party. His academic findings informed and encouraged their decision to leave the Labour Party (Bradley, p.86).

2.2 The Absence of an Electoral Imperative for Realignment

Partisan dealignment amongst the voters may have created an opportunity for politicians anxious to try their luck with a new party but it did not constitute a demand for a new party. The parties that

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did well out of dealignment - the Liberals and Nationalists - suffered from even lower levels of commitment than the major parties. Indeed the level of very strong partisanship amongst Liberal identifiers in the seventies was less than half what it had been in the sixties: 35% of Liberals had 'very strong' identification in 1966, but only 12% in 1974 (Sarlvik and Crewe, p.337).

No new issue arose (in England) to detach voters from the Labour and Conservative parties and link them to the Liberals, or provide a coherent issue basis for a new party, or even switch a sizable block of voters between the major parties (as happened in the Roosevelt realignment in the US during the thirties). Lemieux shows that the Liberal vote in 1974 was characterised by policy contradiction and confusion.

Crewe points to the difference between Labour Party policies and the views of its supporters in 1979. Almost every survey ever done in Britain has found that Labour voters were not socialists in any ideological sense (see Miller, 1983, pp.144-145 for a summary). But Crewe suggests that the discrepancy between the party and its supporters views was specially significant after 1979 for two reasons. First, the discrepancy was getting larger: between 1964 and 1979 there was 'a spectacular decline in support for the collectivist trinity of public ownership, trade union power, and social welfare'. Second, Labour's electoral support had traditionally rested upon its image as the party of the average man-in-the-street, the 'working class' or 'working people and their families'. But social change was shrinking

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the size of the manual working class, and class differences were declining. So Labour's traditionally strong link to a large working class was becoming a weaker link to a smaller class. Therefore, Crewe argued, Labour's disadvantage on issues and ideology assumed a new importance. Always a handicap, Labour's ideology was no longer outweighed by its class image (Crewe, 1982, p.37).

These arguments have some validity but they do not add up to clear proof that the Labour Party's time was past and a new party necessary to satisfy electoral demand. At most they suggest the normal balance of political forces had turned in favour of the Conservative Party rather than Labour. Even that conclusion cannot be accepted without reservation, however.

Support for more public ownership, trade union power and social welfare declined over the period 1964-79 during which all three were greatly extended. But Gallup surveys show as much opposition to cutting welfare in the 1980s as support for extending it in the 1960s. There was no popular demand for a return to the pre-1964 situation (see Economist, 3 December 1983, p.65). As for the trade unions, which had fought bitter battles against Labour governments in 1969 and 1979, it is not at all obvious that everyone who thought they had too much power was automatically debarred from voting Labour. Labour governments, perhaps against their will, had made the case against trade union power.

On some issues the climate of public opinion in the 1980s was

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clearly unfavourable towards Labour, on some (like public ownership) it was so far removed from voters priority concerns as to be irrelevant, on others it was favourable. On many issues opinions were clearly volatile, lightly held, and greatly influenced by partisan attachments. Indeed the Labour Party did itself some damage by assuming the stability of popular attitudes on issues like Britain's membership of the EEC, or the Thatcher government's handling of unemployment. Labour enjoyed a substantial advantage on these issues in early 1980s but instead of these issues moving voters towards the Labour Party, the voters moved their issue attitudes towards the Conservative Party as the 1983 election approached.

Similar remarks might be made about the thesis of social change. The manual working class was certainly shrinking and, other things being equal, that was likely to damage Labour. But other social changes were very much in Labour's interest. The percentage of male employees in trade unions rose from 53% in 1961 to 66% in 1979, and trade unionism amongst women employees rose from 24% in 1961 to 39% in 1979. (The total number of trade unionists dropped in the early eighties only because the number of people employed dropped). The percentage of public employees rose from 24% in 1961 to 31% in 1980 (Social Trends). Sarlvik and Crewe's 1979 survey showed that over 41% of the non-manual middle class earned their living in the public sector – and that, within classes, public or private sector employment greatly influenced voting choice. The 1979-83 Conservative government presided over a return to unemployment levels that had never been experienced since the depression of the 1930s. Lastly, since the mid

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seventies the share of income (both before and after tax and welfare redistributions) going to the bottom 60% of households has been declining while the share going to the top 40% has increased (Social Trends). None of this constitutes an argument for a great political switch to the left, but it does mean that important social changes were not uniformly biased against Labour and that there was no social reason for a dramatic political collapse on the left.

If patterns of issue attitudes were insufficient to imply the end of the Labour Party they were the weakest of foundations for a new party. When the SDP was founded in 1981 it based its appeal on images rather than issues. The SDP-Liberal Alliance's share of support in monthly opinion polls rapidly rose to 45%, putting it well ahead of both Labour and Conservative but at the same time polls showed that few electors had much idea about its policies. Questioned about his policies by a bystander on one occasion, David Owen cheerfully replied (for the benefit of the media as much as the woman herself): 'Look dear, if you want a manifesto, try one of the other parties.'

A MORI poll taken shortly after the founding of the SDP showed that, of those SDP supporters with an opinion, 23% favoured more nationalisation, 33% favoured unilateral disarmament, and 59% wanted Britain out of the EEC. Such policy positions were the very opposite of those held by the parliamentary elite that founded the SDP. In particular the SDP's founders were linked together most of all by an almost fanatical devotion to the EEC (Bradley, p.168). The clearest antecedent of the SDP defection was the parliamentary vote on EEC

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entry on 28 October 1971 when Roy Jenkins (then Deputy Leader of the PLP) led 69 Labour MPs in defying a three-line whip and voting for British entry. Early in 1972 Jenkins wrote to Wilson criticizing his 'constant shifting of ground' on EEC. Shortly afterwards, Jenkins, Lever, Taverne and Owen resigned their official positions in the party and Taverne resigned his seat to fight a by-election. Yet in 1981 a majority of those who flocked to the SDP banner wanted Britain out of the EEC!

Indeed the growth of support for the Liberal/SDP Alliance to such absurdly high levels as 45% was only possible because its support was not based upon issues. No issue existed to motivate so many people so fast. For its new supporters it was very much a 'wish-fulfillment party' that they could support precisely because it did not have any policies or because they had no knowledge of what those policies were. The parallel with Gary Hart's remarkable surge of support in the 1984 US Primary Elections is striking.

Now, if the SDP did not articulate the specific policy positions of its supporters but merely expressed a diffuse wish for something new in style but not new in policy, then we must conclude that the electoral push for a new party system was weak or absent. Voters were simply 'up for grabs'. The active threat to the existing party system came from those political leaders who tried to convert dealignment into realignment.

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2.3 Leadership and Realignment

The threat of realignment in the 1980s took two forms: a catastrophic decline in Labour votes and a surge of support for the Liberal/SDP Alliance.   The two were connected in many ways, not least by the massive switch to the Alliance by about a quarter of former Labour voters.   Nonetheless, for every three voters who left Labour for the Alliance, two switched from Labour to Conservative or abstained (Crewe, 1983). Leadership behaviour played a major part in stimulating both kinds of voter defection.

On 25 January 1981 the so-called 'Gang of Four' issued their Limehouse Declaration and launched the Council for Social Democracy (CSD).   The four were all former Labour Cabinet Ministers: Bill Rodgers, Shirley Williams, David Owen, and Roy Jenkins. Owen had been Foreign Secretary, Jenkins had been Chancellor of the Exchequer, Home Secretary and, for two years, Deputy Leader of the Labour Party. Nine other Labour MPs joined the CSD the next day.   A large advertisement in the Guardian paid for by 100 well-wishers netted £80,000 in further donations - big money in British politics, and the Social Democratic Party was launched in a blaze of publicity on 26 March 1981.   Jenkins and Williams had already been in close touch with David Steel, the Liberal leader, before they launched the SDP, and the new party moved quickly into an alliance with the Liberals.

Until the Gang of Four issued their Limehouse Declaration in January 1981, Liberal party support in monthly opinion polls had

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stayed (roughly) between 10 and 14% ever since the 1979 General Election (Worcester). By March 1981, when the SDP was formally launched, support for a Liberal/SDP Alliance had reached the mid thirties and by the end of 1981 it had peaked in the mid forties. Labour was the main loser. In the year between October 1980 and November 1981, Labour's share in the MORI poll dropped from 50% to 27% and its lead over the Conservatives plunged from 16% to zero (Miller, 1984).

Altogether, the SDP recruited a total of 29 sitting Labour MPs and one Conservative, in addition to Jenkins and Williams who were not sitting MPs in 1981. It also won over many other Labour politicians including George Brown who had been Deputy Leader of the Labour Party from 1960 to 1970, Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. The defectors alleged that their former party had fallen into the hands of extremists, that it was 'not the Labour Party they had joined' in their youth. Their charges gained credibility because of their seniority in previous Labour governments and because they were willing to risk their political futures by leaving the Labour Party in such circumstances that they could never return. Moreover they defended the record and personnel of the Wilson and Callaghan Labour governments which many current Labour activists attacked.

The SDP succeeded moderately well in their attempt to label Labour as extremist. But although they were joined by many second rank Labour figures, or political has-beens like George Brown, they failed to win over anyone else with quite the stature of the original

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Gang of Four. If, as they hoped, Denis Healey had been defeated in the 1981 contest for Deputy Leader and had then switched to the SDP, he would have been followed by a sizeable group of Labour MPs and would have given the SDP a real chance to claim that it was the true descendent of the party of Attlee, Gaitskell, Wilson and Callaghan. As it was, the SDP's success was largely negative. Enough weighty Labour politicians joined it to make its allegations about Labour convincing, but not enough to let it inherit the Labour tradition itself.

Elite action therefore, created the SDP and led it into an Alliance with the Liberals. The celebrity of the SDP leadership guaranteed enormous publicity for the new party and the new Alliance. That publicity boosted the Liberal (or Alliance) share of the polls from 15% to 45%. In return for this media inspired boost, the Liberal Party effectively offered the fledgling SDP a local campaigning organisation in that half of the constituencies that were allocated to the SDP under the Alliance agreement. The strengths of the SDP and the Liberals were complementary (in the short term) - the SDP was strong at the top, the Liberals at the bottom.

But equally significant, in terms of its effect on the 1983 election, was the behaviour of those leaders who stayed on in the Labour Party. While the SDP succeeded up to a point in labelling Labour as extremist, those leaders who stayed, labelled the party as disunited.

Throughout 1981 Wedgewood Benn battled to replace Denis Healey as

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Deputy Leader of the Labour Party. Michael Foot, a left-winger was unopposed as leader. So the point at issue was whether Labour should continue to have a balanced left/right pair at the top, or replace it with a left/far left pair. Like a US primary campaign the Healey/Benn contest lasted the best part of a year; it was fought out in public; it was punctuated by a series of intermediate votes (at trade union conferences rather than in different states); and it was accompanied by a great deal of personal abuse and media speculation. It ended with a televised conference vote which Benn lost by a margin of less than 1% amid well-founded charges that he had in some sense, been 'cheated' - some right-wing Labour MPs delayed their defection to the SDP just long enough to cast a vote against Benn, while 35 left-wing Labour MPs voted for another left-wing candidate on the first conference ballot and then abstained instead of voting for Benn in the run-off ballot. Even without the SDP defectors, Labour had a multiplicity of highly publicised leadership problems throughout 1981.

That kind of behaviour is familiar in the USA where it occurs every four years. Being familiar it has a less dramatic effect upon public opinion. But it was a novel way for a major British party to select a leader or deputy leader and it contributed to the popular view that Labour was now unfit to govern.

Disunity amongst the remaining Labour leaders was seldom out of the news after 1981 but was particularly evident in the election campaign proper - that is, the four weeks between declaring and holding the 1983 General Election. For the first fortnight a large

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number of polls showed Labour steady at 32%, the Alliance at 18%. Alliance support had been on the wane since it peaked at the end of 1981 and had been squeezed further by the coming of a General Election. Then at the half-way point in the four week campaign Healey (the Deputy Leader), Foot (the Leader) and Callaghan (Foot's predecessor) had a public disagreement about Defence Policy. All three stressed the critical importance of the issue and each defined a policy that was clearly incompatible with the other two. Since Labour was already so far behind the Conservatives in the polls that there was no hope of it winning the election, none of the three had any reason to fear they would end up in office with commitments they could not support. Effectively they chose the press and TV during the closing two weeks of a General Election campaign as the time and place for an internal party debate. Within a fortnight Labour's 15% margin over the Alliance was reduced to zero before recovering to a mere 2% in the vote itself (Miller, 1984).

Gallup's election-day poll for the BBC showed that almost half the (many) Labour identifiers who voted for the Conservative or Alliance parties quoted Labour extremism or disunity as a reason for their voting choice: 14% mentioned disunity, 20% mentioned extremism, 10% mentioned both. All these defectors were overwhelmingly in favour of retaining the British nuclear deterrent, but also overwhelmingly opposed to tax cuts if that meant a cut in public services.

Superficially it is possible to explain the 1983 election result in terms of issues - voters declared that they had voted for the party

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which 'had the best policies' and they rated the Conservatives best on most of the issues (Crewe, 1983). But that neglects the question of why they thought the Conservatives were so good and Labour so bad on the issues, and it neglects the very low issue rating they gave the Alliance.

Over the year prior to the 1983 election the 'most important issue' in the polls remained unemployment but Labour's initial advantage on that issue declined so much that by election week at least two polls showed the incumbent Conservatives were the party most trusted (Harris) or preferred (NOP) on that issue, despite the tripling of unemployment during their term of office. On the EEC, a large majority in favour of withdrawal (Labour's policy) at the end of 1982 turned into a large majority in favour of Britain remaining a member (the Conservative policy) by election day. Labour retained a large lead as the party with the best policies towards the very popular National Health Service but failed to make the NHS a salient election issue. On defence, Labour's opposition to the deployment of Cruise and Trident weapons (a popular position according to the polls) did not become a major issue while alleged Labour plans to give up Polaris (an unpopular position) became the defence issue. In many people's minds giving up Polaris came to mean the same thing as leaving NATO and 'going neutral' – although Labour's policy was clearly and explicitly to remain a full member of NATO while making a conventional rather than nuclear contribution to the western alliance. (No other NATO country except the USA has nuclear weapons).

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It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Labour's poor standing on the issues was a by-product of its poor image as a disunited party falling under the control of extremists. Labour failed to retain its initial advantage on some major issues and allowed others to be presented in such terms that it was associated with minority opinion although the same issue, presented differently, would have associated Labour with the majority. In short, a crisis in the leadership contributed to Labour's inability to 'manage' the presentation of issues.

At the same time, a disunited leadership offered no alternative motivation for voting Labour to those who found its policies unconvincing. Of those Labour identifiers who voted Labour only 58% could bring themselves to say their party had the 'best team of leaders'; amongst those Labour identifiers who voted for other parties a mere 3% said it had the 'best team of leaders'. Last, but not least, the example of disloyalty at the top gave no incentive to Labour identifiers to swallow their doubts about policy and leadership and vote their party identification.

Disunity amongst Labour's leaders - including those who founded the SDP, the right wingers clustered round Healey and Callaghan, the far left who worked with Benn, and the 'inside left' who supported Foot - therefore damaged Labour's electoral performance in several ways: it labelled Labour as extremist; it destroyed Labour's ability to manage the issues; it prevented Labour from offering a 'team of leaders' that could act as an alternative government; it weakened

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morale amongst labour identifiers and it encouraged them to show as little party loyalty as they observed amongst the leadership.

3. ORIGINS

3.1 The Michels/McKenzie Model

Bob McKenzie's classic study of power in the Labour Party (and British parties generally) was based upon Robert Michel's model of power in the pre-war German Social Democratic Party:

'Now if we leave out of consideration the tendency of the leaders to organise themselves and to consolidate their interests, and if we leave also out of consideration the gratitude of the led towards their leaders, and the general immobility and passivity of the masses, we are led to conclude that the principal cause of oligarchy in the democratic (i.e., socialist) parties is to be found in the technical indispensibility of leadership... who says organisation, says oligarchy' (Michels, pp.364-365).

Michels incipient fascism is evident in the tone of this quotation from his final chapter. Oligarchy here was primarily the result of the 'incurable incompetence' (Michels, p.367) of the masses. But elsewhere he gives considerable weight to the other influences towards oligarchy - particularly defensive action by the leadership. Michels' study reveals something less than an 'iron law' of oligarchy but McKenzie was able to conclude that 'there is ample evidence of the working of what Michels calls the technical and psychological factors which tend to ensure the emergence of, and retention of power by a small group of leaders in each party.' (McKenzie, 1964, p.15).

Unlike the Conservative, Liberal and SDP parties, Labour was not

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created by a pre-existing parliamentary caucus, but like them it too was created from the top (see Leys, chapter 10 for a brief history). It began in 1900 as a committee of the powerful Trades Union Congress and had no members at all until after the first world war. Three socialist groups - the Independent Labour Party, the marxist Social Democratic Federation and the middle class Fabian Society, were also represented on the Committee along with the TUC, but the TUC was the heavyweight and it was the TUC alone that already had representation in Parliament. The SDF withdrew from the Committee in 1903 and the ILP in 1933, which left only the unions, the Fabians and, by then, a modest individual membership based upon parliamentary constituencies.

By the 1980s the unions still provided in excess of 80% of Labour's finance and controlled the election of 20 of the 29 members of Labour's National Executive Committee. The unions also controlled 89% of the Labour Conference vote on organisational and policy resolutions - a share of the vote that had increased since the fifties as constituency membership declined while union membership rose (see Minkin, 1978a, 1978b).

Formally the Labour Party's annual conference had the power to 'lay down the policy of the party and issue instructions which must be carried out by the NEC, the affiliated organisations and its representatives in parliament and on the local authorities...the Labour Conference is in fact a parliament of the movement' (Attlee, p.93). But that was always a polite illusion; the reality was established from the start by Kier Hardie and Ramsay MacDonald: the

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parliamentary representatives (the PLP) would elect their Leaders – who would be the Party Leaders, and who would rule the party through an 'understanding' with half a dozen trade union leaders who controlled well over half the votes at Conference. (Each union cast its votes as a block at Labour Party Conferences. Its votes equalled the membership it reported to the party, and its president or general secretary had effective control of how those votes could be cast.) The Labour Party could be run from a very small 'smoke-filled room' and most people in that room would be drawn from the moderate centre and right wing of the party. All of them would have a 'leadership perspective', all would head large organisations. When professor Harold Laski, as Chairman of the Labour Party in 1945 tried to remind Attlee of the supreme authority of Conference, Attlee issued what has become one of the most celebrated one-liners in British political history: 'a period of silence on your part would be welcome'.

In a recent article, published after his death, McKenzie reaffirmed Michels' law of oligarchy as a normative rather than empirical theory: 'in the case of political parties oligarchical control by the party leaders of their party organisation is indispensable for the well-being of a democratic polity.' (McKenzie, 1982, p.195). The tendencies which Michels recognised and deplored were not only recognised, but praised by McKenzie.

However the illusion persisted. No one truly believed Conference was a parliament of the Labour movement but all leading Labour politicians went through the ritual of claiming that it was. It was a

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proud claim, something that distinguished the democratic Labour Party from the feudal Conservative Party. Eventually the illusion caught up with reality.

3.2 The PLP Loses Control of Conference

Because the Labour Party was based upon a Committee of the TUC (in contrast to continental countries where parties created unions) it was slow to develop any individual membership at all and it never developed a truly mass membership (Crouch, 1982, p.175). Such membership as it had peaked in the early fifties and declined thereafter. Accurate figures are unobtainable since, until 1963, each constituency party had to pay the minimum affiliation fee for 1,000 members though many had less members than that. Whiteley estimates, on the basis of a sample survey, that the party had 250,000 members (and only 55,000 activists) in 1978 (Whiteley, 1983, p.115). That was probably a substantial decline since the early fifties though not perhaps so very different from the party's pre-1945 level of membership.

Until 1973 the party maintained a list of 'prescribed organisations' whose membership was incompatible with membership of the Labour Party. Its purpose was to prevent infiltration from the left. After 1973 the abolition of this list, coupled with such a small total as 55,000 activists, made the constituency parties easy prey to organised 'entryism' from the left. At the same time the old established members of the party were unhappy at the opportunism of

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the 1966-70 Labour Government and supported more radical policies (Whiteley, 1983, p.48).

Loss of the constituency activists' support would have been a flea bite if the PLP Leadership had been able to rely upon union leaders to continue their 'praetorian guard' role - McKenzie's term for their habit of keeping out of politics but rubber stamping PLP decisions by using their block votes to impose PLP decisions on Conference. That had been based upon the 'understanding' between TU and PLP leaders that leadership needed freedom of manoeuvre and that the TU leaders would stay out of politics while PLP leaders stayed out of TU affairs.

But two types of factors - one accidental, the other more easily predictable, ended the unions' role as protector of the PLP leadership. Let us take the accidental factors first. Union control of Conference was extremely 'lumpy' and became more so. In 1975 the 6 largest unions controlled 53% of the votes at Conference - by 1977 the 6 largest unions controlled 58%, and the 4 largest unions alone had effective control with 48%. Union delegations became less deferential in the seventies than the fifties but it was still generally true that less than half a dozen men had Conference in their pocket if they chose to act together. If those men retired the whole power structure of Conference could change dramatically - not just because new leaders might impose their anti-PLP views on their conference delegations, but because they might no longer exert themselves like Lord Carron of the engineers, to restrain the anti-PLP elements in their union

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delegations to Party Conference.

In 1955 the right wing president of the largest union (the TGWU) Arthur Deakin retired having arranged that his successor would be another right winger. Alas that successor died prematurely and left winger Frank Cousins took over. He moved slowly at first but it was his union that caused the first major upset for the PLP leadership by voting against Gaitskell's pro-nuclear defence policy in 1960. More significantly, in the years 1967-69, new left-wing leaders took over 4 of the 5 largest unions: the Engineers (Scanlon), the Mineworkers (Daly), the Shopworkers (Seabrook) and the TGWU (Jones) (see Minkin, 1978b, p.470). In addition some left-wing unions like the Supervisory Staffs and the Public Employees were rapidly gaining members (purely because of the changing industrial structure), increasing their affiliation fees to the Labour Party and thus getting a larger share of the Conference vote. The fact that their new members were in relatively middle class occupations and probably right wingers or even Conservatives was irrelevant: union votes were cast as blocks - so left-wing unions remained left-wing, and new members merely increased the size of the unions' block votes.

At the same time, that is in the mid to late sixties, less accidental factors drove a wedge between the union and the PLP leaderships. Though British unions were centralised politically they were highly decentralised in terms of industrial power. They had a strong shop-floor movement. When the 1964-1970 Labour government disappointed expectations of increased economic growth and rising

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wages, shopfloor pressure - exerted through local 'unofficial' strikes, caused something of a wage explosion. Union leaders were unable to control it, and the Labour Government produced the White Paper In Place of Strife which proposed legal penalties to crush this wave of unofficial strikes (Crouch, 1979, gives an overview of the politics of industrial relations in Britain).

In Place of Strife was proposed by Barbara Castle and backed by Harold Wilson both of whom had been associated with the left of the Labour Party in their younger days but for them socialist planning meant labour discipline (as it does throughout eastern Europe). The unions, though led by other supposed left-wingers, reacted like true capitalist interest groups and opposed the legislation. Left wing constituency activists made common cause with self-interested shop-stewards in the unions to oppose a Labour government which, in their eyes, had failed to deliver either ideological or economic benefits. In response, those members of the PLP who believed in strong government publicly attacked trade unions as 'special interest' groups. That broke the 'understanding' whereby union leaders left politics to the PLP while the PLP left the unions unfettered by law: in a word, it politicised the union leadership and encouraged it to take action on all aspects of politics - not just on the issue of industrial relations itself.

This new antagonism between a Labour Government and the Unions, coupled with the election of more left-wing leaders in several key unions, meant that the PLP leadership could no longer rely upon union

leaders to control Conference for them. Wilson's Government was defeated on at least a dozen major issues at Labour Party Conferences in the late sixties. While it was true that the PLP had never really submitted to Conference control in the past, it had always been able to avoid a constitutional crisis by itself controlling Conference. Now, in addition to all his governmental problems, Wilson faced a new crisis of intra-party democracy.

3.3 Five Alternatives for the PLP Leadership

How could the PLP respond? What were the options? Three possibilities are encapsulated in Hirschman's title: Exit, Voice and Loyalty. In reverse order, the PLP Leadership could obey the oft-repeated myth and submit to Conference direction, or they could, like Gaitskell in 1960-61, 'fight, and fight and fight again, to save the party we love' - that is, they could try to mobilize their support within the party and reverse Conference decisions; or they could exit, give up, go away. Hirschman uses the term 'exit' to describe customers who stop buying a faulty product instead of complaining to the management, or voters who give up voting for an unsatisfactory party. Exit in that sense was a very much higher-cost strategy for PLP Leaders than for ordinary voters, though it was the course eventually adopted by those who founded the SDP.

Michels quoted straight exit as a standard procedure for socialist MPs to exert their power over the party members. One of his chapters was entitled: The Establishment of a Customary Right to the

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<u>Office of Delegate</u>. Or in other words: 'an election made for a definite purpose becomes a life incumbency' (Michels, p.81). MPs who were criticised by their party threatened to resign and

> 'if necessary, they go still further, and actually resign their seats, appealing to the electors as the only authority competent to decide the question in dispute. In such cases they are nearly always re-elected and thus attain to an incontestable position of power' (Michels, p.83).

Alas, though that strategy may have worked on the continent and Michels quotes John Burns applying it in nineteenth century Britain, the history of British socialism has usually shown that those who cut themselves off from the Labour Party seldom survive for long.

The marxist SDF which split off in 1903 later merged into the Communist Party which has elected only 4 MPs in its entire history. When the ILP, with 37 MPs moved into conflict with the Labour Party to which it was affiliated, most of its MPs wisely abandoned it and became straight Labour MPs. The ILP never won more than 4 seats as a separate party and its MPs sneaked back into the Labour Party.

Right wing exits were scarcely more successful. Ramsay MacDonald took 16 MPs into his National Labour Party in the thirties but they were gradually defeated or resigned and the party itself did not survive beyond the 1939-45 war. Similarly the right wing National Democratic Party (a 1915 Labour offshoot devoted to supporting the first world war) won 15 seats in the 1918 election but not one remained by 1923.

Oswald Moseley's Manifesto on unemployment was signed by 17 Labour MPs in 1930 and 6 of them then resigned and joined his New Party. He also picked up one Conservative MP and one Liberal. But all the New Party candidates were defeated at the 1931 General Election and Moseley remodelled his party on Italian fascist lines - without success however.

Most recently Dick Taverne, a very articulate lawyer, kicked off the run of third party victories in 1972-73 by resigning his seat at Lincoln and standing as a Democratic Labour candidate in the subsequent by-election. He won the by-election but lost his seat at the 1974 General Election.

But exit could also take more subtle and less risky forms. One form of exit was to remain in the party, but assert personal independence and 'teach the party a lesson' by withholding your personal influence during an election campaign or showing by decisive intervention that you could wreck the party's prospects. Consciously or unconsciously, that strategy was followed by Healey and Callaghan in the 1983 General Election campaign. We might call that 'psychological exit'.

In the sixties however, Wilson followed another classic Michels exit strategy:

'reformist (i.e. right wing socialist) deputies, as long as they have not upon their side a majority within the party, carry on an unceasing struggle to withdraw themselves from the influence on the party... they appeal to the mass of the electors, with the contention that it is to these latter alone, or at least chiefly, that they have to give an account of their political conduct. It is right to recognize that this appeal to the electorate as the body which has conferred a political mandate is frequently based upon genuinely democratic sentiments and principles.' (Michels, pp.185-186).

Wilson neither obeyed nor overturned Conference decisions that went against him. He relied upon his electoral mandate, rather than his party mandate, and ignored his party Conference. In happier times Wilson himself had asserted the supremacy of Conference. Explaining his 1960 contest with Gaitskell for the PLP Leadership Wilson declared: 'If Hugh Gaitskell is returned unopposed this will be taken as a mandate for his parliamentary colleagues to defy Conference, ignore the NEC and plunge the movement into still worse conflict.' (Stewart, p.93). But in the late sixties he chose what we might call the 'parliamentary exit' option. Gaitskell did not ignore Conference - he fought back and overturned the original votes against him. It was Wilson who chose to ignore Conference. Under Wilson, the PLP leaders who had lost control of unions, Conference and Party were now reduced to attacking the legitimacy of the institutions within their own movement.

3.4 Intra-Party Democracy:

Whatever Happened to the Iron Law of Oligarchy?

Where did that leave the activists and militants who had won what turned out to be such hollow victories at the party Conferences of the

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late sixties and early seventies? They too faced the options of exit, voice, and loyalty. In a more deferential age they might have chosen loyalty as Michels suggests. If the history of left-wing splinter groups had been a little less daunting they might have chosen exit. Whitely (1983, p.63) suggests that the ideologically disappointed middle class Labour activists were too committed to socialism and too realistic about the chances of small leftist parties either to exit into apathy or exit into other left-wing parties. But the working class Labour activists who were less ideological yet equally disappointed in the 1966-70 Labour government – though for instrumental reasons – were much more likely to exit into apathy, leaving the left-wing middle class ideologies in control of the constituency parties.

Certainly, there was little point in fighting more battles over policy when they could win Conference votes but simply be ignored by the PLP and its leaders. Their dilemma became more acute in the early seventies when the party approved a major policy statement, Labour's Programme 1973, but Wilson promptly disassociated himself from it (Kogan and Kogan, p.26).

The only real alternative to loyalty or exit was to turn the old illusion into reality by asserting the power of Conference and the PLP. In 1974 the index to the Times introduced a new subheading: 'Labour Party – Power Clash'. It took only 8 lines that year but required over 5 columns by the 1979 index. And it was an apt title: the struggle in the Labour Party during the seventies was not

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primarily about policy but about power. And power clearly meant tenure. The only way to prevent members of the PLP from ignoring Conference was to replace them with members who would obey Conference and then make their continued tenure conditional upon good behaviour.

That strategy was pursued in two ways. First, the one unchallenged right of the local activists was to select the party's parliamentary candidate in a constituency where a vacancy occurred through the retirement or electoral defeat of a sitting member. Sitting Labour MPs had security of tenure. Nonetheless turnover was high. Although there were 255 Labour MPs in 1961 and 289 in 1972 only 100 of the original 255 remained in parliament ten years later (Berrington, 1982). Using a variety of statistical procedures to classify Labour MPs as left-wing or right-wing, Berrington found that there was little evidence of Labour candidates being selected for their ideology before the seventies, but in the seventies constituency activists were consistently biased towards selecting left-wing candidates. Bochel and Denver's survey-based study of Labour selection committees confirms Berrington's inference. Selection committees took account of other factors than ideology but ideology was one important factor in their choice in the seventies. Moreover, left-wing activists placed more emphasis on candidate ideology than right-wing activists. So a right-wing ideology could lose a potential candidate the votes of left-wingers on the selection panel without gaining the votes of right-wingers. Right-wingers looked for vote-getting ability rather than ideological compatability (Bochel and Denver, p.68).

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Partly through the accidents of which candidates were in winnable
marginal seats in 1964 and 1966, and which MPs were defeated in 1970,
but also through the deliberate action of local selection committees,
the PLP in the seventies included a larger left-wing minority than in
earlier years - so much so that Berrington described the right's
majority as 'precarious' (Berrington, p.91).

The second part of the left-wing activists reaction to Wilson's
high-handed disregard of Conference was to press for constitutional
change. Initially they wanted some rather meaningless declaration of
Conference supremacy. Later they focused on three more mechanical
reforms, all of which they achieved by the early eighties:

1. The PLP right to elect the Party Leader should end, and leaders
    chosen by the Party outside parliament should·assume leadership
    of the PLP (separate Party and PLP Leaders on the German model
    were not acceptable).

2. All members of the PLP should appear before local selection
    committees at least once during each parliament for reselection
    or deselection; this procedure was misleadingly titled mandatory
    reselection.

3. The Manifesto should be drawn up by the NEC; in the past it had
    been drawn up by the PLP leadership and the NEC at a special
    joint committee (the 'clause 5' meeting). At least that had been
    the theory. The reality had been that the PLP Leader alone
    decided the tone and content of the Manifesto.

    Participation and democratisation were popular themes in the
sixties and seventies, not just in Britain but in Europe and the US as
well. So the right-wing in the PLP found these proposals difficult to
resist. They were, in a sense, ideologically neutral proposals
concerned with the relationship between leaders and led rather than
left and right. Labour or trade union activists who were not extreme
left-wingers could support them and the general public combined an
antipathy towards Labour's 'left-wing extremists' with considerable
support for the main reform proposals being advanced by those
extremists. On the other side, the 1970 General Election defeat
damaged the internal authority of the Wilson leadership and the
increasing assertiveness of Conference delegates was matched by a
pathetic defensiveness on the part of ex-ministers that John Grant MP
described as 'almost obsessional acts of contrition' (Minkin, 1978a,
p.335).

    The only way to oppose these reforms without appearing
unacceptably elitist in an era of populist participation was to assert
that they did not go far enough. While the activists were left-wing
and unwilling to defer to MPs, the mass of ordinary party members and
trade unionists were likely to be both right-wing and (relatively)

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deferential.   Figures from the Deputy Leadership election of 1983
provide firm evidence for this: those constituency parties whose
executive committee decided their Conference vote backed Meacher (the
left-winger) against Hattersley (the right-winger) by a margin of 2 to
1; those that held branch meetings to decide their Conference vote
backed Hattersley by 9 to 1 (Times, 5 October 1983).   However, the
right was slow to reach the conclusion that the only defence against
populism was more populism. By the time right-wingers like David Owen
began to press for 'one man, one vote' elections within the party it
looked like what it was - a desperate diversionary tactic.

     So with encouragement from obscure left-wing groups like the CLPD
(Campaign for Labour Party Democracy) the Labour Conference changed
the rules by accepting Mandatory Selection in 1979.   In 1980 it
accepted the principle of an Electoral College for the election of the
Party leader and Deputy Leader, though it was not until the special
Conference in January 1981 that the details were settled: trade unions
would have 40% of electoral college votes, constituency activists 30%
and the PLP 30%.   Conference did not give the NEC power to write the
Manifesto until after the 1983 election; but in 1983 the Party Leader
(Michael Foot) agreed to adopt a long NEC policy document as his party
Manifesto.

3.5 The Consequences of Demands for Democratisation

     In the event the demand for democratisation may have had greater
consequences than the democratisation itself.   From the mid-seventies

onwards the struggle inside the Labour Party was about the powers and tenure of the PLP, not about policy as such. Michels noted that this combination of 'rebellion on one side, and usurpation on the other' means that 'in all modern popular parties a spirit of genuine fraternity is conspicuously lacking.' (Michels, p.176). The key words used by numerous observers and participants at the 1979 Conference were 'malevolence', 'hysteria', 'venom', and 'intimidation'. Kogan and Kogan noted that 'not only deference but some of the ordinary conventions of public debate have gone' (Kogan and Kogan, p.69).

As soon as Mandatory Reselection had been accepted the CLPD published a pamphlet: How to Select or Reselect your MP which rated each Labour MP on a ten point 'index of moral fervour' (Kogan and Kogan's term) according to their parliamentary voting record. The Almanac of American Politics regularly publishes several such indices of Congressmen's behaviour and they are accepted as a normal, legitimate part of the American political process. Not so in Britain where any external controls on the behaviour of MPs conflict with unarticulated notions of parliamentary supremacy. That pamphlet alienated even left-wing members of the PLP. From a parliamentarian's point of view it was 'intimidation'. Joe Ashton MP predicted a 'night of the long knives' (Criddle, p.1).

Similar levels of bitterness and hysteria characterised later Conferences. In 1981 Hattersley went on BBC-TV to complain that leaflets handed out by left-wing activists were 'typically intimidatory' and Kinnock was treated to cries of 'Judas' because he

refused to vote for Benn in the run-off ballot for the Deputy Leadership (Kogan and Kogan, pp.126-127).

Aware that selection committees in the seventies had begun to emphasise ideological criteria more than in the past, MPs feared that Mandatory Reselection would mean a wholesale purge of the rightwing in the PLP. Reforms which removed their right to elect their own leader and through him to determine the manifesto were an insult to the status and integrity of MPs. Mandatory Selection was a threat to their careers. Nothing could be less fraternal or more personal. Nothing was more likely to reduce MPs sense of loyalty and commitment to their party. If the 'key to party cohesion is control over patronage' (Ware, p.83) the effect of patronage had now gone negative: the MP's hope that the Leader of the PLP would one day reward his loyalty with government office, was now replaced by the fear that loyalty to the PLP would be rewarded by deselection when he faced his local activists.

3.6 Voice and Exit Once Again

In the eighties, as in the late sixties, those who could not accept the dictates of left-wing activists had four options - voice, exit, psychological exit and parliamentary exit.

But in the interval the left had grown stronger within the PLP, the PLP leaders no longer had the authority that comes from being the government of the day, and they had tried to head off demands for an

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electoral college by themselves electing the left-winger Michael Foot as PLP Leader. Moreover, the power of Conference to determine the party constitution was more widely accepted than its power to determine immediate political policy. So one option, parliamentary exit, was closed.

If circumstances had not been so uniformly unfavourable the PLP could have ignored Conference on the Leadership as it had earlier done on policy. It could not have prevented Conference electing a Party Leader but it could have asserted its independence by electing its own PLP Leader - a Schmidt/Brandt solution. Moreover the PLP could have endorsed any sitting MP who was deselected by his local activists - as it had done in the early years of the century. And the PLP Leader could have issued a personal manifesto as Conservative Leaders have done until quite recently. Without question, the press and the media would have focused on the PLP Leader, and PLP-endorsed candidates would have fared better than activist-endorsed candidates in General Elections. But with Foot as Leader that scenario was just not an option.

All three of the remaining options were adopted however, by different groups within the PLP.

Owen, Rodgers, Williams, Jenkins and 27 other Labour MPs chose straight exit and formed the SDP. They regarded the party's constitutional reforms as final and took a pessimistic view about how the party would operate under its new constitution. They were

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encouraged to defect by the return of Roy Jenkins from his period as President of the EEC Commission; by the willingness of David Steel to offer Liberal support for realignment; by the opinion polls which showed great popular enthusiasm for a new centre party coalition; and by academic studies that suggested voter loyalty to the old parties was weak and that well known leaders and good media coverage could substitute for the lack of a grass-roots party organisation.

They ignored or discounted the possibility that Labour activists would use their new powers with discretion; they discounted the fact that opinion polls frequently indicated great popular enthusiasm for a centre party coalition without presaging a major realignment; they discounted the evidence that Labour and Conservative loyalties in the mass electorate, though weakening, were much stronger than any other political loyalties; they discounted the crucial significance in a constituency-based electoral system of the spatial distribution of party support whether based upon local organisation or some kind of collective party identification; and they discounted the evidence from the press reaction to the SNP (Scottish National Party) which showed that a new centre party would enjoy a torrent of favourable publicity quickly followed by unfavourable publicity and then bored reticence - nothing dates so quickly as yesterday's fashion. It would be wrong to pretend the SDP's Leaders were unaware of these difficulties but they were so alienated by activist attacks on the PLP that they were willing to gamble their political futures. Some of their followers, however, had nothing to gamble - they quit the Labour Party to avoid the threat of deselection (which was not always the result of their

<u>ideological</u> failings).   Amongst the Gang of Four neither Jenkins   nor
Williams was an MP when they founded the SDP; so they, too, had little
to lose.

Denis Healey's position was important.   If he had left the Labour
Party the SDP gamble might just have worked.   Conversely,   if the PLP
had been less compromising (or cowardly) in 1980 and elected Healey
instead of Foot as the last PLP leader then the SDP gamble would not
have been so attractive.   David Owen declared after the 1983 election
that he would never have left the Labour Party if Healey had been
Leader.   In the event, Healey was elected Deputy Leader by the PLP in
1980 and narrowly beat off Benn's challenge in the 1981 Electoral
College election.

Right wing defections to the SDP reduced the right's strength   in
the PLP but the remaining right-wingers pursued both the voice and
psychological exit options with considerable success.   They tried to
mobilize a counter-revolution within the party - sometimes in alliance
with those PLP left-wingers who had no wish to become mere puppets of
the   (left-wing) activists or who recognised the   futility   of
concentrating on ideological purity to the neglect of electoral
performance.   At the same time some of the right-wingers - notably
Healey and Callaghan but not Hattersley,   reserved the right to state
and restate their personal political positions at inconvenient times.
Thus,   while   Foot and Conference supported unilateral   nuclear
disarmament,   Healey insisted that the 1983 NEC Policy Document which
later served as a Manifesto must reflect his views as well as theirs.

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So the Manifesto read:

> 'Labour's commitment is to establish a <u>non-nuclear defence policy</u>
> for this country.   This means the rejection of any fresh nuclear
> bases   or weapons on British soil or in British waters,   <u>and   the</u>
> <u>removal of all existing nuclear bases and weapons.....</u>   However,
> all   this cannot be done at once,   and the way we do it   must   be
> designed   to assist in the task to which we are also committed   -
> <u>securing   nuclear disarmament agreements with other countries</u> and
> maintaining cooperation with our allies.'

That is,   one unconditional unilateralist sentence and one   clear
multilateralist   sentence   in the same paragraph.   Any confusion   was
made still deeper a few lines later by the claim 'We wish to see   NATO
itself develop a non-nuclear strategy.'

It   is not surprising that two weeks before the election Foot and
Healey   had a public disagreement about whether this   paragraph   meant
unconditional   rejection   of   the   existing   Polaris   weapon   system.
Callaghan   simply   disagreed   with   it   and   publicly   supported   the
deployment of a new nuclear weapon system, Cruise.

4.   CONSEQUENCES

The   two   decades   from the mid sixties to the mid   eighties   saw
traumatic upheavals within the Labour Party.   We might expect dramatic
consequences   to   flow   from them.   Democratising   the   party   had   a
disastrous   effect upon Labour's electoral performance in   1983.   But
Labour   activists noticed that disaster as much as anyone else and the
ultimate consequences could be slight.   In Britain, as in the USA, the
ultimate <u>Consequences of Party Reform</u> (Polsby's title) may be more   in

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keeping with Michels' scepticism than Polsby's fears.

4.1 A Failed Realignment

Historically, exits from the Labour Party have always ended in failure. That does not mean they always will, but the odds were against the SDP from the start. The SDP defection, along with other evidence of Labour disunity certainly did enormous short-term damage to Labour's electoral performance. But it did not restructure voting patterns, it had little effect upon party identification, and little effect on representation in parliament.

The surge of support for the Liberal/SDP Alliance during the 1979-83 parliament looked suspiciously like earlier surges of support for the Liberals alone, although on this occasion it peaked about 5% higher than before and the Alliance won about that much more than before in the subsequent General Election. Alliance supporters showed little coherence in policy preferences or social background, they were specially likely to describe their vote in negative terms (i.e., as motivated by disliking the other parties rather than liking the Alliance), and they expressed a very low sense of commitment to the Alliance or its component parties. As time passed they tended to claim identification (such as it was) with the Liberals rather than the SDP.

On election day 1983 the voters cast 43% of their votes for the Conservatives, 28% for Labour and 26% for the Alliance. But that same

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day 43% expressed psychological identification with the Conservatives, 38% with Labour and only 16% with the Alliance. Over a third of Labour and Conservative voters claimed a very strong identification with those parties, but only one tenth of Alliance voters claimed very strong identification with the Alliance - indeed many did not identify with it at all (Miller, 1984).

The unstructured nature of Alliance votes meant that they were evenly spread in all kinds of constituency and seldom added up to a local plurality. Thus the Alliance vote produced a Conservative landslide in parliament. Only 17 Liberals and 6 SDP members were elected. That electoral outcome can be traced back to the SDP's issue-less exit from the Labour Party, its quick Alliance with the Liberals, and the decision by the most senior Labour right-wingers to remain within the party and fight. A Mark II Labour Party would have found it much less easy to soar in the opinion polls but might have built up a more structured vote, received a better return in terms of MPs elected, and had a genuinely realigning effect on the voters. Even the Liberals were scared of the genuinely realigning effect of a Mark II Labour Party (Beith, p.115). Instead the SDP served as another vehicle for short-term protest.

The Alliance could not take over the role of principal opponent to the Conservative Government with only 23 MPs when Labour had almost ten times that number. And it was in a weak position to press for proportional representation when so few of its voters identified with it. Indeed in the aftermath of the election its standing in the polls

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declined and removed what force the demand for PR might have had.

Realignment however, need not mean success for the Alliance, it could mean no more than a permanent collapse of Labour support. Conservative hegemony would be very different from a Conservative/ Labour two-party system. But after the 1983 catastophe, the Labour Party showed signs of mending its ways and presenting a more credible alternative to the Conservative Government.

4.2 Restoration of What? - Moderation, Fraternity or Oligarchy?

While the defection of the SDP, the divisions between the remaining Labour leaders, and the acrimony between leaders and activists drew most attention, other significant changes were occurring in the Labour Party.

I noted earlier that the constitutional changes in the Labour Party were ideologically neutral. Few thought so at the time. The CLPD and its associates saw them as a mechanism for imposing left-wing policies and leaders on the PLP. So did the PLP. But Conference itself was not reformed. So the Electoral College and NEC control of the Manifesto took power away from the PLP and gave it to the union leaders, not to the constituency activists. Some of the left-wing Union leaders elected in the late sixties retired in the late seventies, others were apalled by the shambles in the party and its electoral consequences. Right-winger Terry Duffy replaced Hugh Scanlon as leader of the engineers for example. But even before that,

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Jones and Scanlon had become only symbolic left-wingers. They still moved in left-wing circles but they had been deradicalized by their close links with Labour governments and latterly held a very 'leadership-oriented view' of politics (Minkin, 1978b, pp.480-481).

In 1981 the Electoral College system was introduced and Benn came within a whisker of beating Healey. But in the NEC elections at that same Conference, union votes threw 6 left-wingers off the 29-man NEC and replaced them by right-wingers. In 1982 The Times categorized the NEC as comprising 9 left-wingers including Benn, 4 centrists including Foot, and 16 centre-right members headed by Healey. The 1983 Conference confirmed that broad pattern. Benn may have come close to winning the Deputy Leadership but what really did happen to him was that he lost the chairmanship of the NEC's important Home Policy Committee. Unless there are further changes in the NEC composition the NEC is likely to give the Party Leader (now Kinnock) the Manifesto he wants.

Similarly, the 1982 Conference voted by over 3 to 1 to reintroduce the system of prescribed organisations and the NEC carried out some exemplary expulsons of extreme left wingers associated with the Militant newspaper. The 1983 Conference approved those expulsions, again by more than 3 to 1.

Mandatory Reselection did not lead to a massive purge of the PLP's right-wing. Only a handful of MPs were deselected - not all of them for ideological reasons, though it is argued that half a dozen

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may have retired and others modified their behaviour. Certainly the PLP has shifted somewhat to the left as the NEC has shifted to the right. Of 64 Healey MPs with Bennite constituency parties in 1981, 13 retired, 9 defected to the SDP and 4 were deselected (Criddle). But if MPs are frightened to disagree with their local activists then their voting in the 1983 Electoral College elections does not show it. Of 209 MPs who voted, 142 voted differently from their local constituency party. They are unlikely to suffer for their independence. While selectors did take account of candidate's ideology Bochel and Denver's survey showed that only 13% of selectors (whether left or right themselves) made ideology their primary criterion. Many more, on all wings of the party, put greatest emphasis on electability. When faced with a sitting MP ideology is unlikely to be the sole consideration. One decision of the 1983 Conference strengthened the tenure of MPs. By a 3 to 1 majority, Conference defeated a motion to have internal PLP votes recorded and published. Members of the PLP will not have to account to their local activists for their votes within the parliamentary caucus.

Again, the Electoral College made surprisingly little difference to the 1983 Leadership and Deputy Leadership elections. Neil Kinnock won 73% of the union votes, 91% of the constituency votes, and 49% of the PLP vote - which, in a four-candidate contest made him the overwhelming winner in all sections of the college. In the Deputy Leadership election, Roy Hattersley won 88% of the union votes, 51% of the constituency votes and 56% of the PLP votes.

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Perhaps most significant was the report that the TGWU delegates voted 27 to 18 to overturn the recommendation of their union executive and vote for Hattersley in the Deputy Leadership election. Their executive had advised them to vote for Hattersley's left-wing opponent. Moss Evans, their General Secretary, explained his delegates decision by stating the need for Labour to remain a 'broad church'.

At the time of writing Conference has not abandoned its generally left-wing policy position but the new leader, Neil Kinnock has given adequate warning that he is another Wilson who will subordinate policy considerations to the need to win a General Election. Kinnock began, like Wilson, on the left and gradually moved to the right as he moved up. He has a strong nerve guided by a strong ambition for government office. He distanced himself from the extreme left by voting against Healey on the first ballot in the 1981 Deputy Leadership election but then abstaining in the run-off ballot between Healey and Benn. On the NEC, Kinnock cast his vote for the reintroduction of a prescribed list and exemplary expulsions. Along with Foot, Evans and Kitson, Kinnock was one of the 4 NEC members The Times categorized in 1982 as neither left nor right. Making some bitter enemies amongst old friends on the left gained him some new friends on the right.

Contrary to Michel's assertion the Labour Party clearly has enormous reserves of fraternity. History has taught the Labour Party a sharp lesson. In the 1983 Electoral College elections many union delegations, activists and MPs voted for the so-called 'dream ticket'

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of Kinnock and Hattersley – a combination of a (now) moderate leftist and a (now) moderate rightist. That is, they voted for a 'broad church', for party unity and tolerance for both wings of the PLP. Tolerance did not extend however to the far left associated with the Militant newspaper. The whole tone of the 1983 Conference contrasted sharply with the tone of the 1979 Conference. Paraphrasing Kogan and Kogan, we could say that 'not only the ordinary conventions of public debate but deference towards leadership returned in 1983'. Events had demonstrated the need for unity on the platform and deference from the floor.

Which brings us back to an earlier question: what has happened to Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy? Certainly the operation of that law was suspended in the 1970s but suspended perhaps rather than repealed. In the 1950s the PLP Leadership ran the party through the union leaders control of the block vote. Despite the democratisation of the 1970s it seemed that in the 1980s the PLP leadership still ran the party the same old way. For electoral reasons – and for reasons of genuine fraternity also, the activists were reluctant to use their new constitutional power to purge right wing MPs and both unions and constituency parties backed the PLP's choice of Leader and Deputy Leader.

It is not altogether fanciful to imagine that a convention may become established whereby it would seem a disruptive act of disloyalty for the Electoral College to overrule the known choice of the PLP for leader, or install an NEC which the leader could not work

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with, or inflict upon him a Manifesto he could not in conscience present to the electorate. Indeed it is quite likely that increased formal powers for activists and Conference will impose new restraints upon them. If Kinnock as Prime Minister were to face a Conference in circumstances similar to the late sixties, Conference would have the awesome power to dismiss the Prime Minister from Leadership of the Party.

If it chooses to use that power it would have no guarantee that he would go quietly – he might remain as Prime Minister, or he might resign and request a dissolution. When Wilson's job as Prime Minister lay in the gift of the PLP, the PLP could not dismiss him for fear of the electoral consequences. Now that Conference has that power it will have the same fear. Labour leaders enjoyed better security of tenure when their job depended upon the PLP than Conservative leaders enjoyed even when there was no formal mechanism for dismissing them. Mrs. Thatcher is the first Conservative leader to depend upon annual re-election but she has lasted longer than Heath or Home or Macmillan or Eden.

Now if the Labour Conference has the power to dismiss the Leader but chooses not to do so, then its criticism of his policy and judgement will be muted. The Leader will be able to demand (or infer) a vote of confidence from Conference that will delegitimise any of its more specific criticisms.

Kinnock was widely perceived as the 'necessary man' in 1983. But

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it is not irrelevant that he had been for several years a favourite of
the previous leader Michael Foot and that Foot made it clear that
Kinnock was his choice for successor. Despite all the democratic
trappings of the 1983 Electoral College the result was the same as the
most perfect oligarchy would have produced.

4.3 Must Labour Fail?

After Labour's third post-war electoral defeat electoral
sociologists asked the question: Must Labour Lose? (Abrams, Rose and
Hinden). They argued that social change, growing affluence, and a
lack of popular support for socialism gravely handicapped a socialist
party that spoke for the working class and the poor.

After three postwar Labour Governments we might ask: Must Labour
Fail? Is the Labour Party allergic to government? Must it either
alienate the electorate, or alienate its own members? Must its
commitment to planning, rather than the market, force its governments
into confrontation with the unions and turn its chief supporters into
its chief enemies?

Labour's new constitutional arrangement may not eliminate the
tendency towards oligarchy and deference within the party, but they
will make the Labour Party more responsible for Labour Governments.
The Party may still be a somewhat unwilling accomplice to the trimming
and compromising of a future Labour Government, but perhaps more
willing to excuse it. Over the next decade the most revealing

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insights into British politics could be provided, not by surveys of mass attitudes towards policy, but by surveys of Labour Conference delegates attitudes towards deference and leadership.

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