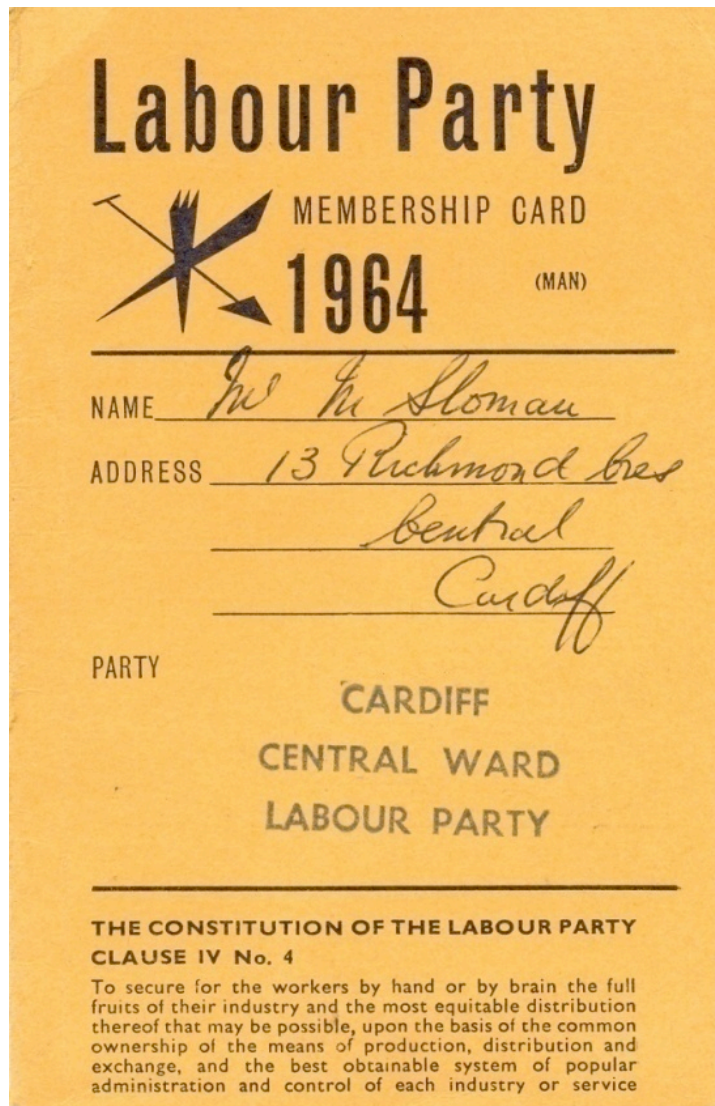


# Labour's failure and my small part in it: a memoir for my grandchildren

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**Martyn Sloman**

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## About the author

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## Introduction and propositions

Winners, not losers, produce personal reminiscences and reflections. This self-published volume is an exception. It describes my involvement with the Labour Party over a 53-year period: beginning as a schoolboy canvasser in South Wales in 1962 and ending as Parliamentary Agent in North Norfolk in 2015. In between, I fought and lost four parliamentary elections and was in a central vantage point to witness what I regard as the defining moment in British Labour politics: the miners' strike of 1984-5.

The book is intended for my grandchildren and, in turn, their children and grandchildren. My message to them is as follows. I hope that this short volume will give you an understanding of the tradition and experiences that motivated me, and formed part of your own family history. I also hope that, in whatever circumstances you find yourselves, you will try to make the world a better place for those currently disadvantaged – or at least regard this as a worthwhile cause. This is far more about values than it is about electoral politics. Only time will tell whether a Labour Party will be the appropriate vehicle for such aspirations.

The task I have undertaken can be termed 'life-writing', an increasingly popular activity in 2015. However, my content is restricted to the political dimension of my life. In three of the parliamentary elections I contested, I lost by fewer than 2,000 votes. I have no regrets: I would have made a poor Member of Parliament, being too uncompromising in my convictions, intolerant of others, and combative by nature. I was fortunate that the two events that led me to abandon any political ambitions – the shambolic 1983 general election and the subsequent miners' strike – took place before my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday. This gave me time to develop a successful career in management education with academic appointments and many travel opportunities. I have also found great fulfillment in my domestic and family life.

This current draft was completed shortly after the 2015 general election when it seems that the Labour Party is in long-term decline. However, the underlying arguments for creating a more just and inclusive society remain undiminished; indeed all the evidence is that inequalities are increasing. What has happened is that the arguments and mechanisms must take different forms in future.

Politically my generation of the Left has failed those that follow. We should be honest, ask ourselves why, and try to share that information so that others may learn from it. I hope that you, my grandchildren, will have more success should you devote energy to the cause.

The material that follows is presented as a series of episodes, interspersed with reflections. The episodes concern the formative incidents that drew me into left-of-centre politics or influenced me once I became involved. The reflections set out what I have learnt as a result. The political content is based around nine propositions and these are set out on the next page; taken together they are my view of what must be understood if the Labour Party is to survive.

## Propositions

1. The Labour Party's purpose should be the promotion of social justice, the elimination of poverty, and the protection of the less able.
2. Many activists in the past have been motivated by their experience of class prejudice – hopefully future generations will not suffer in the same way.
3. Progressive governments will always disappoint. Election victories will be built on over-optimistic expectations and will be followed by problems of implementation.
4. The 1984-5 miners' strike marked the end of politics based on class awareness and industrial action.
5. Tony Blair's politics of progressive centrism can no longer be a model for the future, but to date we have failed to develop an alternative coherent policy framework that can inspire.
6. If the Labour Party is to survive, it needs to develop a clear statement of how modern global capitalism can be organised to deliver growth without producing obscene levels of inequality, and how that growth can be harnessed to fund a well-managed welfare state.
7. Such a statement and the related policies can only be developed on an international basis.
8. The Labour Party of my lifetime has failed to provide an economic model that can deliver a just society and then go on to convince others of its value.
9. There may be little immediate prospect for Labour as a party of government. This does not diminish the importance of the cause of social justice.

## Table I: Labour votes at general elections

Source <http://www.ukpolitical.info>

Date of General Election	Party Forming Government	Winning Government Majority	Percentage Turnout (%)	Percentage Labour Vote (%)
15-Oct-64	Labour	5	77.1	44.1
31-Mar-66	Labour	96	75.8	47.9
18-Jun-70	Conservative	30	72.0	43.0
28-Feb-74	Labour	None*	78.8	37.1
10-Oct-74	Labour	3	72.8	39.2
03-May-79	Conservative	43	76.0	36.9
09-Jun-83	Conservative	144	72.7	27.6
11-Jun-87	Conservative	102	75.3	30.8
09-Apr-92	Conservative	21	77.7	35.2
01-May-97	Labour	179	71.4	43.2
07-Jun-01	Labour	166	59.4	40.7
05-May-05	Labour	68	61.4	35.2
06-May-10	Conservative	None**	65.1	29.0
07-May-15	Conservative	12	66.1	30.4

\*Hung Parliament (Labour formed minority Government)

\*\*Hung Parliament (Conservatives formed coalition with Liberal Democrats giving them a 77-seat majority in The House of Commons)

## Table II: Labour Party leaders

Labour Party leader	Took office	Left office
Harold Wilson	14-Feb-63	05-Apr-76
James Callaghan	05-Apr-76	10-Nov-80
Michael Foot	10-Nov-80	02-Oct-83
Neil Kinnock	02-Oct-83	18-Jul-92
John Smith*	18-Jul-92	12-May-94
Tony Blair	21-Jul-94	24-Jun-07
Gordon Brown**	24-Jun-07	11-May-10
Ed Miliband**	25-Sep-10	08-May-15

\* Following John Smith's tragic death Margaret Beckett became acting leader until the election of Tony Blair.

\*\*Harriet Harman was acting leader of the Party in the interim periods before the election of the new leader.

I am most grateful to Josh de Lyon for his work in the preparation of these tables and his assistance with parts of the main text.

## Episode 1: The formative influences – Cardiff

When I was actively trying to secure a Labour parliamentary candidature in the 1970s, I, like everyone else, had a standard speech delivered at countless selection meetings. This opened: *“I don’t think I ever had to join the Labour Party. I knew that I was part of it, long before I understood what it was or what it represented.”* I would go on to describe my activities, beginning with doorstep canvassing at the age of 16.

Honesty has never proved to be of political advantage, but this opening was true. I was brought up in a South Wales Labour Party family. When I was born, my father was a carpenter-coachbuilder and my mother had held clerical jobs in the Civil Service. Both my parents then qualified as schoolteachers under a post-war emergency training system, a considerable struggle for the family with a small child and little money. My father, a charismatic but erratic figure, became an activist in the teachers’ trade union and drifted in and out of involvement in the Labour Party. For a period he served as deputy leader of the Cardiff City Council. He was an old-school class warrior: he once proclaimed, tongue in cheek, that the innovative (and eventually hugely successful) Cardiff Bay Barrage scheme was in reality an attempt to drown the working class of the city. However, inconsistency and lack of application meant that he never achieved his potential and many of his ambitions were transferred to me. Another significant influence was my father’s sister, Jenny, who joined the Workers’ Union (later the Transport and General Workers’ Union) as a shorthand typist in their Cardiff office in 1920. Subsequently she played important organisational roles in the election of Cardiff’s first Labour MP in 1923 and in the 1926 General Strike.

At the end of her life, Jenny wrote copious recollections of this period in a loose-leaf notebook. My elder son, who later read history at university, edited and extended these notes for a school examination project. To quote one example:

*“No fresh milk, only cheap condensed milk. The lady of the house loved her cats, and every night put down a bowl of fresh milk for them. As soon as the family retired, my mother would put the milk through a piece of muslin into a jug which was served to the family for their breakfast so the servants had the fresh milk for their breakfast and the cats had the watered condensed milk.”*

My son offered a balanced and realistic conclusion in his project:

*“...the Slomans were not heroes and certainly had their faults. They were reasonably intelligent people who fought against the inequalities of society as they saw them without much hope but with great stubbornness”.*

The other side of my family underwent similar suffering. My maternal grandmother’s first husband suffered a severe injury in an underground accident at a colliery. He was then transported by stretcher in a guard’s van in a train and died in a Cardiff hospital. At the time, my grandmother was pregnant and also had another child under the age of three. As was the practice, her husband’s

workmates put money in his overalls to ensure that he could have a decent funeral. However this side of the family had no Labour tradition and this grandmother, once she had prospered, voted Conservative.

The fortunes of our immediate family, like those of many others, improved with post-war recovery and full-employment. We had been living in a rented flat with a shared toilet and no bathroom but, in the early 1950s, we were allocated a local authority council house. We were the first occupiers in a new development that was an extension of the huge Ely council estate on the western boundaries of Cardiff. In 2015, Ely is rightly identified as an area of great social deprivation. However, living there marked a very happy time for me and I enjoyed the real sense of being part of a working-class community. It was tolerant and inclusive: Ely was the birthplace of the first black captain of a Great Britain sports side in any game of note (Clive Sullivan, Rugby League) and the first black player to be capped for Wales at our national game of Rugby Union (Glen Webbe).

Britain in the 1950s was a very class-conscious society. In Cardiff, as was doubtless the case in all provincial cities, everyone was aware of the status of the area in which they lived. Cyncoed, Penylan and Llandaff were posh; Canton, Roath and Cathays were middle ranking. The areas round the steelworks and the docks, and the big council estates on the edges of the city, Ely and Llanrumney, were bottom of the pile. It was only when I went to secondary school that I realised that this mattered.

At the time, the allocation of pupils to secondary school was based on their performance in a competitive examination: the notorious 11-plus. The top 20 per cent or so went to one of the city's six grammar schools; the remainder went to secondary moderns. Less than a fifth of my primary school class at Hywel Dda School, Ely passed the 11-plus and proceeded to an academic route at grammar school. The allocation to secondary moderns was determined by geography; the allocation to grammar school was determined by examination score. Most parents put Cardiff High School as the first choice and as a result the school's intake consisted of those most academically gifted at that age. It was a highly selective old-fashioned grammar school. Despite the fact that it was a state school, prefects were called 'sir'; we didn't compete at sports against other local schools, preferring a fixture list made up of public schools. What was far worse, however, was the school's total concentration on the brightest and ablest pupils. The aim was to get as many of them as possible into Oxbridge, thus maintaining the school's reputation and ensuring that it was the first choice of most of the children (or rather most of the parents) in the city.

I was an awkward, non-conforming, individual in an environment that espoused old-fashioned class values. I didn't fit in but, at that age, most of my rebellions were stupid and pointless. We were once lined up outside the school when Princess Margaret drove by on a state visit and told to raise our school caps as she passed. With other members of the awkward squad I refused to do so and instead shouted, "EOKA" (the campaign call of the 1950s organisation to liberate Cyprus from the British yoke). I don't think either the school or Princess Margaret took much notice.

However, alongside my burgeoning class chippiness, I embraced two political causes that have remained with me. The first concerned the purpose of

education. The mid to late 1960s saw the drive to end selection and move to the comprehensive system. Selection at 11 meant that life chances for a high proportion of our future citizens were significantly downgraded at that age. It created divisions in our society. Moreover there was ample evidence emerging that parental background had a major influence on attainment, irrespective of intelligence. The system was unfair and, accordingly, I became a key player in a small group of Cardiff High School pupils who were campaigning for comprehensive education.

The second political cause was the fight against apartheid in South Africa – an important mobilising issue for the Left. Apartheid (Afrikaans for the ‘state of being apart’) had been introduced into the country in 1948: inhabitants were classified into four racial groups: black, white, coloured and Indian. Under Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd, apartheid had evolved into institutionalised racism characterised by systemic economic exploitation of the black majority and political repression. In retrospect it was astonishing that, while most people in the UK chose to ignore it, some people seemed to support it.

My family boycotted South African fruit. I marched and refused to attend rugby matches involving South African teams. The rugby boycott, in particular, was the cause of considerable argument and acrimony in the very conservative Cardiff High School and I was involved in regular rows with the son of the local newspaper’s rugby correspondent. At the time I would have been astonished to know the positive role that South Africa would come to play in my later professional life.

During my early involvement in Cardiff politics I came into frequent contact with two people who were to emerge as leading figures in the Labour Party: Neil Kinnock, Party leader from 1983 to 1992 (the longest serving opposition leader in British history) and Rhodri Morgan, First Minister of Wales from 2000 to 2009 (the longest serving First Minister to date). They were both older than me – Neil led the University Labour Club when I was involved in the Cardiff Young Socialists. Both were friendly and generous individuals and I remember them inviting groups of us teenagers to the flat in (posh) Penylan that they shared, and subsequent complaints from neighbours about the noise that resulted. In the 1960s and 1970s Cardiff North was a marginal parliamentary seat and I spent some considerable time on the doorstep, especially with Rhodri and the woman who became his wife, Julie (subsequently herself a Labour MP). Whatever the criticisms, and Neil attracted plenty from all quarters, I have not the slightest doubt that they were sincere, capable individuals and, importantly in this context, well entrenched in the values that I respected. Though ambitious, both were well grounded.

These years of teenage activism were a heady time. It seemed that great change was likely and we were all naïve in our hope and expectations. Together with my great friend, and fellow Labour Party Young Socialist, Malcolm Adams, (who subsequently was to become a hugely respected Consultant and Medical Director in the City) I walked out of Cardiff High School to send a telegram to Harold Wilson on his election to the Labour Party leadership in February 1963. It read ‘*congratulations and now for real socialism*’.

Despite my concentration on politics at the expense of my schoolwork I did



better at my A-levels (the examinations undertaken at the age of 17) than I thought I would. I made the required grades to read maths at the University of Exeter; it was a disastrous choice of both subject and university and I left at the end of the first year. Subsequently, life took a much better turn and I went on to read economics at the new University of Lancaster where I obtained a First Class Honours Degree. I will always be grateful to Bill Gregory, a tutor at the Workers' Educational Association, who encouraged me on this path. By contrast, my last conversation with my old school headmaster ended with him telling me that I would do well in life but "*a boy like you should never go to university*".

## Reflection: Political motivation

### Proposition 1

**The Labour Party's purpose should be the promotion of social justice, the elimination of poverty, and the protection of the less able.**

### Proposition 2

**Many activists in the past have been motivated by their experience of class prejudice – hopefully future generations will not suffer in the same way.**

Every member of the Labour Party would choose their own form of words but most would agree with the broad sentiments expressed in the first proposition. Certainly it is why I joined and stayed in membership for more than 50 years, but circumstances change and must be reflected in different policies and new styles of presentation.

This is a memoir for my grandchildren. Hopefully their teenage years will be very different from mine. Their parents are successful graduates able to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. My grandchildren will be brought up in North London which, whatever its downsides, is tolerant of dissent and comfortable with diversity. They are unlikely to encounter class prejudice and snobbery of the type that so irritated me. Society has changed a great deal during my 50 years of activism and many of these changes are for the better.

In common with every grandparent, my wish is that my grandchildren will be personally, professionally and economically successful. If this proves to be the case, I pray that they will not be indifferent to, or dismissive of, those who are not. Should they not be successful in the materialistic sense I hope they grow up in a society that offers them the opportunity to lead a fulfilled life and not be exploited by others. I would like them to live in a world that is more socially just than the one that I have known, and hope that they, themselves, will be proponents of social justice.

Throughout this memoir I will focus on the economic and employment dimensions of social justice. I have spent my life as an economist and my expertise and experience lies in this area. For many readers, and this may well include my grandchildren, the elimination of discrimination on race, gender or sexual orientation will be equally important. Protecting our global environment will also assume greater prominence and for many this will be their main political motivation. To me these issues are part of the same broader campaign for fairness and social justice.

In the course of one of our discussions before the 2015 election, my elder son observed that voting would no longer be determined by where your family were in the 1930s. He was correct. My Sloman family forebears were victims of an oppressive economic system where employers exploited labour – though doubtless there was a strong element of folk myth about their experiences. They,

like many others, saw the Labour Party and the trade unions as a way of both improving their own condition and as part of a battle for greater social justice. Given their circumstances, there was no need to draw a distinction between what advanced them personally and what was fair for society as a whole.

I inherited this tribal loyalty and it was powerfully reinforced by my experiences at a school that positioned itself as a bastion of privilege. Undoubtedly I was an awkward, chippy child and, had my attitude been better, I am sure that I would have been treated differently. However it was the adults in the Labour Party who encouraged me to find self-worth and express my individuality rather than the teachers at the grammar school.

Given this, I would have been 'Labour' more or less irrespective of what the Party did. Throughout my life I have been emotionally, intellectually and tribally a socialist. There are few people whose voting behaviour is determined by such a legacy and they are getting fewer. A tribal dimension has no appeal to people outside the tribe, and may indeed act as a repellent.

It was easy to vote Labour in the 1960s. Class prejudice was endemic and the country was lagging behind the rest of the world economically and industrially – and there was a convincing case to be made that the two were connected. Labour was the modernising party and would release the energies of a newly confident generation. These were heady times. As Harold Wilson memorably put it in his Labour Party Conference 1963 speech: *“The Britain that is going to be forged in the white heat of this revolution will be no place for restrictive practices or for outdated measures on either side of industry.”*

Writing in 2015, after a calamitous election defeat, it is evident that, to survive, the Labour Party will need to rediscover itself by looking forward not back. It will need to find new expressions for some fundamental values. In politics it is important to distinguish between principles (values or aims), policies and presentation. Sadly, in 2015, at a time of crisis for the Labour Party, the mainstream candidates in a depressing campaign for the Party leadership have operated at the bottom level of this conceptual chain; the debate has all been about presentation. The alternative candidate, Jeremy Corbyn, has delivered an emotional appeal but has not offered any serious and coherent new ideas.

## Episode 2: Youthful ambitions – Leominster

My generation of students was the most fortunate that this country has ever known. We were the first generation not to have fought in a conscript war or seen our children conscripted. Indeed 1968, the year of my graduation, was the only year when no British serviceman or woman was killed on active service.

Moreover many of us were the first members of extended working class families to enter university. Local government paid all our university fees and we received means tested living allowances that extended to the reimbursement of travel costs between home and university. I used to put in regular claims for rail fares between Cardiff and Lancaster.

I left university energetic, inspired and excited – buoyed up by an unexpected First Class Honours Degree in Economics and the offer of a job at the National Coal Board (NCB). I spent the summer after graduation in the United States working in New Jersey for the campaign of the anti-Vietnam war US Presidential candidate, Eugene McCarthy (with the help of a travel scholarship from Lancaster). I was present at the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago. This was the occasion of what became known as a police riot: the contrasting feelings of mainstream America and of the peace movement spilt over into violence. I was far too cautious to get involved but I do have a walk-on cameo in a film made at the convention (*Medium Cool* by Haskell Wexler).

Joining the Coal Board was the right decision at the time. Had I stayed on in an academic environment, I would have regretted it. I wanted to move out of theory and into practice. The NCB offered a good training with a competitive salary and its history as the nationalised industry that the miners created made it sound like a branch of the Labour Party. My ambitions at the time, however, were not to rise to the top of any managerial ladder but to play a role in Labour Politics, hopefully as a Member of Parliament. I neglected my early career and was fortunate to benefit from supportive and indulgent bosses. I owe them a great deal.

In late 1969 destiny beckoned, or so it seemed given my optimistic frame of mind. Several years earlier my father had taken steps to include my name on the Labour Party's approved list of parliamentary candidates – this meant little in practice but at least it was a list. As a result I received a letter from the Leominster Constituency Labour Party inviting me to enter the selection process for their parliamentary candidature. I accepted with alacrity and attended what was known as a selection conference in which a dozen or so local members had the choice between two candidates, a third having withdrawn on the day. We spoke for 15 minutes and then took questions.

To this day I cringe at the content of my speech: as I recall it, the central theme was a rejection of the UK membership of the European Community. However I have always been a competent platform performer and, because I appealed to a certain type of Party member, I was selected. The other candidate, who was far more suitable than me, was Adrian Bailey who, 31 years later, became Member

of Parliament for West Bromwich West and a most successful Chair of a House of Commons Select Committee.

Leominster was a hopeless seat for Labour. It was massive agricultural area covering the whole of the north of the county of Herefordshire. It was one of six seats in UK where Labour did not even field a candidate in the 1945 general election that produced a massive victory for the Party. Such Labour vote as existed was thinly dispersed and we could not even elect any councillors.

Just before I arrived as candidate, there had been a public inquiry into proposed boundary changes affecting the two parliamentary constituencies in the county of Herefordshire: Leominster and Hereford. While Leominster was a safe Conservative seat, under quite exceptional circumstances Hereford could just about be categorised as a marginal Conservative seat vulnerable to Labour. Accordingly the Conservative Agent (the official campaign organiser) proposed the transfer of two small solid Conservative voting villages just north of the City of Hereford out of the Leominster constituency and into the Hereford constituency. Their initial argument was that these two districts were south of the River Lugg, which formed a natural boundary. Evidence from the county surveyors proved this not to be the case.

A second argument was then advanced. This was that the natural sphere of influence for these two villages was Hereford not Leominster. The Conservative Agent invited elderly village residents to testify. Having been coached, they were at pains to emphasise the inadequacy of public transport from their village to Leominster: *"Only two buses a day so if you go shopping you have to spend the whole morning there with nothing to do."* This excellent case was destroyed with a simple question to one of the villagers from the Labour agent: *"How easy is it for you to get to Hereford?"* The following answer came back: *"It's terribly difficult because you have to go to Leominster first."*

Once I had settled in, being a candidate proved to be a most enjoyable experience. There was not the slightest prospect of winning and the local Party members were in it for the best of motives and were a fine group of people. Campaigning, such that it was, proved to be great fun and I learnt a few tricks that stood me in good stead for the future. For example, I wrote to all the major local employers asking if I could visit their establishments to gain a better appreciation of their business and meet some of the workforce. One of the businesses declined in a very rude manner and this produced a favourable front page on the local paper: *'Labour Candidate refused visit'*. I obtained a similar result in every subsequent parliamentary seat that I fought.

The 1970 general election took place in the most glorious June sunshine and North Herefordshire was a lovely place to be. The Conservative machine swung into action behind its ponderous old Etonian MP. All we could do was make the odd wave and the local Party treated any success as a triumph. Sadly and unexpectedly Labour lost the election nationally, but I succeeded in increasing the Labour vote. I left well satisfied with both heightened ambitions and a naïve belief in my own destiny.

### Episode 3: Youthful ambitions – Bosworth

After a successful fight in a hopeless seat, I was a credible candidate to become a candidate in a marginal. Following Labour's unexpected defeat in 1970 there were plenty of candidatures available. Set against that there were a lot of ambitious people seeking the same objective, many of whom were more capable than me. At one time I tentatively pursued the candidature for the Cardiff North seat, which had been won back by the Conservatives. However this would have created a difficult family situation since many of my father's friends were unreconstructed Marxists and were hostile to my brand of Labour politics.

By this time I was building connections across the Labour Party. I was elected as a Councillor in the London Borough of Brent in 1971. Subsequently the Labour Party in Brent acquired a dreadful reputation for extreme rhetoric and poor delivery of services. However in my three years of service the Labour Group was well led and I was pleased to be a part of it. It remains the only public election that I have ever won.

It was a colleague of mine in the Coal Board who provided the introduction that led to my next parliamentary candidature. Before working alongside me at the Hobart House headquarters he had been a mine manager in the South Leicestershire coalfield and had established a very close working relationship with the local National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) leadership. The Leicestershire miners were the most moderate in the country; while protecting the rights of their workers they were always anxious to work with management to increase underground productivity – and hence produce high bonuses for their members. This had important implications a decade later when they were unwilling to follow the militant leadership of Arthur Scargill.

The Leicestershire NUM was based in the aptly named Coalville, the central location for the six working collieries. I was invited to speak to their Executive Committee, as were others, and it went well. In 1972, they chose me as their nominee for the highly marginal seat of Bosworth. In retrospect this seems an impressive compliment – a mining union choosing a 26-year-old callow manager from their industry to represent them. I was however in tune with their political approach, an effective speaker, and – at the time – very determined.

The NUM nomination secured me a place at a Labour Party selection conference where there was a choice of six candidates; three of them eventually became Labour MPs elsewhere. However the miners organised as an effective block, which inevitably caused resentment, and I was duly selected to be the parliamentary candidate by a clear majority.

Labour had held the Bosworth parliamentary seat between 1945 and 1970. The Labour MP who had lost the previous election, was a controversial figure called Woodrow Wyatt. A 1997 obituary stated that *"he always tried to live like a lord"* and *"travelled politically from the soft Left to the far Right"*. The Conservative who defeated him was Adam Butler, the old Etonian son of a greatly respected wartime Conservative Cabinet Minister, R.A. Butler. The son, while personable

and charming, was a pale shadow of the father but received very positive national publicity as a result of this family association.

I deluded myself that I would win the seat back. In fact the demographics were moving against us. Mining was employing fewer and fewer people: the six Leicestershire collieries were running out of economically viable reserves. More importantly all the population expansion was taking place in villages that were in easy commuting distance of nearby Leicester. New estates were springing up in old colliery villages round Coalville and to the east of the other main town, Hinckley. Most of the inhabitants of these expensive properties would not vote Labour until Tony Blair's 1997 election.

The February 1974 general election took place against the background of a major wage dispute in the Coal Industry with an NUM overtime band followed by a strike. Prime Minister Edward Heath had called a general election with the slogan *'Who governs Britain?'* Although the mining vote itself was solid they did not get much support from their immediate neighbours (many of them thought that the miners were already well-paid). The high spot of the campaign was sharing a platform with Tony Crosland, Labour's Secretary of State for Environment, who was one of a number of visiting speakers sent in by the Party; he was an enormously impressive intellectual and one I greatly admired.

On the morning of 1<sup>st</sup> March 1974 I woke up convinced I had won. We had certainly maximised the Labour vote on a very high percentage poll (turnout was more than 85 per cent). However there was a squeeze on an extensive Liberal vote which mainly went Conservative and a solid Tory vote in the new estates. I lost by 1,687 votes and was devastated. There are few things more painful than losing when you think you are going to win. I will always retain the greatest admiration for the way that Labour leader Neil Kinnock coped when he lost nationally in 1992. Adam Butler MP in his victory speech said that he didn't know if it was the first election his opponents had fought but he thought that they had done jolly well (or words to that effect). I have no idea whether this was intended as a deliberate condescending slight, but it hurt. Later in life Adam Butler incurred heavy losses at Lloyds and was obliged to sell a family-owned Post-Impressionist picture for, according to press reports at the time, £6 million to meet his need for money.

The national result meant that the Labour Party was able to form a minority Government. Another election was inevitable – possibly as early as June that year but more likely in October. I was obliged to go through another shortened selection process with opposition from an over-ambitious leader of Hinckley Council who had always wanted to contest the seat. However the miners saw me through and I fought my third parliamentary election on October 10<sup>th</sup> 1974. Bosworth was recognised as a key marginal and the then Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, spoke for me in the constituency; so did a number of other Cabinet Ministers including the then deputy leader and eventual SDP (Social Democratic Party) founder, Roy Jenkins. We worked hard and this time secured more than 28,000 votes. However, with an even greater squeeze on the Liberal vote, I lost by 302. I was better prepared for this result that came as no surprise after my experience in February and it was far less painful.

At the time of this defeat I was still only 28. In retrospect I was too young and callow to make a really effective candidate, despite being very hard working and committed. Given the demographics, however, I don't think it would have made much difference. What I realised much later in life was that I was far better equipped to contribute politically when I had acquired wider experience outside the political arena.



## Reflection: Power and disillusion

### Proposition 3

**Progressive governments will always disappoint. Election victories will be built on over-optimistic expectations and will be followed by problems of implementation.**

Rather than wrestle with the complexities of a changing society, it is much easier to adopt a stance of unthinking opposition. A simple, powerful and toxic argument found favour in the Labour Party in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was based on the premise that the Parliamentary Party had betrayed the Labour movement as a whole. Either the MPs didn't believe in what they had espoused or they were corrupted by the opportunities that their newly found power had given them. It was a seductive argument and its acceptance permeated the atmosphere of the Party for more than a decade. Sadly, as the American writer H. L. Mencken once put it, *"For every complex problem, there is a solution that is simple, neat, and wrong."* We wasted a lot of time before we recognised this to be the case.

A cycle of high expectation followed by disillusion is not exclusively a British pattern and is evident from an examination of the history of the Left across continental Europe, with France providing the most obvious current example. However it was demonstrated at its starkest in terms of the post-office disillusion with the Labour Governments led by Harold Wilson (1964-1970) and Tony Blair, and subsequently, Gordon Brown (1997-2010).

In fact, failures are rarely caused by betrayal of principle; there are subtler forces at work. Comprehensive education offers a good illustration. One of the major achievements of the 1964-70 Labour Government was the drive to comprehensive education. It started with the then Labour Education Secretary Tony Crosland inviting local authorities to submit plans to end selection; subsequently in the ten years between 1965 and 1975, virtually all state secondary schools went comprehensive. Sadly, except in the eyes of the most committed, the emergence of the comprehensive system has not been viewed as a national success. It is important to ask why this is the case.

One of the reasons is that it is virtually impossible to get secondary education right. Whatever you do, classrooms will include difficult, demotivated and awkward young boys and girls with the potential to be disruptive. When our sons were at that age, my wife came up with the ingenious suggestion that children should go straight from primary school to university; while this has its attractions it is scarcely practicable. At the root of the problem – and one that is of great significance – is the way that the rise of the consumer has affected education.

In my 50 years of activism, I have seen three major forces at work: the rise of consumer power, globalisation, and technology. Of the three, the force that had most impact has been the rise of the consumer. Quite simply people want more and expect more and will not put up with what they are given. This has had a

huge impact on education, especially secondary education. Every worthwhile parent wants their son or daughter to attend a school that will give them the greatest advantage in life; this advantage could take the form of educational attainment (good GCSEs or A- levels using the currency of 2015) or the more nebulous concept that a school's reputation may assist in getting the young person a job or a desired place in higher education. There is a general view, supported by research, that children will do better educationally if they are placed amongst a peer group of equally or more intelligent children. Hence, as soon as you publish an educational league table of schools, most concerned parents will want to get their offspring into the school with the highest position in the table.

Depressingly, but inevitably, few parents at this stage are concerned about the impact on other people's children. My sons were born in 1973 and 1975. When my wife and I chose to send them to a local comprehensive school we encountered two arguments from our friends. One was, *"It's all right for you, but our children are very clever"*; the other was, *"It's all right for you, but our children are not very clever"*. We were never sure, from such remarks, whether the implication was that our children were too clever or too thick to need private education. In any event, both sons attended highly regarded universities, have done well professionally, and the social attitudes they developed have been a source of deep satisfaction to me. I was immensely proud when, as undergraduates, they became active in wider access campaigns. These were set up to encourage students from less privileged backgrounds to apply for places at the more sought-after universities. I have a particularly happy memory of taking a party of sixth-form students from the Comprehensive School where I was Chair of Governors to Cambridge in 1997 where my younger son, who was reading economics, hosted their visit.

As they progressed in life it was enormously satisfying to find that my sons understood, appreciated, and indeed shared my values. Both my sons became members of the Labour Party and have canvassed for the Party at elections. Champagne socialism is what I would wish for my grandchildren. When speaking at a 2015 anti-austerity rally, the celebrity and singer Charlotte Church (who comes from my part of Cardiff) described herself as a 'prosecco socialist'. This is not a drink I enjoy, nor indeed a word I can pronounce, but we all have to move with the times.

## Episode 4: Civil war – the national battle

Labour lost power when Margaret Thatcher comprehensively defeated Prime Minister Jim Callaghan in the 1979 general election. While the result itself was expected, few people anticipated the extent of the political transformation that was about to take place. Beginning in opposition, and extending over her three election victories, the new Prime Minister articulated, developed and implemented a neo-liberal agenda. At the heart was the firm belief that market forces alone could solve economic problems and that individuals should take sole responsibility for their economic welfare. A wide range of policy changes were taken to implement this agenda, all of them anathema to traditional Labour values. These included: a cut-back in the role of the state, in particular the denationalisation or privatisation of many publicly owned industries, and a central attack on the role of trade unions achieved through legislative changes on the way they could operate. Margaret Thatcher was a 'conviction' politician and for that reason acquired a grudging admiration from many people, including some on the Left of politics. She remained in office until 1990.

Although the 1974-79 Labour Government had achieved many successes, by the time of the defeat it was tired and its approach seemed dated and out of tune with the times. It had not given the new consumer-orientated electorate what they wanted economically. Given the attraction of, and excitement generated by, the new neo-liberalism, the Labour Party faced an enormous ideological challenge. Sadly, the Party met that challenge by embarking on a civil war, with the rise of a faction that for convenience may be labelled 'the new Left'.

The new Left built their position on the widespread disillusionment with the performance of the 1974-79 Labour Government. This was accentuated by the perceived remoteness of some Labour MPs. There was some justification for this view: certainly I had found a number of the MPs who later left to join the SDP to be aloof and condescending. This sort of behaviour could, with a little sleight of hand, be characterised as a lack of commitment on their part; they were portrayed as all too ready to 'sell-out' and betray their principles.

All that was needed was effective leadership and a plausible philosophy or programme. Both emerged around the figure of the long-standing Labour MP Tony Benn.

Benn had entered Parliament in 1950 as a 25-year-old. As was often pointed out when he sought to dissociate himself from the record of previous Labour Governments, he had extensive experience as a Minister in the Wilson and Callaghan Governments. In his early years he was a firm believer in Wilson's white heat of the scientific revolution. Benn's achievements in office do not stack up well. He was a firm advocate of the commercially disastrous Concorde supersonic aircraft. His main legacy in office was the reduction in size of the Queen's head on postage stamps when he served as Postmaster General from 1964 to 66.

When Harold Wilson re-entered Downing Street in 1974, Tony Benn was made Secretary of State for Industry. By this stage he was undergoing some sort of

personal epiphany and – as someone from a most privileged personal background (Westminster School and New College, Oxford) – he became infatuated with the working class. He gave ill-considered and uncritical support to a particular type of workers' co-operative. These were businesses owned and managed by their employees. I had been seconded from the National Coal Board to a public body called the Co-operative Development Agency (CDA) between 1979 and 1981 and became a firm advocate of this sort of organisation, under the right circumstances. This would be a small-scale start up where there were realistic prospects of succeeding, not bailouts of failing firms. Benn's embrace of the concept was to give support to failed manufacturing ventures that had no commercial future. Fearful of the consequences of his behaviour, Prime Minister Wilson moved Benn from Industry to Energy where he had far less scope.

With the support of others, Benn developed what became known as the Alternative Economic Strategy. The mid 1970s articulation involved extensive state planning, a micro-investment programme, import controls, control of the banks and insurance companies, control of export of capital, higher taxation of the rich, and Britain leaving the European Economic Community. By this time, I had been invited to serve on the Labour Party's internal Energy Advisory Committee and saw Tony Benn at close quarters. He had enormous drive and considerable charm. He could flatter: I well remember an occasion, before we had sat together in the same room, when he picked out my name from a lapel-badge and congratulated me on a book that I had written recently on public ownership.

His charm in small meetings translated into charisma on the public platform. He was a supremely effective orator who told his supporters that they had been betrayed by a generation of Labour politicians and that they were at the vanguard of correcting this grievous wrong. There is a problem with such powerful and effective oratory: it can seduce those fortunate enough to possess this gift and tempt them to take the easy option. It is exhilarating to receive adulatory feedback from an audience and one way of achieving this is to tell them things they want to hear – whether you really believe them or not. Worse still, if you say things often enough you start to believe them yourself.

From the start, Tony Benn's focus was the Party and he set about creating a new faction within it. I received an early telephone call from his adviser, Frances Morrell, inviting me to a meeting at her Islington home to meet her great friend Tony and discuss what we could do about the Party. I declined.

Benn's ambitions within the Labour Party were driven by an almost messianic conviction that he was right and this produced unwillingness to compromise. Power should be taken away from Members of Parliament; Party Conference (a hopelessly unrepresentative body) should determine all policy matters; if the MPs did not deliver what the Party decided, they should be deselected for betrayal and replaced – thus, incidentally, creating career opportunities for his own supporters. Logic did not come into it. At one meeting I recall him stating, to massive applause: *"You have found the answer to the question, 'How can we deliver socialism in a capitalist economy?' The answer you have uncovered is to reform your own institutions."* This was a total non sequitur but manna to his followers.

Over time, partly as a consequence of their enormous, almost obsessive, energy and commitment, the new Left made progress in the Labour Party. From 1979 mandatory reselection processes for all MPs became obligatory and, in the following two years, a clumsy Electoral College arrangement for the election of the leader was introduced. To the wider public, such issues were seen as administrative changes of little importance. However, to the new Left, they were seen, together with the new economic strategy and a rejection of the European Community, as fundamental in recreating a party for the future.

Far more politically important was the gradual, initially covert, emergence of a new breakaway party built by those of more moderate persuasion who refused to reject Europe and recognised the Alternative Economic Strategy (in whatever form it was expressed) to be arrant nonsense. Many of my friends in the Labour Party left to join this newly formed SDP – sadly this number included Shirley Williams, a former Labour Government Education Secretary, whom I greatly admired at the time. I was repeatedly invited to join the SDP but refused – mainly, it must be admitted, due to dogged loyalty to the Labour Party. However, writing more than 30 years later, I am sure that it was the right decision.

I stayed in the Party and, together with others, fought to restore some sort of balance. I became an active member of internal Labour Party pressure groups, ‘Campaign for Labour Victory’ and later ‘Solidarity’ that had been established both to prevent the Leftward drift and to deter further defections. Roy Hattersley, who became deputy leader of the Party under Neil Kinnock in 1983, played a significant role in these organisations. However if there was a real hero at this time it was Denis Healey, Labour’s Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1974-79.

In October 1980, James Callaghan announced his resignation as leader with the immensely talented Denis Healey the favourite to succeed him. Sadly, both for himself and the Party, Michael Foot the well-liked veteran leftwinger agreed to stand as the alternative candidate. The election was still solely in the hands of the MPs and Foot won by ten votes. Some of the MPs who voted for Foot only did so under immense pressure from their constituencies; there were rumours that some MPs who were about to defect to the SDP voted for Foot to hasten what they saw as the Labour’s Party’s demise. Many, however, voted for him in the belief that he could achieve conciliation and unity between two otherwise incompatible factions.

Tony Benn had no time for conciliation. Previously, Denis Healey had been elected deputy leader unopposed when the election was made by MPs. However by 1980 the election was in the hands of a wider Electoral College involving MPs, trade unions, and local parties. Despite repeated attempts by Michael Foot to dissuade him, Tony Benn stood against Healey (with a third candidate John Silkin also in the field.) As a result there were several months of vitriolic public hustings for an office that mattered for little.

All this culminated in the 1981 Annual Labour Party Conference at Brighton where Healey defeated Benn by under 1 per cent of the Electoral College vote. I, and my good friend Phil Molyneux of the Healey campaign, spent that long day together at Brighton. When the result was announced in the evening I saw an exultant Roy Hattersley and rushed to embrace him with a cry of *“We’ve saved*

*the Party.*" This appeared in the following day's *Daily Express* in an article which included: "*but no one should underestimate Healey's achievement: 'He's saved the Party' a young man said, sobbing in the arms of Roy Hattersley*". I was 35 at the time.

It was a momentous occasion politically and I am glad I was there and did what I did to try to save the Labour Party from self-destruction. It was a very close call.

One other memory of that night stays with me and serves to show how clever and calculating a politician Tony Benn had become. After his narrow election defeat for an office that didn't really matter, Tony Benn very publicly took his family to a less than salubrious Brighton fish and chip shop where they sat round a table surrounded by cardboard plates and polystyrene cups of soft drinks. It was the sort of place that anybody who could, would have avoided – certainly a well-heeled MP. Dutifully the accompanying entourage of cameramen began snapping away. At which a young Bennite turned to them and remonstrated: "*Leave him alone! Don't you see that he wants to be alone at a time like this?*" It was a grim period but not without its own gallows humour.

## Episode 5: Civil war – North Islington

By the late 1970s and early years 1980s it was evident that the Labour Party had undergone significant changes from the Party I had joined. Under the charismatic leadership of Tony Benn, the new Left was gaining momentum everywhere and displayed ruthless aggression to anyone who questioned their approach. The atmosphere in many constituencies was thoroughly unpleasant; a lot of people had had enough and left to join the SDP or simply dropped out of activism. Local meetings were a nightmare: this was certainly the case in North Islington, the constituency where I had lived since meeting my future wife and marrying in 1972.

No one ever looked forward to going to a meeting of the North Islington Labour Party. There was a running fight between two hostile factions that frequently spilled over into aggression: on one occasion police were summoned to calm a situation that had arisen at the Annual General Meeting of the Women's Section. The Labour Party always held power in Islington: selection as a Labour candidate meant election, whether as a Member of Parliament, a Greater London Councillor, or an Islington Councillor and there was a lot at stake.

The North Islington factions represented the worst of both sides of the Labour Party at the time. The 'old Right', to pick a convenient label, were organised around the sitting Member of Parliament Michael O'Halloran. He had been a poor choice in a 1969 by-election caused by the unexpected death of the previous member. I thought he was fundamentally a decent and well-intentioned man but hopelessly out of his depth. He was unable to make any contribution in Parliament but could rely on the whole-hearted support of the local Irish community. The 'new Left' who opposed him, reflecting the circumstances of the time, was a wide coalition of traditional left-of-centre Labour Party members, Trotskyist entryists who sniffed an opportunity for a coup, and others of no great allegiance who had lost confidence and patience with O'Halloran. Eventually the new Left won when O'Halloran and most of his supporters defected to the newly formed SDP in 1981. Jeremy Corbyn, a rather disorganised Councillor in the neighbouring Borough of Haringey, had for some time been anointed by the new Left faction as O'Halloran's successor.

For most of the 1970s and early 1980s the Party meetings were a pitched battle; there were contests for every position however trivial. If pushed, I sided (just) with the old Right. They included many decent people of the type I had grown up with in the Cardiff Labour Party. Moreover, the new Left often behaved in a most unpleasant way and were contemptuous of others. They would claim to speak for working-class people but never spoke to them and showed them little personal respect. I recall an occasion when an Irishman spoke against abortion at a meeting. He clearly felt passionately and was evidently struggling to deliver what he had prepared in advance. He deserved to be heard but instead was treated with derision by people who were clearly better educated and more socially confident.

Despite the overwhelming grimness of the meetings there were the occasional comic moments. I remember our aggressively left-of-centre Greater London Council Candidate, (who 30 years later became a very establishment figure) being howled down. His reaction was carefully minuted and appeared in *The Guardian* diary column as: *“Following constant interruptions and the candidate calling members a load of dirty slob, the Chairman closed the meeting.”*

Even more amusing was the behaviour of the London Labour Party Regional Organiser, Bill Jones. Following relentless adverse local publicity, poor old Bill was instructed by the Party’s National Executive Committee (NEC) to chair all the major meetings of the North Islington Party. He arrived for the first occasion and was immediately challenged: *“Who are you and what are you doing?”* His response, delivered with a straight face, was:

*“Let’s not start off on the wrong foot, comrades. The NEC have asked me to come here to meet you all and to thank you on their behalf for the great job that you are doing here to promote the Labour cause here in Islington.”*

About a month or so later the previously elected Chairman strode up to the platform and took a chair next to Bill and proclaimed, *“I was elected to this role and I will chair the meeting.”* Bill responded by saying that he was a loyal servant of the NEC, had been instructed to discharge the role, and was determined to do so. The meeting proceeded with them operating in an uncomfortable tandem. About half an hour later, one of the predictable disputes broke out at the back of the hall, generating a lot of noise. Bill then delivered the marvellous line: *“Now, now, comrades. Only two chairmen to a meeting in Islington please.”*

Opinions will vary on the extent to which Jeremy Corbyn, who became the retro-Left candidate for the Labour leadership in 2015, was an effective MP. What is beyond dispute is that, once the Left faction had gained control, Islington Council rapidly developed an appalling reputation. Ideological statements proved more attractive than the delivery of service; there was a continuous churn of councillors as people left the area or simply got bored; the morale of full-time officials plummeted.

One failure proved particularly painful for my wife and myself. We were owner-occupiers in a neighbourhood that included some very poor quality rented accommodation. In the early 1970s, an ambitious scheme was formulated for the Council to purchase substandard property, improve it for rented tenants, and redevelop the area as a mixed community. If successful it would have been a trailblazer for urban redevelopment; it had already attracted national attention. Unfortunately resources ran dry, especially after the election of a Conservative Government in 1979. Rather than curb their ambitions and sell some houses to the private sector, Islington Council allowed many properties to remain empty. They lacked the management and administrative capacity even to put in short-term lets through charities. These empty houses deteriorated and became a target for vandalism and squatters. The local electorate would continue to vote Labour but we had let them down.



## Episode 6: Civil war – Nottingham

Despite a growing feeling of hopelessness, during the late 1970s and early 1980s I continued to put my name forward for parliamentary seats. I was uncompromising when I described my position in the Party on these occasions and gradually came to the opinion that it was time to give up my ambitions.

However on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1981, to my astonishment, I was selected as candidate for Nottingham East. For days afterwards I was in a state of shock and this was followed by more than a year of uncomfortable experience. To understand why this happened it is necessary to understand a little more about the Labour Party organisation of the time.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, Labour parliamentary candidates were selected by the local constituency general committee. It was not until 1993 that selection was based on one member, one vote – thus involving all Party members living in the area. Typically a general committee would have 30-60 members who were in turn elected by local geographical wards or came from affiliated organisations like the trade unions or the local Co-operative Party. The game was to manipulate this structure to the advantage of your favoured individual or a candidate who was sympathetic to your position. This would be achieved by capturing the delegate positions, something that could take years to achieve. The Bennite Left, who were generally young with time on their hands, became increasingly clever at manipulating selection processes. The more traditional Right counter-organised where they had that capability.

In Nottingham an unusual situation had arisen. The sitting Labour MP for the Nottingham East Constituency, Jack Dunnett, had very shortly after the 1979 general election announced that, while he intended to continue in Parliament until the next election, he would not contest that election. Once he had made that announcement the composition of the general committee was, to use the technical term, frozen. It was impossible to secure new affiliations from, for example, Left-leaning trade unions like the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE). This meant that selection in Nottingham East was undertaken by a body that had a small but effective right-of-centre (in terms of the Labour Party at the time) majority.

The local Co-operative Party had put my name forward for the seat. I eventually fought the general election as a 'Labour and Co-operative' candidate. Entirely unbeknown to me the Co-operative Party had come to an arrangement with other right-of-centre organisations to put their votes behind whichever of their candidates secured the highest number of votes on the opening ballot. Amongst those voting for me in the later stages was Jack Dunnett the sitting MP who, despite the fact he was a solicitor, was present as a representative of the General, Municipal and Boilermakers' Union. Such was the extent of micro-organisation required to secure a selection.

Some of the other contenders were understandably livid. This was particularly true of the locally based campaigner and writer, Ken Coates, who had been the most likely winner if the selected candidate had come from the Left of the Party.

He had been ambitious for the seat for years and organised assiduously, only to see his ambitions thwarted by the quirk of the Labour Party rules on timing – the freezing of the structure. He organised a formal complaint to the Labour Party NEC on the grounds that the selection had been unfairly manipulated. He had a point, but there were few people as skilled at manipulation as the complainant himself. He was simply a sore loser.

As a result the formal endorsement of my candidature was withheld pending an enquiry into alleged malpractice during the selection procedure. I was advised to stay out of any discussion, since no one could accuse me of any malpractice. At one stage I received a personal assurance from the then Party leader, Michael Foot, that I would be endorsed; however well intentioned, the fact was that Foot had little control over the Party and could not deliver. In February 1982 the NEC agreed to an enquiry that was conducted by one of their members, the ultra-Left Liverpool MP Eric Heffer. Tony Benn's diary for that time recorded:

*"On Nott East we agreed to have an enquiry and Eric agreed to chair it – the GMC of Nottingham East has been frozen since 1978 and that is how Martin Sloman (sic) got the selection. It looks as if there might now be a new selection and Ken Coates might get it."*<sup>1</sup>

When he reported on the results of his enquiry in April, Eric Heffer recommended that my selection be upheld; Tony Benn moved that there be a fresh selection; this was put to a vote which tied at 6-6 with Eric Heffer then using a casting vote in my favour. I therefore became the candidate.

I can remember discussing all this at the time with my wife. Her view was that the best thing that could happen was for me to go on and fight the election and lose. Given the state and direction of the Party at the time this seemed the most likely result so I gritted my teeth and carried on despite some unpleasant local opposition. This was somewhat relieved when Ken Coates was selected for the neighbouring Nottingham South constituency. However, the Labour Party nationally was heading for disaster. It was bitterly divided, the SDP was a growing threat, and Michael Foot was sadly ineffectual. To compound the electoral problems, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had waged a successful and electorally popular Falklands war. She called an election for June 1983.

It did not appear that things could get any worse. However they could: the national election campaign was an unmitigated disaster. The Labour Party manifesto called for unilateral nuclear disarmament, withdrawal from the European Economic Community, abolition of the House of Lords, and the re-nationalisation of many privatised industries. It was verbose and the astute MP, Gerald Kaufman, described it as the longest suicide note in history. I did not read the manifesto myself as I thought it would upset me. Instead, I concentrated on the local campaign. Despite the fact that I knew I would lose, I rather enjoyed the contest, particularly the public meetings.

Significant special interest group meetings were held during the 1983 general election in Nottingham and most were organised by and for the minority ethnic groups – especially the Asian voters who had originated from the Punjab. These meetings were intended to reassure the members of the community that the

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<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the editor of the Benn diaries, Ruth Winstone, for making this diary note available to me.

candidate was aware of, and would support, the Party's policies on immigration and nationality. The courtesy of the hosts made these events perhaps the most enjoyable part of the campaign and provided one fond and amusing memory. The pattern for the meetings was that a Chairman from the community would introduce the candidate and then, before calling on me, would call on another community member to speak in support. This supporting speaker would start by speaking in English but, after a few sentences, invariably say: *"With great respect to the candidate I can best make my political points in my own native language."*

At one of these meetings a non-Asian native Nottingham elector had heard in advance that the candidate was appearing at the local hall and, not realising that it was intended for a special group, had come along to listen. Far from being embarrassed he appeared to enjoy the experience and I noticed that he joined in the applause that greeted every important political point made in Punjabi and even laughed along with the jokes.

The disastrous national campaign was reflected on the doorstep. I recall canvassing a cheerful middle-aged woman in Sneinton, Nottingham. Once I'd announced myself as the Labour candidate her mood changed. She proceeded to harangue me for a good five minutes: the Party was in the grip of the militant Left; Michael Foot was a hopeless leader and had lost control; it had ceased to understand ordinary people. Since I agreed with much of what she said I found it difficult to respond beyond a parting-shot of: *"Thank you, but one last question: which way will you vote?"* She responded, *"Labour – I always vote Labour."* We were down to that sort of tribal loyalty.

Given this background the result was much better than I expected. I polled just over 16,000 votes, only 1,464 votes short of the winning Conservative – the SDP candidate polled nearly 8,500. Nottingham East eventually went Labour in 1992 but with a halfway decent campaign nationally we could have won in 1983. For my part I'd had enough. My loyal and sympathetic friend Phil Molyneux drove me home in the early hours of the morning and on the way I made three promises to myself. The first was that I would never again stand as a Labour parliamentary candidate; the second was that I would never again own a British Leyland car; the third was that I would never again bank with the Co-operative Bank. The last two were part of the obligatory baggage that went with Labour candidature and had been ongoing irritations due to their unreliability. I took consolation in the fact that I had a job to go back to and a supportive family. However great changes were about to take place at the Coal Board.

## Episode 7: Civil war – the miners’ strike

By this time I had acquired a considerable affection for the coal industry and for my colleagues at Hobart House, the headquarters of the National Coal Board (NCB). It was well managed, despite the dominance of mining engineers who created a macho and firmly anti-intellectual culture. For some time, mining engineering had been the only university engineering subject for which there were more places than applicants. Hence any candidate for an electrical, mechanical or civil engineering course who failed to get the required grades would be offered a place to read mining engineering through what was known as the clearing system. As a result many of those entering the Coal Board, far and away the largest employer of mining engineers, were amongst the least academically gifted.

This was brought home to me in stark terms when I was undertaking recruitment interviews in 1981 for our graduate management scheme (known as the milk round). I was interviewing a young man whose father was a senior mining engineer in the most successful coalfield; I had encountered the father on a number of occasions. His son, like the father, was pleasant enough but reading his form it was evident that he had achieved little at university, either academically or socially. He struggled in the interview so I gave him an easy question to assist. It was: *“This year we have received over 50 applicants for every place on the scheme. What is it that I can write down here as a recommendation that you should go forward to the next stage?”* At this point the young man realised that this was his only remaining opportunity and, after thought, came up with: *“My father says that a lot of employers are looking for intellectual and energetic graduates. From what he knows of you lot at Hobart House you’re not like that and I’d fit in well.”*

There was comradeship amongst the managers, solidarity amongst the workforce, and often a common shared bond between the two sides – particularly around the individual colliery. As a young economist I remember being sent on a project in a South Yorkshire pit. There was a decrepit power station on the site that was used to produce steam for internal purposes at the colliery. The remit I was given was to investigate the possibilities of renewing some of the equipment at the power station, increasing output and selling the electricity thus generated to the local electricity board. Unusually I encountered considerable resistance to my enquiries and soon found out why. There were discrepancies in the production figures. I went underground to follow the pipework and discovered that someone had, with many other people’s connivance, rigged up a pipe to provide free heating for houses on the local estate.

By this time the economics of production meant that there was little long-term future for the industry. UK deep-mined coal was becoming increasingly expensive compared to the more convenient fuels of oil and gas, and indeed to coal produced overseas. However the manner of the industry’s destruction was a tragedy for all sides. From March 1984 the coal industry experienced the most extensive and intense industrial dispute that had been seen in Britain since the

1926 General Strike. When the strike began I had been employed by the NCB for more than 16 years and was working in a central personnel role at national headquarters.

In his speech at the 1983 general election count, Ken Coates, the defeated Labour candidate in the neighbouring seat of Nottingham South, proclaimed: *"We may have lost in the ballot-box, but we will now use our industrial muscle to destroy the Government and its policies."* Ken subsequently became an increasingly disgruntled Member of the European Parliament before being expelled from the Labour Party in 1998. The thoroughly anti-democratic and politically foolhardy tone he articulated reflected the agenda for the next two years. We had insulted the electorate with our efforts in 1983 but the shock troops were ready and waiting. It was this political mood and the ego of the Marxist leader of the NUM, Arthur Scargill, which led to a strike that made little economic sense and proved to be a complete political disaster.

The strike centred around the issue of colliery closures. Here it is important to understand a fundamental difference between mining and manufacturing. In an extractive industry like coal mining it is standard practice to work the more accessible reserves of mineral first. They are easier to mine and hence more profitable. Once these reserves are extracted they cannot (unlike manufacturing) be replaced: mining activity then moves on to less profitable reserves. Given this, no colliery ever totally runs out of reserves – it is simply that what remains is not worth working. The issue for debate should be at what stage a colliery should be closed and what should happen as a result.

At the NCB everybody recognised that another round of colliery closures was inevitable. A Monopolies and Mergers Commission (MMC) investigation published in 1983 (*National Coal Board Cmnd. 8920*) put a clear focus on high cost pits. In this report, they presented detailed evidence on the 198 operating collieries; 70 of these collieries had operating losses of more than £10 a tonne. As the MMC report put it, the closure of these high-cost pits with no real chance of returning to profitability was *"the single most effective measure in reducing costs and improving average efficiency"*. The NUM had refused to co-operate with the MMC but had, at the same time, given evidence to the Energy Select Committee of the House of Commons. Here Arthur Scargill articulated the view that, where there were coal resources *"even if there is loss on production of that coal, then that coal should be produced"* and *"as far as I am concerned the loss is without limit because I am more interested in the investment our men have put into this industry"*. While this uncompromising position could be explained in terms of the interests of national security (the vulnerability to oil supplies), and the social costs involved in closure, it was an argument for industrial atrophy. Miners were to be sent underground to work in unpleasant, dangerous conditions even if there was no economic market for their product.

If the economic agenda was clear, the political agenda was more confused with a number of different elements in play. Margaret Thatcher had, in September 1983 appointed a Scottish-American businessman Ian MacGregor as Chairman of the NCB. He had made no secret of his commitment to profitability and his lack of sympathy with trade unionism. MacGregor had full support from the Government and rapidly demonstrated his lack of desire for compromise and

conciliation that had previously characterised senior management at the Coal Board. An ideological battle with Arthur Scargill was inevitable. For those of us who were working at the NCB's headquarters this contest looked like a fight between two prehistoric monsters – they roared and the ground quaked but there was an inevitable feeling that evolution was taking place elsewhere.

The strike lasted 358 days but despite the rhetoric and the subsequent romantic image it was never a demonstration of solidarity. Area ballots held in the Midlands, North East and North West coalfields produced heavy votes against the strike. NUM members in the most profitable NCB area in Nottinghamshire continued to work throughout. Support from other trade unions was variable and some were publicly hostile.

However, it made Arthur Scargill the hero of the Left. One of the most uncomfortable aspects of this awful period for me was attending Labour Party meetings in Islington and hearing the class rhetoric. There was a vicarious enjoyment of the strike from those for whom nothing was at stake. Particularly distressing was to hear my friends in the Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire NUM who had refused to follow Arthur Scargill's leadership described as 'scabs'. Moreover, mining, a dangerous and unhealthy occupation, was for 'other people's children'. The children of the Islington middle class would work in marketing, publishing and broadcasting while hard graft could be done by others in the North.

Ultimately, and probably inevitably, the miners' strike was a complete triumph for the politics of Margaret Thatcher and the managerial economics of Ian MacGregor. The miners returned to work in March 1985 without a settlement. What should have been at issue was the management of change and how necessary but painful economic transitions could be accomplished.

The miners' strike was a political disaster for the Left: the NUM (National Union of Mineworkers) was now irreversibly fragmented. In less than a year Arthur Scargill and his adherents destroyed what previous generations of miners had taken decades to establish: a single cohesive trade union. Inevitably, with the benefit of intervening time, romantic folk myths have emerged. The most pernicious is that it marked the beginning of a new awareness and solidarity. There may, it is true, have been some politicisation of the odd individual, however there is not slightest evidence of widespread sustained commitment, even in the mining areas. In 2005, when working as a writer and researcher on training, I visited a large call centre in the UK to write a case study. The centre, then branded as Ventura, was located in the Dearne Valley – the heart of the former Yorkshire mining area (and firmly Scargill country). Indeed the modern centre had been built on a former colliery site. The contact centre displayed all the necessary conditions for the emergence of a trade union. Staff were working closely together, many were from traditional mining families; they were not particularly well paid; if they took action the effect on output would be immediate. Yet there was no trade union presence and that tradition was completely absent. For many of today's workforce the miners' strike might have taken place 130, not 30, years ago.

Given the fact that the economics were increasingly moving against UK deep-mined coal in the international energy market, it was only a matter of time

before the inevitable demise of the industry. There were enormous problems of industrial change emerging and the need to construct social policies to alleviate the impact of these changes and help those worst affected. By failing to address this issue, the Labour Party not only gave Margaret Thatcher a short-term victory, it set itself back by a decade.

For my part, I was lucky that, during the period of the strike, I was seconded to an internal role charged with establishing NCB (Enterprise), the Coal Board's job creation company. This organisation was created as a way of easing the transition in areas where jobs were to disappear. I considered this to be thoroughly worthwhile and I could pursue this activity away from the immediate conflict and without any political or moral qualms. It was also very enjoyable and stimulating work and led to a teaching appointment at the NCB's Management College. More importantly, the strike marked the end of my political ambitions and led to a decision to find a job outside the industry. It was fortunate that I was still young enough to rebuild my career in management education.

## Reflection: Industrial change

### Proposition 4

**The 1984-85 miners' strike marked the end of politics based on class awareness and industrial action.**

Should they choose to become active politically, I sincerely hope that none of my grandchildren undergo an unremittingly unpleasant time as that we experienced in the 1980s. The immediate traumas blinded us to the long-term consequences: the miners' strike was the most significant moment, or climacteric, in post-war Labour politics.

From the end of the strike, 'Old Labour', embedded as it was in the notion of working-class solidarity, was dead. Historically, Labour Party support had been built on offering the industrial working class policies that would advance their economic interests while creating a fairer, more just society. Changes in the economy and society – the decline of trade unionism and the growth of consumer power – meant that this approach was no longer viable. The Labour Party of the time knew what it was against but was confused about what it was for, and had no idea how to get there.

Values and aims may remain constant but the policies that can achieve these aims must alter with the circumstances of the time. When I first joined the Labour Party as a teenager in 1961, Clause IV of the Labour Party's Constitution was printed on my membership card. It stated:

*"To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service."*

Common ownership, which found its practical implementation in nationalisation, together with state-led economic planning, was the economic tool needed to deliver social justice. In the 1960s we believed that extensive public ownership and control was a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for building a better society. This view had its resurgence under the powerful advocacy of Tony Benn in the 1970s and early 1980s. It totally ignored the international dimension: essentially, the alternative economic strategy that found favour at that time advocated a siege economy.

The main criticism of this perspective, however, is that extensive public ownership or nationalisation simply could not deliver what the modern consumer had come to expect. The economy was changing and there were no longer readily identifiable 'commanding heights of the economy' – to use the Marxist-Leninist phrase currently popular in the Labour Party. In 1978 I had written an unsuccessful book, *Socialising Public Ownership*, putting the case for new perspectives on the structure of ownership and control. However it was a lost cause at that time.



In the 1950s the revisionist Labour leader, Hugh Gaitskell attempted to introduce a wider perspective on the mechanisms needed to deliver Labour's values and aims. At the 1959 Party Conference he famously argued that Clause IV "*implies that common ownership is an end, whereas in fact it is a means*". Gaitskell's attempt to change the constitution was bitterly contested and eventually unsuccessful.

If Clause IV, and the accompanying rhetoric of Benn and Scargill, were the defining characteristics of Old Labour then the defining moment of 'New Labour' involved its removal. Tony Blair, on becoming leader in 1994, made the abolition of the old Clause IV a symbolic part of his creation of New Labour. In his October 1994 Conference speech Blair abandoned nationalisation and firmly embraced market economics. The new Clause IV included the following statement on economic and industrial policy:

*1. The Labour Party is a democratic socialist party. It believes that by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone, so as to create for each of us the means to realise our true potential and for all of us a community in which power, wealth and opportunity are in the hands of the many not the few; where the rights we enjoy reflect the duties we owe and where we live together freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect.*

*2. To these ends we work for:*

*(a) a dynamic economy, serving the public interest, in which the enterprise of the market and the rigour of competition are joined with the forces of partnership and co-operation to produce the wealth the nation needs and the opportunity for all to work and prosper with a thriving private sector and high-quality public services where those undertakings essential to the common good are either owned by the public or accountable to them.*

Statements of principle, however well-drafted, are not enough. In retrospect it is surprising how little subsequent discussion there has been within the Labour Party on the mechanisms needed to implement such objectives. Since 1995, there have undoubtedly been shared assumptions amongst Labour Party supporters: on the importance of planning or the need for collective, rather than individual, solutions to economic and social problems. However there has never been a worthwhile debate on the economic and industrial frameworks needed in the modern age. Most important, there has never been a debate on the best form of ownership structure.

It is surely time to question whether the Companies Act is any longer an adequate way to govern how companies should behave. This Act is the primary source of UK company law and, at its simplest, sets the framework for the objective of increasing member (shareholder) value. There is now a powerful case, for example, for introducing more specific obligations for workforce development, including obligations that reflect wider societal needs. For some time there has been an undercurrent of discussion on structural models that reflect wider stakeholder interests – for example, the German model of co-determination with a two-tier board structure. There are many alternatives beyond this type of restructuring and these should be explored in the future.

## Interlude 1: Labour in opposition, 1983-1997

The general election of 1983 marked my last parliamentary candidature. Following the miner's strike, the level of my political involvement dropped significantly as I put all my emotional and intellectual energy into salvaging a neglected career. I did not return to significant activism until the election of 2010, but took time off work in 1987 to campaign for my friend Willie Bach (later Lord Bach) who was fighting a seat in a mining area near Nottingham. He was an excellent candidate, representative of the best of the Labour Party in that troubled time, but struggled against the legacy of the bitterness of the strike and sadly lost. Subsequently I attended meetings of the Labour Party in Hornsey in North London where we had moved from Islington.

However, for the most part I was an observer of the political events that led to the electoral recovery of the Labour Party and the eventual victory in 1997. For this period I can only offer observations from a distance. When our elder son was struggling to learn to play the bassoon, there was doubt as to whether he was sufficiently capable to participate in a particular concert. My wife's suggestion to him was: "*Can't you just join in the notes you know?*" This is essentially what I have tried to do in this interlude and the one immediately following. They deal in turn with two critical political events: Neil Kinnock's courageous fight against extremism; the victory of Tony Blair, and the triumph of what I describe as his progressive centrism.

Michael Foot resigned as Labour leader following the 1983 election defeat. Immediately Neil Kinnock, my old friend from Cardiff, was proposed as leader by a leading trade unionist and headed for a comfortable victory.

When he was Shadow Education Secretary under Foot's leadership, Neil had kindly agreed to visit Nottingham in support of my candidature. It was a long day out involving an early drive from London and a late morning visit to a school. When we entered the school gate there was no sign of any welcome and I wondered if I had made an embarrassing diary error. Neil said immediately: "*Don't worry, Martyn. They all do this. They try to make it look as though they are treating it as a casual, informal visit and have not made any changes to normal routine.*" No sooner had he finished the sentence than two very smart teenage pupils leapt out from behind a shed and delivered a carefully rehearsed "*Welcome to our school, Mr Kinnock.*" After a second school visit and a meeting that evening he still had the energy to talk to everyone who attended a social event before our return drive.

In his time in Parliament, Neil had matured considerably. Like many who entered Parliament at a young age he had shifted rightwards over time; while still a marvellous orator he was no longer a firebrand and had become more reflective and inclusive in his politics. Very courageously he had declined to vote for Tony Benn as deputy leader in 1981 and attracted vituperative hostility from the more extreme sections of the Left as a result. I greatly liked Neil: he was warm person with real empathy and great energy; he was thoroughly honourable and good company with an excellent sense of humour. Despite this, my preferred

candidate was Roy Hattersley who became his deputy – his views on what needed to be done to save the Party accorded with mine.

Beyond question, however, Neil had an enormous political and personal commitment to the Labour Party; he recognised the great debt he owed to it. He had experienced at first hand the nastiness and vindictiveness of some factions that had given the SDP momentum. He therefore decided to combat the ultra-Left and chose exposure and expulsion of the Militant tendency as his battleground.

I first encountered the Trotskyist group of Militant during my time in the Cardiff Young Socialists (though they did not use this name until later). We had decided to plan a one-day conference for the Welsh Young Socialists and a small team met to determine the programme. The representative from the Chepstow Young Socialists moved that we invited Ted Grant, Militant's leading theoretician, to be the main speaker. None of the rest of us had heard of him and a one-day event was held in Splott, Cardiff with the sitting MP, James Callaghan (the subsequent Party leader and Prime Minister) and Ted Grant as the speakers. Grant proceeded to harangue Callaghan and deliver a diatribe that even as a 17-year-old I recognised to be absolute gibberish. One of the older Cardiff Young Socialists left to go the toilet. I thought he was leading a walkout and proceeded to join him. I stayed outside and, together with another Young Socialist, went up to Jim Callaghan in the interval and we dissociated ourselves from the way the occasion had been manipulated. Jim thanked us and told us to hang on in there and not concede power to the extremists.

Militant, as they subsequently became, was one of several openly Trotskyist groups – known as the Trots – working within the Labour Party. They were entryists: seeking to take over an organisation by joining up their own adherents and then operating as a tightly disciplined group within. They had evolved from the post-war Revolutionary Communist Party and considered themselves to be the true inheritors of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. They were wholly unreconstructed, believing in the class struggle and making impossible demands on the current economic system; this, like entryism, was a classical Trotskyist position. By tight organisation, Militant achieved growing power and influence in the 1970s and 1980s. They captured the National Young Socialist movement, which became no more than a recruiting ground for the faction. They gained total control of the Liverpool Labour Party.

At the 1972 Labour Party Conference, Militant supporters moved and seconded a motion requiring a future Labour Government to introduce '*an enabling bill to secure the public ownership of the major monopolies*'. The mover of the resolution called for Labour to win popular electoral support by committing to take over '*the 350 monopolies that controlled 85 per cent of the economy*'. The resolution was passed by more than a million votes and the conference agreed to call on the Labour Party executive to formulate '*a socialist plan of production based on public ownership, with minimum compensation, of the commanding heights of the economy*'.

Having seen Militant in action a great deal over that period, one bizarre aspect of their behaviour was that the number of monopolies identified seemed to vary: sometimes, as above, the figure of 350 was cited, sometimes 400 and, most often, 250. Any challenge to them to justify the number was ignored. They also argued

that this state ownership should take place *'with compensation based on strictest need'*. This sort of language was used, within the Party, at a time when the command economies of Eastern Europe were beginning their collapse under the weight of their massive inefficiencies.

In retrospect it was astonishing, given their political programme, that Militant were taken seriously; what was worse was that they were permitted to pursue their entryist programme into the Labour Party. Sadly, many on the Left of the Party knew what was going on but were unwilling to speak out. In part this was due to a general desire to shift the Party to the Left and the knowledge that they could rely on Militant votes to achieve this aim; in part this was due to sheer cowardice. In 1975 the Labour Party's National Agent, Reg Underhill, produced a report which demonstrated beyond any doubt that Militant were, by acting as a separate organisation, in clear breach of the Party's Constitution. The NEC voted by a small majority to take no action on the report. This decision was often cited by those who left to form the SDP as one of the reasons for their departure. Over time the tide turned against Militant: in 1981 an NEC-initiated enquiry led, two years later, to the expulsion of five leading members of the faction.

The end of Militant's influence in the Labour Party came four years later. In 1985 Liverpool's financially struggling Militant-controlled Labour council had written to council workers, stating they wouldn't be paid unless the Government provided the necessary money. At the Labour Party conference in Bournemouth that year, Kinnock took the opportunity to launch an attack on the Militant Tendency. His marvellous uncompromising speech included the following two sentences. *"We know that power without principles is ruthless, sour, empty, vicious. We also know that principle without power is idle sterility."* He claimed that Militant members were sticking to a *"rigid dogma, a code... outdated, misplaced, irrelevant to the real need"*. One of the leaders of the breakaway Social Democratic Party, David Owen, later said he knew the SDP was done for after the speech.

Kinnock's 1985 speech was recognised at the time as a political watershed. In the context of this memoir, it had another significant impact. It marked the end of the attraction of Marxism in any form as a political creed for the Labour Party and of wholesale state ownership as an economic solution. Arguably it paved the way for the later emergence of Tony Blair's approach to politics.

## Interlude 2: Labour in Government, 1997-2010

Neil Kinnock fought and lost two general elections. The second, in 1992, was a cause of immense distress to all Labour supporters since it had seemed that victory was within our grasp. He resigned as leader and was succeeded in July 1992 by a thoughtful Scot, John Smith, whom I had known and respected when we had served together on the Party's Energy Policy Committee in the 1970s. Sadly, John Smith died on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1994 of a massive heart attack after less than two years as leader. On that day both my sons rang me at work within half an hour of each other to commiserate: one was at York University and the other in New York on a pre-university gap year. One can only speculate what would have happened if John Smith had lived. The Party was in the mood for change and he was a thoughtful, capable and thoroughly principled man. He was succeeded in July 1994 by Tony Blair.

Tony Blair is the only Labour Party leader to have won three successive general elections. He was an immensely persuasive politician with enormous empathy and the ability to disarm any audience. He set about making radical changes in the Labour Party and was wholly successful in that endeavour. However, the Party will not judge him kindly.

The main criticism of Tony Blair has been enunciated many times over. This concerns his support of the Iraq war and his close identification with the policies of the US President George W. Bush. Our country was led into the conflict on the premise that Saddam Hussein of Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction. No evidence was ever found that this was the case: this led to significant political defections from Labour voters to the Liberal-Democrats (Lib-Dems) in the 2010 election, costing, amongst others, the Hornsey seat where our family had lived from 1987 to 2001.

Tony Blair's detractors also argue that he was an individual without principle. This is wholly unfair. His politics unquestionably marked a major shift from those of his predecessors, but they deserve the most serious consideration in any analysis of the failure of the Labour Party. By altering Clause IV he achieved a radical transformation in the way that the Labour Party projected itself on economic and industrial policy. I met him just once at a school event in North London and had only the briefest of exchanges: the comments below are therefore derived solely from second-hand or published sources.

Tony Blair regarded himself as '*a progressive not a conservative*' and '*an idealist*'; for him New Labour was about traditional values in a modern setting. Importantly, he believes that progressives do best if they occupy the centre or the centre-left. In a foreword to a book by his polling and strategic adviser Philip Gould (who sadly died in 2011) he offered a most comprehensive outline of his philosophy.

*"I would argue that that for all Labour's history it was only when it stood at the centre that it won."*<sup>2</sup> Moreover, "*The centre ground meets the prevailing*

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<sup>2</sup> Quotations are from *The Unfinished Revolution* – see background references at end of text for details p. xix

*mood of the governed towards their government, actual or protective. They put a high premium on competence and effectiveness. They want things done. So they will back radical change if they consider it necessary. But they want it conceived on the basis of what works, not what is politically correct.”<sup>3</sup>.*

This centrist argument has intellectual coherence. It is also attractive – particularly to capable and ambitious young people of progressive outlook who would like to be in government. In the view of Blair and his supporters it demands not just a new mindset but needs to be presented as a radical change from past thinking.

With Gordon Brown as Chancellor of the Exchequer, the 1997-2010 Blair Governments achieved a remarkable record of economic growth. They were characterised by high levels of employment, market efficiency and consumer choice. Moreover, the surplus generated through sustained economic growth was used to invest heavily in improving public sector and welfare infrastructure. This benefited all sections of the community, but particularly the poor.

Overall, then, progressive centrism was a period of good government. Much was achieved: the minimum wage; significant and lasting cuts in hospital waiting times; improvements in schools; a fall in crime; peace in Northern Ireland; civil partnerships. By the end of the period of office, pensioner and child poverty had been greatly reduced. Moreover the country appeared to be at ease with its position in the world: a successful Olympic bid encapsulated the new global outlook.

Although never a Blairite, I must applaud such achievements. My main criticism of his politics is that presentation would all too often come first. One particular incident left me very disappointed. This was the decision to abandon the recommendations of a high profile Working Group for 14–19 Reform (the Tomlinson Report). In 2004, Tomlinson recommended replacing GCSEs, A-levels (the academic examinations) and vocational qualifications with a new single diploma over a ten-year period of reform. This radical recommendation attracted considerable support amongst the educational community. In the run up to a general election the Government, led by the Blairite Secretary of State, Ruth Kelly, rejected the idea of an overarching diploma system and instead chose to reform existing qualifications by making them harder, and more clearly tied to basic skills. This decision was partly driven by the desire to placate the Confederation of British Industry and partly by the potential political unpopularity of abolishing A-levels. As a result, a major opportunity for ending the divisions and segregation in education and creating more opportunity for the less privileged was missed. Given my own experiences in secondary education this mattered a great deal to me.

Like many other Labour Party members I regard the incursion into Iraq as a tragedy for Blair, for the Party, for the country and indeed the world. Another significant criticism of tremendous import concerned his toxic relationship with his deputy and Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. This has been the topic of innumerable books and articles and there is general agreement that their

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p. xx

mutual animosity has its roots in their interpretation of the discussions that led to Gordon Brown's decision not to contest the Party leadership in 1994. In effect this gave Blair a clear run and he secured 57 per cent of the votes in the Electoral College. Whatever was said or implied in these meetings the fact remains that Blair denied Brown the promised succession until June 2007. By this time the global economic crisis was looming.

When he became Prime Minister, Gordon Brown's public and (if subsequent insider writings are to be believed) private demeanour suffered by comparison with Blair. However there were indications that, had he called a general election in the autumn of 2007, shortly after he had succeeded Blair, he would have won. With his own mandate, and more time to cope with the fall-out of the 2008 global financial crisis, he would have had the opportunity to implement policies which may well have marked a change of direction from progressive centrism. Unfortunately this can be no more than speculation. Although a commanding figure in many respects Brown did not fight an effective campaign in 2010. Particularly damaging was a remark he made while out campaigning, describing a working-class voter who had expressed concern about immigration as a bigot. This was intended to be a confidential aside, but was captured by a live microphone and given prominence in all news media. His defeat was yet another chapter in a series of tragic misfortunes that have blighted the Labour Party.

History will be kind to Gordon Brown the economist, if not to Gordon Brown the politician. When faced with the 2008 global crisis he took prompt action to co-ordinate the international response to prevent further bank failures and a complete collapse in the financial system. However in the UK an inevitable consequence was a rise in the Budget deficit: from 2 per cent before the crisis to 11 per cent by the time of the 2010 general election. This gave the Conservatives sufficient ammunition and they used this as the basis for a sustained ideologically led attack on public expenditure, particularly local government.

Honest analysis counts for little in the face of well-timed and well-delivered propaganda. The Conservative Party engineered a quite remarkable political success in the period around the 2010 general election. They were able to convince the electorate that it was the profligacy of Labour that was the primary cause of the 2008 crisis. The public deficit was too high and the solution was to balance the books as quickly as possible by cutting public spending. Labour's economic recklessness has now become the central Conservative theme; in this they were assisted by a crass political error. The outgoing Labour Treasury Minister, Liam Byrne, had left a note for his successor that said: *"I'm afraid there is no money"* and signed off wishing him *"good luck"* Gleefully his opponents took the note into the public domain.

Following the 2010 election defeat and Gordon Brown's resignation as Prime Minister and Labour Party leader, attention was focused entirely on the forthcoming leadership election. It was not until he was elected on 25<sup>th</sup> September – almost six months later – that Ed Miliband had the opportunity to develop his own economic perspective. By then the economic mismanagement charge had stuck. Subsequently, when the opportunity became available, Ed Miliband and his Shadow Chancellor, Ed Balls, failed to construct a compelling alternative economic narrative.

## Reflection: Economic management

### Proposition 5

**Tony Blair's politics of progressive centrism can no longer be a model for the future, but to date we have failed to develop an alternative coherent policy framework that can inspire.**

One of the real pleasures of my life was reading economics at university and I have always enjoyed my subsequent efforts to keep abreast of developments in the subject – particularly macroeconomics, the management of the economy as a whole. This is a book for my grandchildren and I would not want to burden them with a legacy of ambition, but it would be pleasing if one of my descendants in turn followed my younger son and went on to study the subject at university. If so, he or she would be likely to be sitting in an examination room attempting to answer this question: *“Was the UK recession of 2008-15 caused by excessive Government spending?”*

I hope that the family economist of the second half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will gain top marks by producing an answer along the following lines:

*“The recession of 2008-15 was not a UK recession: it was a global phenomenon. The central cause was a massive and irreversible shift in economic power across the world and a failure of the financial and banking system to cope with the new streams of investment capital generated as a result. Specifically surplus funds from the emerging economies in Asia, seeking high rates of return at a time of low economic growth, were used to fund house purchases, particularly in the United States. This produced a speculative bubble that was unsustainable in the long-term. In the short-term this underlying problem was exacerbated by the introduction and excessive promotion of over-engineered, complex products, by under-regulated investment banks. This last point was not adequately recognised until Lehman Brothers filed for bankruptcy in September 2008.*

*“Indeed Mervyn King, who was Governor of the Bank of England at the time, subsequently went on record to argue that no single country could have found their way through the crisis. Although he agreed that Labour had allowed public spending to rise too quickly, in his opinion: ‘The real problem was a shared intellectual view right across the entire political spectrum and shared across the financial markets that things were going pretty well.’”*

Whoever had been in office would have been in difficulty and the opposition given a unique opportunity to make political capital. It was Labour's misfortune to be in government at the time of what will be seen as an inevitable malfunction of the global financial system: it was unable to cope with the major transition in economic power to China, India and other countries who were enjoying rapid growth and enhanced competitiveness. The Conservatives opportunistically chose to put the blame on excessive public spending by Labour. Had the positions been reversed, Labour would have seized on the under-regulation of the banking system and the need for international co-operation.



However the failure to undertake an honest analysis of the global financial crisis had disastrous political consequences for the Labour Party. There followed an extended period in which there was huge uncertainty as to whether budget deficits were acceptable or the financial conservatism of a balanced budget was necessary. This continued into the 2015 leadership debates with mainstream candidates going to considerable efforts to stress their support for sound finances, while studiously avoiding any explanation of what they meant by the term.

Such uncertainty reflected a deeper policy malaise. Like many economists of the Left I am a Keynesian. I believe that one of the key roles of government is to intervene, through public spending if appropriate, to ensure that the economy operates at a level that avoids underutilisation of resources. Without such intervention, the economy could settle at a natural equilibrium with high unemployment or under-employment or both. Neo-liberal economists take a different view and argue that unfettered price mechanisms should determine the allocation of resources and that any interference will have damaging consequences. The neo-liberal solution is to seek to improve market efficiency.

What is encouraging for the Left are the growing indications that the balance of argument is moving in our direction. Neo-liberalism or market fundamentalism is delivering most of its benefits to those who are already rich and privileged; it does not deliver prosperity to the many. Since the 2010 general election there has been a raft of publications, including many by authors who are Nobel Laureates, pointing to this fact and suggesting alternative approaches. All of them stress the international dimension of the problem, a subject that will be discussed in the next reflection. However, what seems to be accepted across the economic spectrum is that it will no longer be possible to rely on high economic growth to fund public services along the lines achieved by the Blair/Brown Government.

## Episode 8: Letting down the next generation

My later professional life proved to be a time of unexpected pleasure. In my mid-50s I joined the research staff of my professional institute; this gave me great scope and opportunities to travel internationally. I developed links at universities, both overseas and in the UK.

My chosen area for writing and research remained in the area of skills development but moved from the level of the firm (the micro problem of staff training) to the national challenge (the macro problem). The macro problem concerns the policies and interventions that a government can adopt to ensure that the nation produces capable individuals equipped to meet business requirements – and also that individual citizens are given every opportunity to find meaningful and rewarding employment. This macro dimension of skills development is an area that presents an important political question: should we be seeking to give priority to the interests of the employer or the interests of the workforce? This question is at the heart of the political challenge facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century Labour Party.

I wrote extensively on the subject, mainly for the magazine and website *Training Journal*, who generously allowed me freedom to develop my own critical perspective. I was invited to present this perspective to a House of Lords Select Committee who were investigating an issue of growing concern: that of youth unemployment. This topic, perhaps more than any other, illustrates the paucity of Labour's thinking at that time.

In the first episode of this volume I referred to the influence of my Aunt Jenny. I inherited her diaries and a few papers including the text of the speech she delivered in May 1936 as Chairman of the Workers' Union Women's Guild. This included the following:

*"It is a fact that there are thousands of youths in this country who have never done a day's work since leaving school. The most tragic aspect of this is the fact that they are used to this standard of life and become complacent, accepting what little they can get and not caring very much where it comes from."*

She could easily have been describing the situation 80 years later.

Ensuring that systems are in place to allow an individual, particularly young people, to acquire skills has a massive impact on life opportunity and hence on economic inequality. Bizarrely, throughout the whole of my professional life, there has been a tame consensus on the topic. Successive governments of all persuasions have adopted an institutional and voluntarist approach. This is the view that skills development should proceed within a framework based on partnership between government, companies and workers. This approach is characterised by an endless succession of schemes introduced in the hope that sooner or later one of them will work. Trying to identify and categorise the full range of government initiatives intended to promote skills training in the UK over the last five decades would have tried the patience of a research

archaeologist.

Once in office, the 2010 Conservative-dominated coalition emphasised their commitment to neo-liberal economics by stressing the importance of 'employer ownership' – defined as "*A substantial commitment, backed with public investment, to step back and give space to employers to take ownership of the skills agenda.*" This was more of an ideological statement than a new approach and was accompanied by yet another raft of initiatives.

By this time there was irrefutable evidence that a chronic problem of youth unemployment had developed. This had become known as NEETs (16- to 24-year-olds currently not in employment, education or training). The term 'NEETs' was adopted across EU states and OECD countries as a measure of youth employment. Once the economy changed and the recession took hold there had been a considerable increase in the number of post-18 NEETs. Figures released in May 2015, shortly after the election, recorded that there were just under a million (943,000) 16- to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training in the UK (13 per cent of this population). This number shows no sign of sustained downward movement.

The underlying cause has been a major structural change in the UK economy – many of the traditional jobs for school-leavers had simply disappeared. By this stage I was spending most of my time in Norfolk and a local example illustrated the nature of the problem. In the 1930s in Norwich, the major employment centre in Norfolk, 25 per cent of boys and 33 per cent of girls leaving elementary schools found employment in boot and shoe factories. Another 14 per cent of girls found employment in the Christmas cracker and chocolate factories. These factories had all closed and production was taking place in countries with cheaper labour costs.

Between 2012 and 2015 I concentrated much of my professional and political energy on this issue of NEETs. As well as writing for *Training Journal* I sought to influence Labour Party policy through direct approaches to MPs and political advisers. My old friend, Adrian Bailey, by now MP for West Bromwich West and a highly effective Chair of the House of Commons Select Committee on Business and Industry, was most receptive. So too was Jim Cunningham, the MP for Coventry South, who had been an apprentice in the engineering industry. Staff in the office of Tristram Hunt, a Labour education spokesperson, also expressed support.

There was a huge political opportunity for the Labour Party at this time. Unfortunately what could have been an important vote winner for the Labour Party was diverted into a bidding war between the major parties on who could deliver more apprentices. The opportunity was missed.

Traditionally the term apprenticeship had referred to an extended craft-training programme with a valued qualification at the end. My father was an apprentice. His father was a bricklayer and my grandmother was determined that her sons should have a trade and, equally importantly, work indoors rather than outside in cold weather on a building site. Accordingly my father's brother became an apprentice tiler and my father a carpenter. Both were 'time-served', spending five years working under the supervision of a master craftsman, initially for very low wages. Apprenticeships in 2015 were very different. They had become a

convenient label for a certain sort of skills training. Independent training providers could make a lot of money delivering such schemes that were subsidised by government. However, by increasing the numbers involved and appealing to a romantic memory of what apprenticeships used to be, the Conservative Government was able to imply that the problem of youth unemployment was being addressed. The Government announced proudly that it had achieved two million apprenticeship starts. Prime Minister David Cameron had pledged to make apprenticeships the 'new norm' for school-leavers who decide against going to university.

There was an important question that needed to be addressed. Should apprenticeships be high quality vocational training leading to a qualification with value in the employment market? Alternatively should apprenticeships be a form of subsidised training that takes place within a certain framework or standard? Instead of addressing this question, Ed Miliband competed in this bidding war, promising that, if a Labour Government was elected in 2015, policies would be put in place to ensure that as many people would secure apprenticeship places as entered university. There was never the slightest prospect of achieving this target – it was a slogan of the shallowest form.

Worse still, 18 months before the election, in September 2013, the Labour leader announced plans to make large companies train a new apprentice for each skilled worker hired from outside the EU. In that way, he claimed, 125,000 new high quality apprenticeship places would be created over a five-year period. To quote: "*We are going to say to any firm who wants to bring in a foreign worker that they also have to train up someone who's a local worker, training up the next generation.*" At the time, overseas workers were brought into the UK under what was known as Tier 2 of the current points-based immigration system. There were just over 20,000 Tier 2 certificates issued annually – add some other more specialised certificates and multiply by 5 and you do get to 125,000. However, obtaining a Tier 2 certificate was very demanding and no employer would embark on the process unless there was a strong business case and an urgent need. Many of the employers using Tier 2 permits already had apprenticeships in place, so the figure of 125,000 new places was wrong. For those who had such a scheme it would simply introduce a tick-the-box exercise. In his proposal, Miliband added a wholly undesirable element to the debate: creating apprenticeships would be seen as a sanction or punishment for not employing a sufficiently high proportion of British workers. Further, his arithmetic was simply incorrect.

Throughout this period, given its profile, the problem of youth unemployment attracted a wide range of solutions that extended from thoughtful analysis to ill-informed prejudice. The latter included arguments that the young people themselves were to blame (they possessed the wrong skills and display the wrong attitudes or were not putting enough effort into their job search) or that the fault lay in the education system (schools and colleges are not teaching 'employability' skills). In my view what was required was a new 'psychological contract' with the younger generation. This term describes an unread and unspoken, but implicitly understood, arrangement between parties. My expression took the following form:

*“We recognise, and expect you to recognise, that personal learning and development takes place through work. We want to give you every opportunity to undertake that learning in what we know to be a changing economic and employment climate. We expect you to grasp the work opportunities that are made available to you. However we recognise that you are young: it will take you time to appreciate your strengths and weaknesses and to develop the judgment needed in the workplace. You will make mistakes. Our promise to you is that we will be honest about the challenges you face, we will endeavour to give you the support and information you need to make sensible decisions, and we will try to ensure that you are not exploited in the workplace.”*

I made little or no headway with this argument. At the time many of the political advisers I encountered had little practical experience outside what had become known as the Westminster bubble. They had proceeded from university to a political job as an adviser to an MP or work in a think-tank. They were personable but most had never worked outside the political arena so had little idea what was at issue in the skills debate. I suspect that this was especially so of the entourage round the leader Ed Miliband and may explain their failure to grasp the issue of youth unemployment and the ill-judged incursion into the apprenticeship debate.

Whatever the cause, the result was that no progress was made between the defeat of 2010 and the election of 2015.

## Reflection: The international dimension

### Proposition 6

**If the Labour Party is to survive, it needs to develop a clear statement of how modern global capitalism can be organised to deliver growth without producing obscene levels of inequality, and how that growth can be harnessed to fund a well-managed welfare state.**

### Proposition 7

**Such a statement and the related policies can only be developed on an international basis.**

Shortly before the 2015 election campaign the UK-based aid charity, Oxfam published an excellent report entitled *Even it up: Time to end extreme inequality*. The report commented that:

*“Extreme economic inequality has exploded across the world in the last 30 years, making it one of the biggest economic, social and political challenges of our time. Age-old inequalities on the basis of gender, caste, race and religion – injustices in themselves – are exacerbated by the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots... Worldwide, inequality of individual wealth is even more extreme. At the start of 2014, Oxfam calculated that the richest 85 people on the planet owned as much as the poorest half of humanity.”*

A similarly powerful statement from a more important source appeared shortly after the election. In June 2015, Pope Francis published an encyclical: *On care for our common home*. He wrote:

*“Those who possess more resources and economic or political power seem mostly concerned with masking the problems or concealing the symptoms. Our failure to respond demonstrates a loss of a sense of responsibility for all fellow men and women upon which all civil society is founded.”*

Moreover:

*“The foreign debt of poor countries has become a way of controlling them, yet this is not the case where ecological debt is concerned.”*

At the time I remember thinking what a shame it was that Pope Francis was not a candidate to lead the Labour Party. He would certainly have secured my vote. He recognised the problem, articulated it clearly, and was not afraid to point to the hard choices that needed to be made when seeking a solution. The Pope's statement was not designed to appeal exclusively to any one section of society; it was not a call for mobilisation of the very poor. It is crafted to appeal to anyone who cares. It was a moral statement based on observed facts.

We need a thoroughgoing reappraisal of how Labour's values can be delivered in this modern global economy. It will be necessary to build international alliances while developing progressive domestic policies to manage the economy in a way that inspires confidence and maintains electoral support. This is a massive task and we are starting from a poor position. My grandchildren would find it difficult to comprehend the insularity of the British Left of my generation and, even worse, that of previous generations.

The Cardiff Labour Party of the 1960s, where my activism began, had an incongruous attitude towards international issues. On the positive side there was strong support for movements for colonial freedom and, above all, an abhorrence of apartheid in South Africa. This offered a stark contrast with the imperial, and often racist, views held by the local Conservatives. Set against this many of the local Labour Party members maintained a bizarre admiration for the communist bloc in Eastern Europe – despite mounting evidence of political repression and economic inefficiency. In part this was a legacy of the co-operation in the Second World War; in part this reflected a belief that public ownership and state planning offered the best solution to our economic problems. At one of my first Labour Party Branch meetings I attended, I remember one of the members arguing that the construction of the Berlin wall was an understandable response to problems created by capitalist currency speculators.

A corollary was a xenophobic distrust of continental Western Europe. In the course of a debate on post-war German rearmament, one leading Cardiff Labour Councillor famously remarked: *"I wouldn't trust a German with a pop-gun."* Sadly this sort of distrust translated into hostility for the European Community (dismissed as a capitalist conspiracy) and indeed coloured my early thinking on the subject.

Therefore one of my most important life journeys has been a recognition that the problems that matter, poverty and inequality, can ultimately only be tackled on an international basis and through international co-operation. In part this resulted from some inspiring professional opportunities outside the UK – these are described in the personal afterword. My appointment in post-Apartheid South Africa was especially influential.

The transition from the institutionalised racism of apartheid to a democratic rainbow nation has, during the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, been a cause of astonishment and joy for most of the world. South Africa is facing immense economic problems. Legacies of apartheid include a large population living in sub-standard conditions with unfulfilled high expectations for their future. Currently there are three million unemployed young people (three times as many as the UK which has a similar population). To compound matters, few countries in the world were as badly affected by the collapse in demand for manufactured goods caused by the global recession of 2008. As my South African friends point out they had a well-regulated banking system and the cause of the downturn in demand lay outside their country. Nothing could have convinced me more of the need for international co-operation.

Sadly, but inevitably, at a time of recession, the international debate in the UK has been dominated by immigration. In past the UK has benefited enormously

from labour migration and historically has exploited the resources of our former colonies. In the post-2008 recession, inward migration from the Eastern European countries has become an inevitable target; it is easy to blame migrants for unemployment and depressed wages. At a time of economic growth the Blair/Brown Governments failed to anticipate the problem and did not seek transitional arrangements on labour entry for the new EU members. This was a mistake but an even greater failure was the lack a clear political policy on the global economy.

I hope that the debate will move on and that the above paragraph will be puzzling, bordering on the incomprehensible, to successive generations. So that I am not too hard on my own generation, let me conclude this section on a positive note. Britain was at its very best in the 2012 London Olympics. London, arguably the most diverse and tolerant city in the world, rose to the occasion, creating a welcoming, open and friendly atmosphere, and embracing the world. I am glad that my grandchildren will be brought up in such a community. I hope that when they grow up they will consider themselves to be citizens of the world.



## Episode 9: Fifty years on – a last hurrah

Despite all the fall-out from the global financial crisis I was always much more comfortable with Gordon Brown's vision and policies than with Tony Blair's. Accordingly I returned to activism for the 2010 general election and leafleted and canvassed in the marginal Westminster North constituency, near our London flat. Immediately after that election I transferred my Labour Party membership from London to North Norfolk where my wife and I were beginning to settle into retirement. I began attending Party meetings, which were held in the seaside town of Cromer.

Over time I became more active in North Norfolk and at one Annual General Meeting was, to my total surprise, proposed as Constituency Party Treasurer. I was elected by 17 votes to nil over the existing post holder – this followed mounting criticism of his reliability. This was the first and only time I had experienced such a victory – doubtless because they did not know me very well. The post suited me: my organisation and reliability were appreciated; my combativeness was less of a handicap. I found the local Party activists to be a most amenable bunch; like the Leominster members 40 years earlier they were willing to fight a lost cause with integrity, dignity and considerable perseverance.

North Norfolk was indeed a hopeless seat. Historically it had a strong radical tradition and, as a consequence of the big arable farms and their large underpaid workforce, it was the birthplace of the agricultural workers' trade union. Labour held the seat until the 1970 general election. However the constituency had undergone significant and irreversible shifts in demographic composition: the agricultural workforce had dwindled; there was very limited manufacturing employment; the area had become increasingly attractive as a retirement area for people like us. The Labour vote was shrinking, a tendency that had been accelerated by a sustained and energetic Lib-Dem campaign which squeezed that vote. A Lib-Dem, Norman Lamb, captured the seat in 2001. By the 2010 general election the Labour vote in the parliamentary seat was down to 2,680 (5.4 per cent – and so only narrowly avoiding losing our £500 deposit).

One consequence of the local Lib-Dem success meant that there were no Labour members on the 48-strong North Norfolk District Council. We therefore committed to contest every seat in the hope of rebuilding the Labour vote. I agreed to stand providing I could be allocated a seat in which there was no prospect, however remote, of my winning. There were plenty of such seats available and I stood and lost in a District Council election in 2011 and a County Council election in 2013.

In North Norfolk there was no discernible political difference between the local Conservatives and Lib-Dems – indeed there were frequent defections when aggrieved individuals switched between the two. Irrespective of designation they were a pretty poor bunch. I well remember attending, out of curiosity, a 'stand for councillor' evening at the offices of North Norfolk District Council in October 2014. It was open to *"anyone interested in becoming a candidate who would like to find out more about what being a councillor involves"*. The event was doubtless

well intentioned. After some initial presentations we convened to a room set out with six tables for groups of ten. The problem was the councillors themselves. With one or two exceptions they proved totally unable to deliver the desired agenda. They proceeded to talk in tedious detail about the work of their committee and then hand over to another anonymous colleague who proceeded to offer a similar monologue. On at least one of the tables, the participants ignored the monologue and talked amongst themselves; the speaker carried on regardless and may not even have noticed.

If there was one theme to emerge it was that these existing councillors had a dislike of politics. Both Conservative and Lib-Dems were at pains to emphasise how they worked together and tried to avoid anything 'political'. Who knows what motivated them to become councillors beyond a sense of self-importance and a desire to attend events and sit at the front. Such limitations mattered. At the time in my small village we had real problem on broadband speeds and were investigating an innovative solution involving Wi-Fi transmission from a local church tower. One of the councillors, who did not represent our area, had aligned herself with objectors to this initiative. At the meeting she asked me: "*It is not a village where many people work from home, so why do you need broadband?*" Doubtless the landed gentry said similar things about electric light on the grounds that not many people in the village were able to read.

Our local Lib-Dem MP, Norman Lamb, had been amongst those who enthusiastically embraced the post-2010 coalition with the Conservatives. He was hardworking and ran an efficient office. However he was a supporter of one of the most shameful acts of post-war politics: the reversal of the stance on student fees. In their 2010 general election campaign the Lib-Dems put a commitment to abolish student fees at the centre of their campaign. This made no sense at all at a time when almost half the population was participating in further or higher education. Moreover it was accompanied by a sanctimonious we-alone-keep-our-promises campaign. The subsequent betrayal, when the Lib-Dem Party in government instead voted to triple tuition fees, contributed greatly to disillusionment among young voters. At the time I was involved in a considerable amount of university teaching and had developed a great liking for the students who had been so cynically misled. I was incensed and determined to ensure that past voters in North Norfolk who had voted Lib-Dem for tactical reasons to prevent a Conservative victory, were given every encouragement to return to the Labour fold.

I thought that we would find it very difficult to find a credible Labour candidate willing to contest the 2015 general election. Not only was the seat totally unwinnable, it was miles from anywhere. However, to my surprise and delight, our Constituency Party Chair, Denise Burke, expressed her willingness. She and her husband had recently moved to the area from London. Denise was a national expert on childcare and early years services; previously she worked as head of childcare for both Labour and Conservative Mayors of London. She was personable and energetic and we were very lucky to have her – to this day I have no idea why she wanted to stand. However stand she did and asked me to be her election agent. This is the person responsible for all legal aspects of the campaign including the submission of all formal papers (including candidate nomination),

the control and monitoring of expenditure, and ensuring that activists acted within the boundaries of election law. I was happy to take on this responsibility: I would not have done so for a candidate whom I did not respect.

Come the general election, our local campaign in North Norfolk proceeded as well as could be expected. Denise spoke well at various hustings meetings; we secured good publicity in the local newspaper; we had sufficient volunteers to deliver our leaflets and cover the polling stations on the day in our target areas. We were fortunate to be able to draw on the services of a talented expert on social media, Jono Read, who lived in the constituency. We did our best to secure what we were encouraged to call our core vote. One morning we were handing out leaflets in the main square of the market town of Sheringham. An elderly lady wheeling her great-grandchild stopped to talk. She said that, although she had been successful, she was voting Labour: *"I've never forgotten where I come from. When I was a child we all used to try to play with the girl down the road – she was the only one in a house with an inside toilet."* Unfortunately there were very few people who shared her memories and sentiments.

There was only one incident for me to deal with as agent and, regrettably, this took place very close to home. I was the Treasurer of our local Village Church. It was one of a group of nine Parishes in a Church Benefice (to use the technical term) looked after by one Rector who had his office and home in a nearby village. During the election campaign all Churchwardens received an e-mail from the Benefice Administrator which read: *"Short notice, but the Rector has issued an invitation to you and anyone in your parish to meet Norman Lamb at the Rectory, this Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> April, from half past one o'clock. Drinks!"*

In my capacity as Labour Party Parliamentary Agent I immediately responded requesting equal treatment for all candidates and stressing that that the Church, locally or nationally, must not express a preference for any single candidate or party. I received a quite extraordinary reply that included the statement: *"There was never any sense of a political gathering in this invitation – Norman is very well liked by many people of all political persuasions."* Meanwhile the local Lib-Dems had leafleted our area describing the meeting at the Rectory as a chance to *"Ask Norman Lamb"* and *"hear more about his priorities for North Norfolk in the coming years"*. It was an overtly political event, featuring just one candidate among five, organised by the Church, in the middle of a general election. Following a formal complaint to the Bishop, the local Archdeacon was obliged to intervene and issue a separate note directing Churchwardens to the other candidates' websites.

If our local campaign proceeded well the same could not be said of the national picture. The Conservative Party had entered the 2015 general election with an unassailable lead over Labour on the handling of the economy. These were the findings from every opinion poll reinforced by anecdotal evidence from the doorstep. The Conservative leadership, with the shameful collusion of the Lib-Dems, established the myth that the global financial crisis of 2008 was a result of Chancellor Gordon Brown's over-spending. They had kept to this script throughout their period in office.

Ed Miliband had been narrowly elected leader of the Labour Party in September 2010 defeating his abler older brother. Under his leadership the Labour Party's

election strategy was to secure what it regarded as its core vote – between about 30-35 per cent of the electorate. Given the peculiarities of the electoral system this could have secured sufficient seats to form a government. The political message promulgated to produce this result was the need to ensure a fairer and more equitable treatment of working families. Even in a muted economic recovery there was every indication that the rich and successful were the beneficiaries, while wages were not keeping pace with prices leading to deterioration in standard of living for middle- and low-earners.

As the Parliamentary Agent for North Norfolk Constituency I had concluded, well before the election that we would have been better off without a national campaign. Ed Miliband was undoubtedly principled and sincere in what he believed; he was committed to the creation of a better society. A hostile press ridiculed minor deficiencies in his personal style and unduly pilloried him whenever they had an opportunity. However, under his leadership, we fought the 2015 election with a muddled set of policies designed to show that Labour was on the side of the working class: these included the freezing of energy prices, a mansion tax on high value properties, a cut in student fees, and the ill-constructed policy on apprenticeships. While such policies were never objectionable in themselves there was a complete failure to develop them into a coherent whole.

Ed Miliband's most significant failure lay in the one area where he would have been expected to succeed: the formulation of an over-arching economic policy narrative for Labour in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which, in co-operation with others, could be translated in to vision that inspired. What was needed was a clear statement of how modern global capitalism could be organised to deliver growth without producing obscene levels of inequality, and how that growth could be harnessed to fund a well-managed welfare state. Such a statement could command support from wavering voters who held socially progressive principles. Ed Miliband's approach to this problem seemed to involve floating a series of ethereal concepts that no one, with the possible exception of his super-clever Education spokesperson, Tristram Hunt, was capable of interpreting. Such concepts included one-nation, productive capitalism and pre-distribution, all of which were rapidly confined to the dustbin of Labour history.

Some six months before the 2015 general election Labour in general, and Ed Miliband's leadership in particular, was experiencing a difficult period. The UK Independence Party (UKIP) had won two successive parliamentary by-elections caused by the defection of sitting Conservative MPs. In neither constituency was Labour able to mount an effective challenge. However what was most disturbing for the Labour Party was that these by-elections created the opportunity for UKIP to present an aggressive case that it, rather than the Labour Party, was the body that could represent the interests of ordinary working people.

Not surprisingly therefore the 2015 general election produced a dismal result for Labour. The Party lost all but one of its seats in its traditional base of Scotland to the Scottish National Party (SNP). Labour failed to make any significant gains in England outside London. Labour's percentage of the UK vote in the 2015 general election was 30.4 per cent. Although this marked an increase of 1.5 per cent over 2010 it was best interpreted as another step in a long-term decline.

In North Norfolk, Denise Burke achieved the desired increase in the Labour vote polling 5,043 votes. The defending Lib-Dem, Norman Lamb, saw his majority cut be two thirds to just over 4,000: by the end of the campaign his party had become a byword for hypocrisy and opportunism and suffered accordingly. There were elections for North Norfolk District Council on the same day as the general election. I had agreed to stand in my home patch of Glaven Valley to ensure that we had a full slate of candidates. In this impossible seat I secured only 78 votes and came fourth out of five candidates. I was forced to conclude that my popularity increases the further the distance from my home. My lecturing had always been most effective in Australia, New Zealand or South Africa.

## Final reflection: The past and the future

### Proposition 8

**The Labour Party of my lifetime has failed to provide an economic model that can deliver a just society and then go on to convince others of its value.**

### Proposition 9

**There may be little immediate prospect for Labour as a party of government. This does not diminish the importance of the cause of social justice.**

This memoir was completed in 2015 in the period between the general election of May 7<sup>th</sup> that year, and the election on September 12<sup>th</sup> of a new Party leader. At the general election Labour's policies were confused and its strategy, consolidating what was described as its core vote, inept. Labour secured less than a third of the UK vote and was humiliated in its traditional stronghold of Scotland. The election defeat has been followed by a leadership contest characterised, not by the discussion on principles and policies that was so desperately needed, but by a proliferation of slickly produced marketing e-mails lacking in political substance. The Labour Party of my generation has failed to rise to a new set of challenges and, after a catastrophic 2015 general election result, seems to be reluctant even to enter into a serious dialogue on their solution.

Given the experiences of my formative years in Cardiff, I will never leave the Labour Party. I am a tribal supporter. There have however been occasions when I would not have minded being expelled. The Miliband election campaign and its aftermath was one of these.

It is, however, both simplistic and unfair to attribute Labour's failures solely to the current generation of the Party leadership. Recent events are just the latest, if a particularly disappointing, stage in an ongoing decline. By 2015 a failure to address a long-term problem surrounding Labour's identity meant that defeat at the general election was inevitable. My generation of the Left has let down my grandchildren's generation and their successors. I can only offer them an apology. We should have done a better job.

In this memoir I have tried to describe my personal journey in politics. At the heart lies a belief in economic and social justice, but my views on the form that injustice can take and how it needs to be addressed has evolved over time. My initial motivation was a result of the class prejudice that I encountered. This moved me, at an early stage, to form a view on education that has remained with me throughout: that education should be regarded as an inclusive process available to all, not as resource to be focused to give the most able even further advantages. Moreover being clever and capable should not be seen as a virtue that intrinsically merits reward, but as an attribute possessed by many fortunate people who should put their talents to good use.

Another important value, and this is one I inherited from my family, was an abhorrence of racism. In my later working life I was able to enjoy considerable periods of overseas work and made good friends with many fellow professionals in my chosen field of learning, training and development. Not only did this convince me that there was a convergence of aspirations but also that the problem of social justice could only be resolved on an international basis.

To re-emphasise, and extend, the first of the nine propositions in this volume, I believe that the case for Labour should rest on social justice: the need to eliminate poverty and limited opportunity for the less able; the need to prevent exploitation of the weak by the strong (wherever it takes place in the world), the need to create an economic system that does not produce obscene levels of inequality. These were the values that I acquired, by osmosis, in the Cardiff Labour Party of the 1960s. They remain compelling to me.

We should strive to create a fairer society that provides opportunities for growth and development of all, not at the expense of others. The best expression of this aspiration that I have found was in a 2014 novel *The Children Act* by the author Ian McEwan. Here his central character reflects that:

*“Welfare should not be to be gauged in purely financial terms” and “welfare, happiness, must embrace the philosophical concept of the good life”.*

The following ingredients of the good life are presented:

*“economic and moral freedom, virtue compassion and altruism, satisfying work through engagement with demanding tasks, a flourishing network of personal relationships, earning the esteem of others, pursuing larger meanings to one’s existence, and having at the centre of one’s life one or a small number of significant relations defined above all by love”.*<sup>4</sup>

This is certainly what I would like to see for my grandchildren and their children and grandchildren. I would like to see this in place for all children throughout the world.

We will not achieve the changes that can make this happen unless we can win elections – on this Tony Blair was completely correct. We must discover how to connect with people outside those who are already committed to social justice; we must convince them that we can offer opportunities for them in a well-managed economy as well as creating a better society to benefit the less privileged and less capable. I would not have fought (and lost) so many elections unless I was a firm believer in democracy. I remain a supporter of what I regard as the fairer voting system of AV (Alternative Vote).

To return to the argument presented in the previous section, where the failure at the 2015 election was considered. What was needed at that time was a clear statement of how modern global capitalism could be organised to deliver growth without producing obscene levels of inequality, and how that growth could be harnessed to fund a well-managed welfare state. However the very description of the system as ‘global capitalism’ itself acts as a barrier. The dominant system in most economically developed countries is characterised by private organisations

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<sup>4</sup> Quotations are from *The Children Act* – see background references at end of text for details, p.15

of varying sizes, mainly operating under a legal framework (the Companies Act in the UK) that gives primacy to shareholder value, and run by a professional cadre of managers. This is conducted within a political framework of neo-liberalism that assumes that market forces alone should determine allocation. Within such systems larger international corporations will manage their supply chain to produce where it is cheapest; many will exploit their labour force and most will barter one country against another to gain subsidies and other financial advantages. They will organise their affairs internationally to reduce their obligations to pay tax. To emphasise: the problem of creating a more equal society can therefore only be resolved on an international basis and by international co-operation. However the system is changing and, perhaps, to quote Confucius: *“The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name.”* It may be that a new vocabulary is needed to describe the economic and industrial changes that will be required.

This memoir was completed at a depressing time: it is fair to ask whether the Labour Party’s decline means that it will never form part of government again. Certainly the next generation of leaders faces an immense task. They will need to do far better than their predecessors.

Once it became impossible to build a progressive party based on working class solidarity, and once public ownership and central planning were no longer seen both as offering a necessary and sufficient solution to the country’s economic problems, a fundamental rethink was needed. The times were not propitious for this rethink and the political climate was wrong. The Labour Party debate was dominated in turn by the civil war over Tony Benn’s fundamentalism and the rise of Tony Blair’s progressive centrism. The question of how to manage modern capitalism and use its output to eliminate poverty and promote inequality did not become a topic for serious discussion. Throw in a measure of opportunism – an inevitable characteristic of politicians of the Left – and you produce the sterility of the Miliband years.

I am confident that there will always be large numbers of people committed to social justice and willing to give time and effort to promote such views through political action. Moreover those people will be living in many different countries and the internet will allow them the opportunity to communicate and act on a worldwide basis. This offers immense hope for the future.

In the UK whether the Labour Party is the vehicle chosen by such activists remains to be seen. Institutions come and go and it may well be that the Labour Party that I knew has had its day, if not served its purpose. However the underlying cause is a noble one and one I commend to my grandchildren.

Ultimately it is values that matter.



## Personal afterword

Earlier in this memoir I described the 1984-85 miners' strike as the defining moment in British Labour politics. A Labour Party built on working class solidarity was no longer viable and the subsequent decline of the Party must be interpreted against this background. The miners' strike had a traumatic effect on my life. Since this volume is intended as a memoir for my grandchildren I will close with a brief overview of my subsequent professional activities.

After the strike it was clear that there was no future in the industry. By then I had moved into a role in management training at the NCB and this gave me a good base to look elsewhere. I joined a leading management consultancy shortly before my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I then moved through a number of senior training roles in financial services including becoming Director of Management Education and Training at a blue-chip accountancy firm. Over time I developed a second career writing, researching and lecturing. Seven books led to three Visiting Professorships at UK universities. I then enjoyed a Fellowship at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand to coincide with the rugby season, a Fellowship at the Institute of Adult Learning, Singapore, and a deal of speaking at overseas conferences. The culmination of my professional career was a visiting appointment as Extraordinary Professor at North-West University (NWU), Potchefstroom, South Africa. Once the Afrikaans-speaking whites-only heart of apartheid, NWU had become a marvellous multi-racial institute with students fully representative of the rainbow nation.

In April 2014, in the course of my final NWU visit, I fulfilled a long-standing commitment to guest lecture at an event planned by Vuselela College in neighbouring Klerksdorp. It transpired that this town was the birthplace of the distinguished opponent of apartheid, Archbishop Desmond Tutu. At one time there had been three colleges in Klerksdorp (white, black and coloured). Now there was one, headed by an Indian woman. The room was packed; I was on good form, and the audience was receptive and appreciative. It could not have gone better. It offered an appropriate culmination of my professional work and I decided to make it the occasion of my retirement.

## Background references

This memoir has been intended for general readers who have left-of-centre views and an interest in the politics of the time. I have therefore sought to avoid references and footnotes on the academic pattern as these could serve to detract from the main narrative. However, for those who have a further interest in the arguments advanced the following volumes are recommended.

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