

A one-party state?

The argument that, in the wake of the Tories' electoral triumphs, Britain is now a 'one-party state' confuses that which is new about the current political climate with that which has always been a feature of British politics. The Conservatives, as the party of capital, have dominated British politics throughout this century. The new factor is the destruction of the Labour Party. The collapse of any opposition to the Tories has made clearer the fraudulent nature of the democratic process.

The results of the local elections confirmed the message of the general election a month previously—triumph for the Tories, humiliation for the Labour Party. Even in regions where the Labour Party had done relatively well on 9 April, it was trounced last week. In the West Midlands, for example, there was a huge swing towards the Tories, giving Conservatives victory in Dudley and depriving Labour of control of Walsall and Wolverhampton.

Where the turnout was higher the Tories fared better, reversing previous electoral trends and undermining Labour's argument that voter apathy was responsible for its poor showing. In Basildon—where, at 48 per cent, the turnout was much higher than elsewhere in the country—the Tories took a spectacular 61 per cent of the vote and won all nine seats being contested. Such results clearly represent an anti-Labour trend within the working class.

The Tory triumph in local elections, following hard on the heels of the general election victory and amid the continuing disarray within opposition ranks, most noticeably manifested in the Labour Party leadership campaign, has led many to argue that we are now living in a 'one-party state'. The Tories are entrenched in power, they say, and there is little hope of restraining them. The idea of the one-party state has been given further credence by the way that the Tories are using their powers of patronage to install their supporters on governing bodies of schools, hospitals, etc, enabling the government to push through its reforms with little opposition.

In fact, the 'one-party state' argument confuses what is new in today's political climate with what has always been an inherent feature of British politics. Throughout this century the Tories have been the natural party of government and have dominated British politics. What is new today is not Tory domination but the destruction of the opposition. The collapse of the Labour Party from an organisation with genuine roots in society to a collection of cliques with no cohesion or dynamism has transformed the political process.

The Tories have always been the party of the capitalist class. In a country in which capitalist rule has never seriously been threatened, the Tories have more or less been entrenched in power. Since the end of the First World War, when Labour replaced the Liberals as the principal opposition to the Conservative Party, the Tories have held

power for 54 out of 74 years. Even between 1945 and 1979, when Labour's corporatist values were supposed to be triumphant, the Labour Party spent as many years in opposition as it did in government.

Most Labour governments, moreover, were either minority administrations or commanded majorities so small that they effectively had to rule as a coalition. Only twice in its entire history—in 1945 and 1966—has the Labour Party won majorities in double figures; these governments held power for a total of nine years.

It is also instructive to look at when Labour administrations took the reins of power. Almost without exception Labour has assumed power in those periods when the capitalist class was facing a major political or economic crisis and needed the assistance of Labour to subdue working class unrest. In 1924, Ramsay MacDonald became the first Labour prime minister following the post-First World War strike wave, the collapse of the Liberals and disarray among Tories over the issue of protectionism. In 1929, Labour assumed power at the start of the Depression. In 1964, Labour formed a government with the barest of majorities at a time when it was clear that the Tories, after 13 years in power, had simply run out of steam, and when there was growing radicalisation among workers. In 1974, Harold Wilson replaced Edward Heath at Number 10 in the wake of the miners' strikes, the three-day week and the onset of the first postwar recession.

Only in 1945 did Labour win at the polls at a time when the capitalist class was facing no immediate economic or political crisis which required the helping hand of Labour. The 1945 Labour victory was the result of popular disillusionment with free market capitalism engendered by the experiences of the thirties and of the Second World War. There was widespread support—including within the establishment—for Keynesian economics and welfare policies, with which Labour was more closely associated. The election result was also the consequence of the fact that Labour had been thoroughly house-trained through its participation in the wartime government; sections of the ruling class were willing therefore to entrust Labour with power.

Reviewing the past century, it becomes clear that Britain has never had a two-party system.

The Conservatives have always been the party of government. They have shown tremendous flexibility in adapting themselves to changing circumstances—such as their ability to dominate the years of consensus politics in the postwar period. Even major crises, such as the Suez debacle or the rift within the ruling class over Europe, have not seriously damaged the Tory Party. Labour has only come to power on those occasions when the ruling class has faced political or economic problems which it recognised could be better resolved through a Labour administration. In these circumstances the Conservatives have made way for Labour, but have subsequently resumed power.

If there is nothing new in the idea of the 'one-party state', then the notion that the current Tory ascendancy is the result of the renewed strength and vigour of the Conservative Party is simply absurd. The Tories are more unsure and insecure, and have less vitality and dynamism, than at almost any time this century. Compare, for example, the current Major administration with that of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Then the Tories had a clearly worked out programme, a definite idea of where they were going and an ability to enthuse their core constituency with their anti-socialist ideas. Today, as the Queen's Speech revealed, the Tories have exhausted their fund of ideas. Tories have in effect given up on giving a political lead to Britain, and are themselves simply swept along by the tide of events.

What is new today, then, is not Tory domination, and still less is it Tory dynamism. What has changed dramatically is the Labour Party's relationship to society.

The Labour Party's distinct identity and place in politics was forged through its relationship to the British establishment, the trade union bureaucracy and the working class. Labour acted as an intermediary between the establishment and the working class. The labour bureaucracy provided the social base for the party and its link to the working class. For the ruling class, the Labour Party provided a means to contain unrest; for the union leaders a channel to the corridors of state power; and for workers, Labour seemed to be a vehicle through which they could express their aspirations for a better society. All three relationships have been radically transformed over the past decade.

The relationship between the Labour Party and the trade unions became strained in the seventies as Labour became drawn further into the orbit of the establishment and was less responsive to working class pressure. The experience of the Social Contract and the winter of discontent in 1979 was a key turning point. The Tory attacks on the unions in the eighties, their marginalisation in the workplace and the bureaucrats' loss of national status as a result of the erosion of the mechanisms of consensus have all forced union leaders to look for new political alignments.

The link with the Labour Party is no longer the key, or indeed a necessary, relationship for the unions. Many unions resent paying for the running of a party which can

no longer provide them with political benefits. Union bosses have tried to ensure the survival of their organisations by finding a new relationship with the employers. Many now talk of establishing a relationship not solely with Labour but with pressure groups in all the major parties. The irrelevance of Labour to the future of the unions has led them to endorse Labour's plans to ditch the block vote and the party's trade union image.

The Labour Party itself has responded to electoral humiliation in the eighties by running away from its past. Neil Kinnock tried to make Labour electable by transforming it into a junior capitalist party, ditching the relationship with both the unions and the working class. But this remaking of Labour means that the party cannot perform its old role for the establishment—Labour is incapable of mediating class relations because it no longer has contact with the working class. In making itself acceptable to the ruling class, the Labour Party has also made itself redundant.

The transformation of Labour has denied it any role in British politics. It can no longer act as a vehicle for the aspirations of working class people. Indeed many sections of the working class now look to the Conservatives' promise of individual betterment through home ownership and the expansion of market forces as the only way to improve their lives. Labour's inability to achieve power makes it unattractive to the trade union bureaucracy. At the same time, the severing of links between Labour and the working class means that the Labour Party can no longer serve the ruling class as a buffer against working class unrest.

The Labour Party has been transformed from an organisation with a genuine, if secondary role in British politics, to a collection of individuals who are barely more relevant than the Liberals. It is this which makes the Tories look invincible.

Britain has always been a 'one-class state' because the capitalist class has always held the levers of state power. 'Democracy' has been a means of camouflaging such a dictatorial political process. The existence of an opposition party capable of administering the country has provided the illusion of a 'two-party system' and of a democratic process in which people can influence policy through the ballot box. The demise of Labour has destroyed that illusion and made more apparent the reality of Britain as a one-party state.

The destruction of Labour has also masked the current weakness of the Conservative Party. Few of the problems besetting the Tories—from the recession to the conflict on Europe, from financial embarrassments such as the Canary Wharf development to scandals such as the Lloyd's affair—have any political consequences. This can make our arguments about the weaknesses of the Tory Party and the fragility of the British political process seem unreal. We need to be sensitive to this gap between appearance and reality, a gap that is rooted in the lack of any opposition to the Tories.

The rise of Paddy Ashdown

The emergence of Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown as a key player in British politics is not simply a by-product of Labour's damaging post-election leadership contest. It reflects a much more profound realignment of political forces in British society.

Last weekend Paddy Ashdown appealed for constructive debate and cooperation between anti-Conservative forces of the centre-left in response to the 'near-permanent Conservative hegemony' established over British politics in the fourth consecutive Tory term. Ever since the general election, and indeed before it, Ashdown has taken advantage of Labour's decline to advance the claims of the Liberal Democrats as a major alternative oppositional force.

Ashdown's immediate response to John Major's election victory was to declare Labour 'unelectable' and hence to disparage its status as the only serious contender for government office. Labour's demoralisation has been heightened by the leadership contest precipitated by Neil Kinnock's decision to retire immediately from the fray, and by the protracted post-mortem on the defeat. This situation has provided the Liberal Democrat leader with considerable opportunities to advance his own post-election agenda.

It is striking that all candidates for the Labour leadership now express an openness to consider electoral reform, if not some form of proportional representation. Ashdown has made this long-standing Liberal cause a major theme before, during and since the election. All Labour's leadership contenders now question the block vote system through which the unions formally control Labour's policy-making and electoral machinery, an issue the Liberals took over from the old Social Democrats after their merger in 1988 (the SDP defectors from the Labour Party made a principle of opposing the block vote when they could no longer swing it to their advantage). Even erstwhile radicals in the Labour camp, like Michael Meacher and Robin Cook, are now questioning Labour's support for universal welfare benefits and progressive taxation, issues raised by Ashdown in the election to emphasise the Liberal Democrats' commitment to austerity and private enterprise.

It is not surprising that Labour's leadership candidates have given Ashdown's latest appeal a stiff response. Margaret Beckett might well point out that the Liberal Democrats have fewer MPs than Labour has shadow cabinet members. If Labour did badly on 9 April, the Lib Dems did little better, having lost out in terms of share of votes (down from 23 per cent in 1987 to 18 per cent) and seats, ending up with only 20 MPs (compared with Labour's 271). It might also be noted that the Liberals fared badly in last week's local elections, a sphere in which they traditionally do well, winning only 19 per cent of the votes.

In reply, Ashdown can point to his success in reviving the old centre party after the debacle of the merger with the SDP and the departure of both a Liberal fundamentalist wing and Dr David Owen's ill-fated rump. He can declare too his

success in building a 100 000-strong membership base and consolidating the party's financial position. But the real explanation of Ashdown's success lies elsewhere, in the realignment of British politics resulting from the collapse of Labourism.

The gradual decline of the old labour movement over decades accelerated through the eighties and culminated in Labour's 9 April electoral humiliation. If further proof were needed of the terminal state of the old Labour Party, last week's local government elections provided it. Labour's electoral demise follows its organisational and programmatic abandonment of its links with the working class, a process speeded up under Kinnock and accelerating out of control in the course of the current shambolic succession struggle. But the disappearance of Labour as a distinctive pole of British political life, rooted in the organised labour movement, changes the whole character of modern party politics.

For most of the twentieth century, the Tories have rallied their party faithful and appealed for wider support through anti-socialist and often anti-communist propaganda. Now the Communist Party has renounced communism and Labour has renounced socialism, and both have abandoned the working class. Though this has disoriented the Tories, as their lacklustre election campaign indicated, Labour's loss of identity has made it incapable of mobilising any alternative base of support, as its election defeat confirmed.

The realignment of the major parties has created new opportunities for the Liberal Democrats. For the whole postwar period, the Liberals (or the SDP, or both) proclaimed their role as centre parties, as parties offering a third way between the class-based extremes of the two major parties, or even, in Dr Owen's fantasy, breaking the mould of the two-party system. In the event, the mould was broken by the demise of Labourism rather than by the efforts of the centre parties, but the Liberal Democrats are well placed to become beneficiaries.

Now, despite their electoral insignificance, their narrow base of support and their extraordinarily dull leadership, the Liberal Democrats are set free to play a much greater role in British political life. They need no longer act as the repository of protest votes from the two major parties, because there are no longer 'two major parties'. There is now only one governmental party and a number of contenders for a role in opposition. For now, Ashdown must concentrate on consolidating his position *vis à vis* the disintegrating Labour Party. But as the Tories' problems mount, he may well come to occupy a more prominent role alongside whoever emerges from the smoke-filled rooms in which the Labour leadership is still resolved.

After the German strike

The German public sector strike has produced a defeat for the government of Helmut Kohl but no victory for the working class.

The German establishment clearly wanted a set-piece confrontation with public sector workers to demonstrate its determination to destroy the postwar consensus and clear the way for a broader assault on working class living standards. However, the Kohl government lacked both the political nous to isolate the strikers and the will to see through the confrontation to the bitter end.

Unlike the Thatcher administrations in Britain in the early eighties, the Kohl government had little idea about how to win public support for its anti-union policies. Indeed it did not even recognise the need to win such support. At the same time, the strength of popular support for the public sector workers undermined the government's own conviction about the need to see through the strike. This lack of conviction represents not simply a political weakness but also demonstrates the strength of corporatist values

in Germany—and the importance of such values in providing legitimacy for the German state.

While the strike was a setback for the government it was no victory for the working class. The union settled for a pay rise barely half the original claim; the settlement clearly angered many workers.

The strike also demonstrated the chauvinist attitude of many west German workers towards their east German counterparts. This divisive sectionalism is one of the biggest problems facing the German working class movement.

Finally, there is nothing progressive in the union leaders' attachment to the consensual approach of the past 45 years. For the union bureaucrats consensus represents a route to the corridors of power. For German workers it means a set of policies which ties their interests to those of the German state and of the capitalist class.

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