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**THE LIFE AND SOUL OF THE PARTY:
CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE IN THE
BRITISH LABOUR PARTY SINCE 1979**

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Introduction¹

The electoral history of the Labour Party between 1979 and 1997 is one of spectacular collapse and recovery. The party suffered four consecutive electoral defeats (1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992). Following the fall of the Labour government in 1979, the party subsequently slumped in 1983 to its worst electoral defeat since 1918. After 1983, however, it succeeded in slowly increasing its share of the popular vote in the 1987 and 1992 elections, before scoring its greatest ever victory in the General Election of 1 May, 1997.

This process of catastrophic electoral collapse (1979-1983) and gradual, but eventually triumphant, recovery (1983-1997) has been accompanied by equally dramatic programmatic change. Between 1979 and 1983, the party moved sharply to the left on key policy issues. It fought the 1983 election with a manifesto calling for widespread state intervention in the economy, unilateral nuclear disarmament and withdrawal from the European Community. From 1983 onwards, however, the party moved steadily back towards the political centre. This process involved the eventual abandonment of unilateralism, the enthusiastic embracing of the European Community and a wholesale rejection of any substantial state intervention in the economy. In 1995, under the leadership of Tony Blair, the party's historic commitment to the nationalization of the means of production, distribution and exchange was struck from its constitution. Overall, therefore, the history of the Labour Party between 1979 and 1997 is one of *change* - with respect

¹I am very grateful to the following for their comments on this paper: Javier Astudillo, Justin Byrne, Emma Cerviño, Marta Fraile, Javier García de Polavieja, Luis Ortiz and Santiago Pérez-Nievas. In addition, I thank Jacqueline de la Fuente for her editorial assistance with the preparation of the text.

to its policies, ideology and, as I elaborate in this paper, its internal structure and organization.

Clearly, in terms of understanding this process of change, the external environment in which the Party operated in the 1980s and 1990s is critical. The electoral appeal and ideological power of Thatcherism, for example, forced the Party to (eventually) reevaluate its own position on important economic, social and industrial issues. Meanwhile, as with other European social democratic parties, the decline, or outright disappearance, of traditional constituencies as a result of economic and industrial change forced the Party to revise its electoral strategy. As such, we could conclude that the Party acted in keeping with the logic of Downs' familiar model of electoral competition - that is to say, after the adoption and then rejection of an array of controversial and unpopular policies (1979-1983), subsequent Party leaderships (Kinnock, Smith, Blair) successfully steered the Party back to the middle ground (1983-1997). This placed the party in a position to win a convincing electoral victory in 1997.

Table 1. *British General Election Results, 1979-1997*

	1979		1983		1987		1992		1997	
	%vote	seats	%vote	seats	%vote	seats	%vote	seats	%vote	seats
CON	43.9	339	42.4	397	42.3	376	42.8	336	31.0	165
LAB	36.9	269	27.6	209	30.8	229	35.2	271	44.5	419
LIB	13.8	11	25.4	23	22.6	22	18.3	20	17.0	46
OTHE R	5.4	16	4.6	21	4.3	23	3.8	23	7.5	29

CON: Conservative; LAB: Labour; LIB: Liberal (1979), Liberal-SDP Alliance (1983, 1987), Liberal Democrats (1992, 1997).

Source: For 1979 Penniman (1981:335); for 1983 Heath, Jowell and Curtice (1985:2-3); for 1987 Butler and Kavanagh (1988:283); for 1992 Heath, Jowell and Curtice (1994:8); and for 1997 *Financial Times*, 3-4 May 1997; and *The Independent*, 4 May 1997.

Yet such a conclusion is a limited one. It is one thing to predict that a "dysfunctional" electoral strategy will lead to disaster. In this sense, the Downsian model helps us explain why the Labour Party was punished heavily in the 1983 General Election. But the question as to why apparently unpopular policies were adopted in the first place remains unanswered, and the issues of when, how, at what speed and with what consequences change took place remain largely unexplored.

To address these issues more fully, I argue in this paper that it is essential to analyse the internal organization and structure of political parties if we are to understand their *ability* and *willingness* to change, and the *direction* or *form* that such change assumes. My empirical account of the "internal life" of the Labour Party between 1979 and 1997 is therefore based on the assumption that parties are *not* unitary actors;² instead, they contain (to greater or lesser degrees) multiple sites of power and influence *which may have competing conceptions of what the party is, and what its goals and strategy should be*. To the extent that a party adopts an overall goal or strategy, this will be the outcome, or product, of internal struggle. It is the motivations and rationales of the multiple actors involved in that internal struggle that need to be explained in order to understand whether or why a party changes, and the nature of that change. This notion of *competing* rationalities within a single party therefore helps *explain* change, rather than merely

²In comparison with Downs, who assumes that party organizations are centralised and unified, and that party leaders have the capacity to change policies to pursue electoral advantage (Norris 1994:174).

describing such change as rational or irrational with respect to what may well be an arbitrarily defined notion of rational action. As such, it is simply not very useful to declare, for example, that the policies and strategy adopted by the Labour Party between 1979 and 1983 were "irrational".

This assumption of internal fragmentation, and the notion of competing rationalities, are, I believe, particularly valid with respect to the British Labour Party whose various constituent parts - the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), the Annual Party Conference, the National Executive Committee (NEC), the Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) and the Trades Unions - have traditionally competed for control of ideology, strategy and policy. The central thesis of this paper is that changes in the balance of power between these elements, and their competing visions of the party itself, generated an internal struggle which centred primarily on questions of organization. In turn, organizational change was critical for ideological/programmatic change - the former was necessary to facilitate and promote the latter: "Organisational transformation was no less significant than programmatic, not least because sweeping changes in ideology and policy could not have been accomplished in its absence" (Shaw 1994a:xi).³ In the process, the relationship between the party's constituent elements was reshaped. Given this, I will analyse both the organizational *causes* and *consequences* of the party's move first to the left and then back to the centre.

The Advance of the Left, 1979-1983

³In similar fashion, Koelble (1987:263) argues that "the struggle over party rules was essentially a struggle over larger issues. At stake were the policy direction of the party and the power relationships inside the organization".

As Harmel and Janda (1994:259) remind us, change within political parties does not "just happen". The sources of, and motivations for, organisational and programmatic change are complex. What, therefore, was the context for the goals and demands pursued by the Labour Left after the party's 1979 electoral defeat? Here, I outline the principal characteristics of the party's *ancien regime*, for it was the perceived failings of such a regime that the Left sought to remedy.

The Ancien Regime

Without question, since its founding at the turn of the century, the Labour Party, in both organisational and ideological terms, has been a pluralist political movement. Like any other political party, it has contained different and competing sites of power and influence. Traditionally, the policies, ideology and strategy of the party have evolved from, and been shaped by, the often uneasy interaction between its principal constituent parts - the PLP, the trades unions, the annual party conference, the NEC and the CLPs. Such "institutional pluralism" (Shaw 1988:184) has been paralleled by the presence of multiple ideological currents within the party's ranks. Indeed, given the competing and contradictory influences of (for example) Fabianism, Marxism and social democracy, scholars have long struggled to define satisfactorily what eventually came to be known as British "labourism". Such ideological ambiguities have led to longstanding debates on whether the Labour Party was, wished to be, or ever could be, a vehicle for the "socialist" transformation of British society.⁴

Nonetheless, despite this pluralist context, it *is* possible to speak of an organisational and ideological *ancien regime* which emerged and held sway in the

⁴Here, I wish only to emphasize the heterogeneity of the party's ideological roots. For a much fuller discussion and overview of this literature, see Richards (1989:11-26).

party until the late 1960s. The roots of this regime, and the process by which it emerged, are complex. Its principal characteristics, however, may be outlined as follows. In contrast to the more pluralist spirit which prevailed in the party's early years, the struggle in the 1920s against Communism, the disaster of the MacDonald government, the persistent rebellions of the Independent Labour Party, and the deep ideological divisions generated by the Spanish Civil War all led to a gradual tightening of managerial control and the centralisation of authority within the party. (Shaw 1988: 5, 24). By the 1930s, when the trades unions' traditions of disciplined collective action had become a potent force, the NEC displayed an increasing ability and willingness to impose its authority, to use discipline as an instrument of party management and to rigidly enforce party conference decisions at the expense, if necessary, of local constituency party autonomy. This represented the essential elements of what Shaw (1988:24-26) terms, in somewhat exaggerated fashion, a regime of "social-democratic centralism". This regime was sustained by a 'consensus', up until the late 1960s, between the party's three separate, but interlinked, elite actors: the trades unions, the PLP and the NEC (Shaw 1988: 152).

The Collapse of the Ancien Regime

Between 1979 and 1983 the system of control and organisation within the Labour Party which had prevailed for most of its history disintegrated. For the Left of the party, in terms of its longstanding constitutional and policy goals, it was to prove a period of unprecedented success (Thompson 1993:116). How is the Left's success in this period to be explained?

The immediate catalyst for change was the result of, and the circumstances surrounding, the 1979 General Election. Called in the wake of the so-called Winter of Discontent, which had signalled the collapse of the government's Social Contract

with the trades unions, Labour suffered its worst electoral defeat since 1931 (Crewe 1981:263). Its working class vote in particular had declined sharply. While there had been an overall swing in the national vote from Labour to Conservative of 5.2% (itself the biggest shift in the electorate's allegiance since 1945), the swing from Labour to Conservative had been 11% amongst skilled manual workers, 6.5% amongst semi- and unskilled manual workers, and 7% amongst trade unionists as a whole (Crewe 1981:263,280).

While post-mortems and recriminations are likely in any party following severe electoral defeat, they were particularly divisive and ferocious in Labour's case. The Right attributed the party's defeat to the events of the Winter of Discontent, where the behaviour of the trades unions in general, and those in the public sector in particular, had destroyed the party's popular appeal (Leonard 1981:112) and alienated working class voters themselves. As Denis Healey (1989:467), Labour's Chancellor of the Exchequer between 1974 and 1979, reflected: "we had lost the election mainly because the Winter of Discontent had destroyed the nation's confidence in the Labour Party's ability to work with the unions; it had also turned large numbers of working people against their own trade union representatives". After the 1979 election defeat, therefore, the Right was increasingly preoccupied with what it saw as a growing distance between the party's position, and the state of public opinion, on a whole range of issues.⁵ The party's close links with the trades unions (as extremely unpopular institutions) was only the most glaring example of a wider problem. As such, the Labour Right accepted, in large part, the notion of "class dealignment" propounded by many political scientists, among them Ivor Crewe who, by 1982, noted a "spectacular decline" among Labour's voters "in support for the collectivist trinity of public

⁵In a Fabian tract published just before the party's 1979 annual conference, it was pointed out that 86% of the electorate favoured a ban on secondary picketing, 75% favoured the sale of council houses, and 60% favoured the restoration of grammar schools. Labour opposed these policies. In contrast, only 24% favoured the abolition of fee-paying schools, only 20% favoured the abolition of the House of Lords, and only 38% were in favour of giving trade unionists seats on company boards. All these were party conference policies (Jenkins 1988:111).

ownership, trade union power and social welfare" (Crewe 1982:37; cited in Shaw 1994a:23). The *logic* of the Right's position was the need to adjust - to moderate - the party's electoral appeal and strategy accordingly.

For the Left, however, the reverse was true. The blame for the 1979 election defeat lay with what were invariably labelled the "anti-working class" policies of the Callaghan government. Specifically, "it was the Labour Government's incomes policy itself - rather than the strikes which flowed from it - that was responsible for the party's defeat" (Leonard 1981:112), and which had alienated the working class itself. In more general terms, however, the experience of the 1974-79 Wilson and Callaghan governments was the latest in a long line of betrayals, whereby an incoming Labour government had singularly failed to implement the socialist objectives with which it had been elected to power. For the Left, the Wilson and Callaghan governments had not come close to fulfilling the promise of the 1974 Manifesto to effect an irreversible shift of power and wealth in favour of the working class. As Shaw (1994a:24) describes, such a failure had, as far as the Left was concerned, created a problem of trust and credibility.⁶ What was needed, therefore, was the creation of a leadership that could be relied upon to promote and implement a radical programme. This involved nothing less than the destruction of the PLP's autonomy. And contrary to the Right, the Left was quite clear that a *radicalisation* of the party's platform and strategy was what was required. If class had appeared to decline in saliency, this was because Labour governments had invariably been hostile to working-class interests, had denounced strikers and clung to the myth of a national interest that transcended class: "the salience of class and class solidarity was not socially determined but was contingent upon the efforts of the Party to

⁶As Labour's General Secretary declared to the 1979 Party Conference, "You have got to ask yourself: why was there a Winter of Discontent? The reason was that, for good or ill, the Cabinet, supported by MPs, ignored the Congress and the conference decisions. It is as simple as that" (cited in Jenkins 1988:111).

define political issues in class terms, and to propagate socialist ideas" (Shaw 1994a:25).⁷

Yet if the 1979 election defeat provided the context and catalyst for the eruption of an internal party battle, it does not explain why it was the *Left's* version of events, and programme for change, that emerged victorious in the period between 1979 and 1983. Indeed, it is certainly not immediately apparent as to why it should have done so - in analytical and intellectual terms, there were fatal flaws in its interpretation of Labour's defeat and, as a consequence, in the proposals and strategy which flowed from such an interpretation. Instead, the sources of the Left's success lie in its "long march through the institutions of the Labour Movement" (Jenkins 1988:106).

The longer-term sources of the Left's success

As Minkin (1991:195) notes, the constitutional crisis which the Left provoked and which engulfed the Labour Party between 1979 and 1982 was complex, and is not explicable in terms of one source, one cause or one change in behaviour patterns. Instead, it was the product of a long-term transformation of the respective roles of, and relationships between, the key actors within the extra-parliamentary party - the NEC, the trades unions, and the CLPs.

⁷I do not maintain that the "class issue" was the only source of division between Left and Right; I merely use it as an example of how differing interpretations (in this case, of the causes of electoral defeat) could lead to very different proposals for policy and strategy.

Up until the late 1960s, the NEC had defined its managerial role to conform with the requirements and expectations of the party's parliamentary leadership, and had deployed its powers to contain or repel any challenge to that leadership (Shaw 1988: 153). By the late 1960s, however, that role had changed. Growing disillusionment with the Wilson government, a growing gap between the Conference and the wider party, Wilson's open disdain for critical Conference decisions, and widespread complaints within the party that the Cabinet took little or no account of NEC representations, all prompted a reappraisal of the proper role of what was, constitutionally, the party's senior body. As such, by the late 1960s, the NEC was operating increasingly as an independent pressure upon, rather than a buffer of, the parliamentary leadership of the party (Shaw 1988:183). This process of disaggregation between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary party was further reinforced by the 1967 Simpson Report on Party Organisation which recommended the upgrading of the political role of the party's general secretary. Indeed, Ron Hayward, elected General Secretary in 1972, emphasised explicitly his responsibility to promote party policy as laid down by the Conference and the NEC. This transformation of the NEC's role marked the end of the period when the party machine was fully at the disposal of the party leadership (Shaw 1988:199). The significance of this change in the role of the NEC is difficult to exaggerate. Whereas before, it had acted as a bulwark of the party leadership against parliamentary and extra-parliamentary dissent (for example, during the doctrinal divisions of the 1950s), by the late 1970s, the NEC was much more responsive to rank and file sentiment and adopted a much more benevolent attitude towards organised dissent, most notably in its refusal to invoke the party's constitutional restrictions on factionalism (Seyd 1987:94). By 1979, in the wake of the election defeat, the NEC placed itself in the forefront of a sweeping programme of constitutional reform (Shaw 1988:199).

However, the role of the NEC could itself not have been changed without changes within the trade unions and the constituency parties and active party

membership. The changing role of the unions was a subtle one, but no less important for that. As in the case of the NEC, the largest unions, under the control of the Right, had traditionally supported and protected the party's parliamentary leadership (Shaw 1988:200). However, the period between 1966 and 1972 witnessed an explosion of industrial militancy. At the national level, between 1967 and 1969, new Left-wing trade union leaders were elected to four of the six largest unions affiliated to the party. By 1970, the Right-wing trade union bloc vote was no longer dominant at the Party conference. Meanwhile, at the local level, trade unionists were encouraged to join the party to combat the rightward drift of the Wilson government and, later, the industrial relations legislation of the Heath government (Seyd 1987:47).

Such militancy retained a powerful presence within the union movement throughout the 1970s. In the wake of the 1979 General Election, many public sector unions - notably NUPE - continued to resent the incomes policy and public spending record of the defeated Labour Government. Indeed, a strong and influential minority contingent of Left-wing union leaders on the TUC General Council tended to view the 1974-79 government as a failure. As such, they were prepared to work closely with allies in the party to seek greater control over the parliamentary leadership (Minkin 1991:193-194, 196).

However, in his detailed analysis of the evolving party-union relationship, Minkin (1991) argues that it would be wrong to view the unions as the initiating source of the constitutional revolt of 1979-1982.⁸ For one thing, it remained the case - even in 1979 - that the majority of union leaders were on the Right, or Center-Right, of the party. Traditionally respectful of the autonomy of the PLP, right-wing union leaders were wary of demands for constitutional change within the party.

⁸See also Howell (1992-93).

Moreover, in contrast to the Left, many of them felt that in difficult circumstances, the 1974-79 government had done a good job; in particular, the achievements of the 1974-76 Wilson government were not to be underestimated, particularly in the light of the emerging harsh realities of the Thatcher government.

Such differences between the Left and Right "impeded any co-ordinated move in the unions to intervene collectively" (Minkin 1991:194). There was no agreed or consistent drive among union leaders to secure a new constitutional settlement after 1979, nor was there any agreement as to what such a settlement would entail. It is noteworthy that not a single resolution relating to constitutional reform was submitted by the unions to the party's 1979 Annual Conference (Minkin 1991:196). The drive and initiative for change came from elsewhere. *Nonetheless*, by adopting an essentially passive stance in the struggle which engulfed the party from 1979 afterwards, the unions still played a critical role in the process of change: "in the 1950s, most of the biggest unions acted as the leadership's Praetorian Guard; a quarter of a century later, the majority were, if not accomplices in the insurgency, totally unwilling to suppress it at the leadership's behest" (Shaw 1988:200).

These changes in the respective roles of the NEC and the unions ensured that by the end of the 1970s, "the integrated control system of the earlier period had been replaced by a pattern of institutionalised conflict between the Parliamentary leadership and a National Executive displaying an unprecedented responsiveness to rank and file sentiment, with the loyalties of a divided trade union movement almost equally split between the two (Shaw 1988:200).

To a large extent, however, the changing roles and behaviour of the NEC and the unions were a reflection of, and a response to, critical long-term changes in the attitudes and demands of the CLPs and active party membership. This constituted the third, and most important, source of the Left's success in the 1979-83 period.

Patrick Seyd (1987:39-40) has noted how during the 1950s and 1960s, the party's activists were widely held to be an uninfluential element in the power structure of the party, and irrelevant to its electoral appeal. As such, the party leader was given central prominence while the parliamentary leadership devalued the political importance of a mass party and expressed little concern for the health and state of the party's grass roots.. Not surprisingly, individual party membership declined - from a peak in 1951 of approximately 800,000 to between 250,000 and 300,000 in 1979 (Jenkins 1988:108). The decline under the 1964-70 Wilson government was especially sharp, reflecting an exodus of traditional working-class members (Seyd 1987: 43). By 1979, it was estimated that fewer than half the CLPs had more than 500 members and only 13% had 1,000 or more (Jenkins 1988:108-109). Such a decline, however, had important implications for the political and class complexion of the party's active membership. For while it has proved difficult to characterise, politically, the party's membership of the 1950s and 1960s, there was a notable growth in support for the Labour Left within the CLPs in the 1970s (Seyd 1987:38). Moreover, the party's membership became increasingly middle-class and radical. Thus while the industrial strife of the late 1960s and early 1970s certainly led to an influx of blue-collar working-class militants into the party's ranks (Seyd 1987:44,47,74), archetypal party activists in the 1970s were young, educated, public-service professionals (Seyd 1987:44; Shaw 1994a:20; Shaw 1988:298; Jenkins 1988:109-110).⁹

This recomposition of the active membership was accompanied, as Shaw (1994a:20) puts it, by an important change in the party's "cultural landscape". The new cohort of activists had not been exposed to the types of socialising experiences that had inculcated traditional labourist norms; it was far more assertive and rebellious and much more impatient of rules and those who sought to enforce them. Moreover, new activists tended to regard Labour's history in terms of a series of

⁹Derisively dismissed by Peter Jenkins as the "lumpen-polytechnic" (*The Guardian*, 4 October 1980).

betrayals. Their participatory ethos, which involved no automatic deference to the party establishment, demanded not only greater involvement in the policy process but also radical changes in the whole structure of authority within the party (see also Shaw 1988:298; Jenkins 1988:109-110; Seyd 1987:53). Indeed, evidence from party activists submitted to an internal party commission in 1979 revealed a very strong majority in favour of constitutional reform (Thompson 1993:115-116).

However, a rank and file challenge to the traditional pattern of leadership and authority within the party could not have prevailed without the effective mobilisation of discontent (Shaw 1994a:21). As such, the emergence in the 1970s of an array of pressure groups within the party campaigning for structural and constitutional change was a critical development. The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD), founded in 1973, had three interlinked general goals: to weaken the Right's hold on the party, to redistribute power from the parliamentary establishment to the rank and file membership, and to end the effective independence of the PLP upon which the Right's control of the party was seen ultimately to rest (Shaw 1994a:16; see also Seyd 1987:113). It was joined, during the decade, by a range of other groupings all of which coalesced (temporarily) in 1980 to form the Rank and File Mobilising Committee (RFMC) (Shaw 1994a:21-22; Seyd 1987:113,116). This front¹⁰ was unified by three principal - and longstanding - specific objectives, all of them internal to the Labour Party and all of a constitutional nature: the mandatory re-selection of Labour MPs, the right to frame the party's manifesto to lie solely with the NEC, and the expansion of the franchise

¹⁰The RFMC included the CLPD itself, the Labour Coordinating Committee, the Socialist Campaign for a Labour Victory, Independent Labour Publications, the Institute for Workers' Control, the National Organisation of Labour Students, and the Clause 4 Group. It was later joined by Militant, the Labour Party Young Socialists, Labour Action for Peace, and the Socialist Education Association (Thompson 1993:116). Any account of the specific activities of these groupings is well beyond the scope of this paper; for sustained analysis of Left-wing pressure groups within the Labour Party in the 1970s and early 1980s, see in particular Seyd 1987 and Kogan and Kogan 1982.

for selecting the party's Leader and Deputy Leader to the party at large through the construction of an electoral college (Thompson 1993:116; Shaw 1994a:16).¹¹

In propounding such goals and objectives, it is not clear how representative such groups were of the sentiments of the party's wider membership. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the Right-wing of the party - in the predictable and time-honoured fashion of Sydney Webb¹² - depicted groups such as the CLPD and RFMC as sinister, undemocratic and unrepresentative of anyone but themselves. On the other hand, Seyd (1987:127) argues that such demands enjoyed relatively widespread support throughout the party - on the Left and even to a certain extent on the Right, both amongst the CLPs and trade union branches. Certainly it is noteworthy that the number of individual CLPs affiliated to the CLPD, for example, rose from 4 in 1974 to 107 in 1980 (Kogan and Kogan 1982:42).¹³

¹¹The party leader had always been elected exclusively by members of the PLP.

¹²I refer to Webb's memorable description of party activists as "frequently unrepresentative groups of nonentities dominated by fanatics, cranks and extremists" (cited by Seyd 1987:202n1).

¹³In this context, the role of "entryism" in pushing CLPs to the left during the 1970s and 1980s has, I believe, been exaggerated. The Militant Tendency, as the archetypal entryist organisation, certainly acquired a presence in CLPs in several provincial cities such as Coventry and Swansea, and gained national prominence as the dominant force in the government and politics of Liverpool in the 1980s.

Moreover, several Labour MPs elected in the course of the 1980s were members of, or closely associated with, Militant.

Yet it seems that the *general* advance of the Left in the late 1970s and early 1980s can only be explained by the widespread mood of discontent that undoubtedly existed amongst all party activists. In certain contexts, this did allow entryist organisations to "take over" local party branches. Liverpool, however, remains the only example of an entire city government falling into the hands of such organisations, and specifically local conditions, such as notoriously corrupt traditions in city government, and appalling levels of social and economic deprivation, played their part.

What *is* for sure is that during this period, the Labour Party Left *organised* in an exceptionally efficient manner. First, the myriad array of Left groupings within the party demonstrated a rare ability to cast aside sectarian differences and unite in the pursuit of the clearly defined and limited number of constitutional objectives referred to above: "this broad coalition was held together not by any common ideology (which did not exist) but by agreement over the pursuit of a limited number of clearly-specified goals" (Shaw 1994a: 22). Second, in the course of the 1970s, the Left transformed its "operational behaviour" (Seyd 1987:97) - groups such as the CLPD were not bound by the postwar Labour Left's conventional parliamentary-centred methods,¹⁴ but were instead dedicated to, and skilled in, winning votes in local constituency parties and trade union branches. By the end of the 1970s, the traditional dominance of *parliamentarians* within the Labour Left had been undermined, as the broad-based RFMC mounted an extensive campaign for constitutional reform within all sectors of the party (Seyd 1987:94,97,116). Third, Tony Benn emerged during the 1970s, but especially from 1979 onwards, as an eloquent and charismatic champion for constitutional and policy change within the party. In turn, consistent support from party activists gave Benn an influential base within the NEC, first as Party Chairman (1971-72) and then as Chairman of the NEC's immensely powerful Home Policy Committee (1974-81) (Seyd 1987:97,99).¹⁵

¹⁴For most of the postwar period, the Labour Left was, for all intents and purposes, confined to an element within the PLP (organised, from 1964 onwards, in the form of the Tribune Group [Shaw 1994b:165]). For example, during the 1950s, Bevan's assaults on the revisionist wing of the party took place within the confines of the PLP, with all the limitations that this entailed.

¹⁵Interestingly, Benn's arch-foe Denis Healey argues that the CLPD, for all its skill and dedication, would not have succeeded without Benn as a rallying point (Healey 1989:470).

The effects of the Left's success, 1979-83

Following the party's 1979 election defeat, the Left succeeded, to a very large degree, in achieving most of its constitutional and policy goals. Indeed, by January 1981, the Left had secured major structural changes within the party (Seyd 1987:127). Though the attempt to assign to the NEC sole responsibility for formulation of the party manifesto narrowly failed, the Left succeeded, in the course of the party's 1979 and 1980 annual conferences, with the policy of mandatory reselection of MPs, and the establishment of an electoral college for the election of the party's leader and deputy leader. The details of the latter, whereby the unions gained 40% of the vote, the CLPs 30% and the PLP 30%, emerged from a chaotic and acrimonious special party conference held in January 1981.¹⁶ As a mechanism, the electoral college was soon put to the test when, directly after the special conference, Tony Benn, as the candidate of the Left, initiated a contest for the party's Deputy Leadership, by pitting himself against the incumbent Denis Healey.¹⁷ Though the powers of the Deputy Leader were (and remain) negligible, the contest and its extremely narrow outcome were significant for revealing the long-term benefits the Left had gained from taking its campaign to the extra-parliamentary party. In particular, the Left's decision to concentrate on the industrial wing of the Labour movement paid dividends. Timed, in fact, to intervene in the series of union conferences held during the Spring and Summer of 1981, the

¹⁶It was the outcome of this conference that provided the catalyst for the subsequent formation of the SDP, thereby further contributing to the demoralisation and disarray of the Right-wing of the party.

¹⁷The viability of contesting the leadership of the party had been undermined by James Callaghan's calculated decision to resign the party leadership prior to the January 1981 special conference, thereby ensuring that the PLP would at least have one last chance to elect the party leader by itself. To the general incredulity of the nation, in a ballot of the PLP on 10 November 1980, Michael Foot beat Denis Healey by 139 votes to 129.

Benn campaign sought to politicise the unions, if necessary by appealing over the heads of union leaders (much to their annoyance) to activists and branch members. In so doing, it transgressed the "rules" and protocol of the traditional union-Party relationship (Minkin 1991:336), but nonetheless won itself 40% of the union vote in the electoral college (Jenkins 1988:127). With more than 80% of the CLP vote going to Benn, it was only Healey's strength within the ranks of the PLP that saved him from defeat. Even then, his extremely narrow overall margin of victory -(50.426% to 49.574% [Kogan and Kogan 1982:117]) - testified to the powerful impact of the Left's insurgency.

Though in retrospect, Benn's near-triumph was to prove the high point of the Left's advance within the party, the legacy and effects of this advance were longer-term and more profound. For one thing, the Left's effective control of the NEC, and its advance within the ranks of the CLPs and (to a lesser extent) the unions, led to sweeping changes in party policy at the annual conferences of 1979, 1980 and 1981, the most prominent of which were the adoption of unilateral nuclear disarmament, withdrawal from the European Community without a referendum, and a major extension of public ownership and state intervention in the economy.

However, such sweeping policy changes reflected a profound shift in the structure of power within the party. Herein lies, of course, the significance of the constitutional changes which the Left had been able to attain, for these changes transformed the relationship between the parliamentary and extra-parliamentary party. In terms of the party's internal structure of power, the traditional dominance of the PLP had been undermined significantly. As such, the traditional capacity of the parliamentary leadership, and the party leader, to secure compliance by appeals to loyalty and solidarity disintegrated (Shaw 1994a:21). Whether, though, the diminished power and influence of the leadership and PLP actually reflected a transfer of power *to* the extra-parliamentary party is another matter. It is clear that the electoral college had stripped the PLP of its exclusive right to choose the party

leader¹⁸, while mandatory reselection had enhanced the influence and constitutional rights of CLPs. Incumbent MPs were now far more dependent on the goodwill of local activists than before; as such, CLPs had acquired a formidable countervailing power to the sanctions and incentives available to the party leadership (Shaw 1994a:22).

¹⁸In expanding the electoral base of the party leader, the electoral college was critical to the political fortunes of Neil Kinnock, for example. The support he gained from the unions and CLPs in October 1983 in his successful bid for the party leadership more than compensated for his weaker standing within the PLP.

Yet the overall effect of constitutional change was ambiguous. Certainly, by 1983, the power of both the party leader and the parliamentary elite had been drained to an unprecedented degree (Shaw 1994a:22); under Michael Foot in particular, the "authority of the leadership fell to its nadir"(Shaw 1994a:18).¹⁹ But no new centralised source of authority emerged in its place. As such, it would be more accurate to refer to the *paralysis*, rather than the *transfer*, of power within the party (Shaw 1994a:22-23). With the Left and Right locked in almost continual conflict over issues of policy and party constitution - and this, moreover, in the context of a much more fluid and fragmented organisational framework - the party lacked the ability to coordinate the efforts of its members as effectively as possible, let alone the flexibility with which to respond to any possible external challenges that might arise (Shaw 1994a:22-23).

¹⁹Much has been made of the disastrous nature of Foot's leadership. For particularly devastating accounts of his general unsuitability for the task, see Jenkins (1988:120-121) and King (1985:21-22).

Nonetheless, given the acute divisions within the party over constitutional and policy issues, and the parliamentary leadership's loss of power, it is difficult to see how any leader, in such circumstances, could have united the party. Moreover, from the point of view of the internal situation of the party upon which I am focusing, the decision of the PLP to elect Foot over Healey as leader was not as bizarre as it undoubtedly seemed to the wider electorate (who, according to polls, overwhelmingly favoured Healey). (Among Labour voters, 38% favoured Healey, 17% Tony Benn, 8% Shirley Williams, 7% Foot and 2% Peter Shore [Jenkins 1988:119]). It should be remembered that while Foot was identified with the party's Left, he had served as a loyal and effective member of the 1974-79 Labour cabinet. As such, many MPs undoubtedly viewed him as the candidate more likely to unite the party's conflicting wings than the abrasive (though brilliant) Healey.

It was in such a condition that the party fought what proved to be a catastrophic electoral campaign in 1983. Given the drastically altered constitutional landscape upon which I have concentrated, the policy commitments adopted at successive party conferences between 1979 and 1982 were included, by and large, in the party's manifesto for the 1983 General Election. The Left, it is true, did not get its way entirely with respect to the party's economic policy commitments²⁰, and fatal ambiguities remained in the party's position on defence²¹. Nonetheless, the manifesto was without doubt the most Left-wing that the party had ever presented to the British electorate, promising widespread state ownership of industry, economic planning, import controls, the restoration of trade union rights, unilateral nuclear disarmament, the abandonment of the Polaris missile system and withdrawal from the European Community²² (Norris 1994:173). The *manner* in which it was presented also reflected the upheavals of the previous three years - in organisational terms, Labour's campaign, it was widely agreed, was the most inept of any British political party in modern times.²³ In the event, Labour's platform was rejected decisively.

Change in the Labour Party, 1983-1997

²⁰Shaw (1994a:13) argues that Foot as party leader, and Peter Shore, as Shadow Chancellor, managed to restrain the more radical measures demanded by the "Bennite Left".

²¹Such ambiguities reflected continuing dissent from senior members of the Shadow Cabinet and PLP who rejected the switch to unilateralism. As such, the party's unilateralist stance may have been the product of the Left's "long march" through the institutions of the Labour movement; this in and of itself, however, could not negate the influence and impact of individual, prominent politicians within the party. The denunciation of the party's defence policy, in the midst of the 1983 election campaign, by James Callaghan, as ex-party leader and ex-Prime Minister, is a case in point.

²²And accordingly dubbed by Gerald Kaufman as "the longest suicide note in history" (cited by Healey 1989:500).

²³The general shambles was epitomised by the startling declaration of Labour's General Secretary on 26 May 1983 that the party's campaign committee had just expressed its unanimous support for Foot's leadership (Kellner 1985:74-75).

The period following the 1983 election saw dramatic changes inside the Labour Party, in terms of organization, policy and ideology. Following the election defeat, the party leadership's principal strategy was to restore its own authority and develop a more moderate and unified party. In this, it succeeded. Between 1983 and 1987, the party moved, cautiously and gradually, towards the middle ground, and moderated and modified most Left-wing pledges for its 1987 election manifesto. Even then, however, its economic and defence policies remained ambiguous. Following its 1987 election defeat, the leadership moved swiftly against party factionalism, developed new mechanisms for formulating and debating policy - away from the public glare of the annual conference - and succeeded in completely marginalising the Left. The Policy Review initiated in September 1987 accepted the leading role of the market, dropped the commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament and enthusiastically embraced the European Community (Norris 1992: 173-174). By 1992, only 29.2% of the electorate regarded the party as extreme (compared to 50.2% in 1983) (Heath and Jowell 1994:202).

Yet it is crucial to emphasise that such change was not just programmatic, but organisational (Shaw 1994a:x). By 1990, Kinnock, as leader, had achieved a level of control over the party unmatched by any predecessor. The organisational changes which he had promoted and achieved had culminated in a tighter disciplinary regime, a more centralised decision-making structure and a restoration of control by the parliamentary elite (Shaw 1994a:xi-xii). Such a trend has undoubtedly been accentuated under the leadership of Blair. As such, the contrast between the internal life of the party in 1997 with that of 1983 could not be greater. Here, I analyse the context for, and sources and effects of, such dramatic organisational change.

The Context for Change

The immediate catalyst for change was the severity of Labour's election defeat in 1983. If the 1979 result - itself the party's worst showing in fifty years - had been a disaster, the 1983 result was little short of catastrophic. With only 27.6% of the vote, the party had come close to being relegated to third place by the Liberal/SDP Alliance (which had gained 25.4% of the vote). Labour had lost 37% of its 1979 electoral support, equivalent to more than *three million* votes (Ranney 1985:199; Penniman 1981:335). This represented the sharpest electoral collapse of any major British party since 1945. Its share of the vote was its lowest since 1918 and measured in terms of the average vote per candidate, its worst result since being founded in 1900. It lost 119 deposits and ceased to be a political force in the south of England (excluding London) where it won only three seats and came third in 150 constituencies (Crewe 1985:156).

Moreover, while the party lost support across the social spectrum (Crewe 1985:172), the continuing erosion of its working-class electoral foundations was spectacular. Certainly, the party retained its strength in the traditional industrial heartlands, but overall, support for the party in 1983, when compared to 1979, had declined amongst skilled manual workers (by 10%), semi- and unskilled manual workers (by 12%), trade unionists (by 16%) and the unemployed (by 5%) (Crewe 1985:171). As such, "the Labour vote remained largely working class, but the working class ceased to be largely Labour" (Crewe 1985:173). Indeed, the party's share of the working class vote had declined from 64% in 1974 to 49% in 1983 (Shaw 1994a:27), thereby testifying to a growing disjuncture between the party itself and its traditional base of support.

The severity of the defeat was a function of electorally unpopular policies, and Labour's image, in the 1979-83 period, as a divided, extreme and weakly-led party. In terms of party policy, Labour's stance on the economy and defence proved extremely costly. Despite the fact that unemployment was ranked by the electorate

as the most important issue, Labour's policies of state intervention damaged its credibility, even though it was the "preferred" party on the issue by a margin of 16%²⁴. On the issue ranked second, that of defence,²⁵ the Conservatives led Labour by 54%. Indeed, election polls revealed large majorities against Labour's policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament, and small majorities supporting the government's decision to install NATO cruise missiles and purchase the Trident missile system, to which Labour was unambiguously opposed. Never can a major political party have campaigned on a policy so overwhelmingly at odds with entrenched popular opinion. And, with the exception of the national health service, the same was true, to varying degrees, on all other issues on which the party fought the election (Crewe 1985:176-181).

In addition, there is no question that the internal wrangling during the 1980-83 period had severely damaged the popular image of the party. In October 1980, a Gallup poll revealed that 83% of respondents thought that Labour was disunited, while in February 1981, 69% felt that the party was "moving too much to the left". At the same time, only 24% of respondents felt Foot was proving a good party leader (King 1985:22-23). The subsequent internal pandemonium only worsened

²⁴ A MORI poll conducted during the election revealed that a majority expected unemployment to number, within two years, under the Conservatives, 3.5 million and under Labour 3.0 million. Labour's proposal to cut unemployment to 1.0 million within the lifetime of a Labour Government was not seen as credible; only 40% of voters expected unemployment to even fall under Labour (Crewe 1985:179).

²⁵ Without doubt, defence was ranked so highly precisely because of the policy that Labour had adopted. In 1979, only 2% of voters reported that the defence issue had influenced their vote, compared to 38% in 1983 (Crewe 1985:177-178).

matters. By election day 1983, only 13% of voters selected Foot as the best potential Prime Minister (compared to 46% for Thatcher), while 33% of those deserting the party referred to "extremism", and 25% to "disunity", as one of their reasons for doing so (Crewe 1985:181, 183).

Perhaps the most powerful testimony to the severe disjuncture between, on the one hand, the party itself, and on the other, the electorate in general and its traditional constituency in particular, was the precipitous drop in the proportion of voters identifying with the party. Defining party identification as the "voters' longstanding emotional attachments to their parties (...) acting as a sort of adhesive that binds voters long term to parties", Heath, Jowell and Curtice (1994:287) point to a devastating development. While the proportion of the electorate identifying with the party had declined slowly between 1964 and 1979 from 42% to 38%, it had dropped between 1979 and 1983 from 38% to 31%. As such, "it is clear that Labour's political difficulties in the late 1970s and early 1980s .. not only cost the party votes in the short term but also broke the long-term bond for many voters that linked them to the party" (287-288).²⁶

²⁶ As such, Jenkins argues that "to capture the party and to lose the country was the entire nature of the Bennite phenomenon" (1988:126).

It was in these dire circumstances that Foot resigned the party leadership in the immediate aftermath of the election, thereby paving the way for the use of the electoral college for the first time to select his successor. With an apparently new desire for unity within the party reinforced by the 1983 election result (Ellison 1994:201), the so-called "dream ticket" of Kinnock, identified with the Left²⁷, and Hattersley, identified with the Centre-Right, cruised to a comfortable and easy victory for the positions of leader and deputy leader respectively at Labour's 1983 annual conference. The significance of Kinnock's victory should not be underestimated. As the first party leader chosen by the electoral college, he could claim a far stronger democratic mandate than any of his predecessors (Shaw 1988:300). With 72% of the trades unions' votes, more than 90% of the constituency votes and nearly half of the PLP's votes, he was "effectively the choice of the whole Labour Movement" (Jenkins 1988:218). As such, the electoral college went a long way to restoring, in remarkably rapid fashion, the authority of the party leader.²⁸

²⁷Benn had lost his parliamentary seat in the 1983 defeat and was thereby ineligible to contest the leadership.

²⁸In so doing, the electoral college - from the perspective of the Left - proved to be a long sought after constitutional reform that had unintended consequences. For while it certainly broadened the mandate of the party leader, its cumbersome and relatively complicated nature did nothing to increase either the responsiveness or accountability of the leader to the rank and file membership. In fact, as Jenkins (1988:347) suggests, it may have had precisely the opposite effect: "the Electoral College was a wonderfully immobilising device which made it virtually impossible to remove a leader".

For accounts of the 1983, 1992 and 1994 elections for the party leadership, see, respectively, Drucker (1984), Alderman and Carter (1993) and Alderman and Carter (1995).

The resurrection of the party leader's authority was, however, a function of other developments. Though the disastrous 1983 election result provided the catalyst for altering, once again, the structure of authority and power in the party, changes in the roles of, and relationships between, the party's key actors had been underway for some time prior to the election itself. These changes served, above all else, to undermine and divide the Left - its power, by the time of Kinnock's election as party leader was, in fact, on the wane (Jenkins 1988:223).

The Left itself was, of course, discredited by the 1983 election result - it was largely on its programme, after all, that the election had been fought and lost (Seyd 1987:159). The severity of the defeat, though, only served to confirm and solidify divisions within the Left that had been in place since 1981 (Seyd 1987:136). I have already noted that the unity of the Left in pursuit of its constitutional goals was of a transitory nature; once these goals were achieved between 1979 and 1981, the various Left groupings to which I have alluded went their separate ways (Jenkins 1988:223). Indeed, differences within the Left emerged in the course of Benn's challenge for the Deputy Leadership in 1981. The abstention of some Tribune Group MPs (including Kinnock) was sufficient to deny Benn victory. This "irreversible and bitter" split (Jenkins 1988:127) was institutionalised with the formation of the Campaign Group of MPs in December 1982 (Shaw 1994a:38). As such, the transitory unity of the Left was unable to survive Benn's defeat (Thompson 1993:123). What came to be known as the "soft" Left, centred around the Tribune Group, and the "hard" Left, centred around the Campaign Group, differed increasingly on a wide range of policy, organisational and strategic matters (Shaw 1994a:38; Seyd 1987:136).

In the longer term, these differences crystallised into a permanent realignment of the Left within the Labour Party. For its part, the "soft" Left rallied around, first, the beleaguered Michael Foot and later the newly-elected Kinnock. This led, slowly and tentatively, to an emerging coalition between the "soft" Left

itself and the Right around the party leader²⁹ (Shaw 1994a:39). Indeed, the Tribune Group - historically the scourge of the party's parliamentary leadership - had become, by 1987, the party establishment itself (Jenkins 1988:347). In contrast, and conversely, the "hard" Left, in the form of the Campaign Group, fought an increasingly unsuccessful rearguard action to preserve the constitutional and policy gains of the 1979-1982 period. By the late 1980s, it was completely marginalised within the party, as evidenced by Benn's abysmal showing in his challenge for the party leadership in 1988.³⁰ Unlike his bid for the deputy leadership in 1981 which followed, as we have seen, two years of extensive constitutional campaigning and the construction of valuable alliances within all sectors of the party, the 1988 campaign was doomed from the start. Obtaining only 11.37% of the Electoral College vote, Benn suffered an overwhelming defeat (Minkin 1991:351,356).³¹

The demise of the Left, however, was not simply a function of internal schism. The unions and the CLPs also played important roles. The unions, as I have

²⁹The "soft" Left's motivations for this realignment were complicated and drawn out, especially as Kinnock increasingly identified with the Right-wing of the party. It seems that the decision to rally around him nonetheless was, as Shaw notes, partly to provide him with a centre-Left power base with which to halt his drift to the Right, partly because of the conviction that party unity was electorally essential, partly because of hostility to erstwhile allies on the "hard" Left, and partly because of a shift to the Right on the part of those concerned (Shaw 1994a:40-41).

³⁰Benn returned to parliament via a by-election victory in March 1984.

³¹In his diaries, Benn reveals his frustration at the growing futility of the contest, and labelled the result "appalling" (Benn 1992:550).

already noted, were, at best, reluctant partners in the Left's project of organisational and constitutional reform. Moreover, at the time of the divisive deputy leadership contest between Benn and Healey in 1981, Right-wing unions had resented the attempts of the Benn campaign to mobilise support within their ranks (Shaw 1994a:37). In addition, unions in general were inevitably, and understandably, far more concerned with returning the Labour Party to power and viewed what seemed to be endless and acrimonious constitutional wrangles as a distraction. Particularly in the wake of the 1983 election, the majority of trade unionists opposed any further internal party reforms and blamed the Left for the defeat (Minkin 1991:342). Thus the unions simply did not see the 1988 leadership contest, for example, as a priority, and proved far more resistant to the Benn campaign's attempts to mobilise their rank and file membership (Minkin 1991:351).

It also appears that a parallel change took place in the attitudes and activities of the active party membership within the CLPs. Benn's vote in the 1981 contest for the deputy leadership of the party, when he gained the support of more than 80% of CLPs, had confirmed the strength of Left-wing opinion amongst party activists (Seyd 1987:160). By the late 1980s, however, support for the Left amongst party activists had weakened considerably. As ever, in comparison with party members in general (and even more so with Labour voters), a disproportionate number of party *activists* placed themselves on the Left. However, on the basis of an extensive survey of party members and activists conducted in 1988 and 1989, Seyd and Whiteley (1992a:164; 1992b:34-35) show that amongst the "very active", the number supporting the party's move to the political centre outnumbered those opposing it by a margin of three to two. As such, they conclude that - at least by the 1980s - the majority of party activists were not unrepresentative Left-wing extremists (1992a:216,218). Certainly, it is noteworthy that in his bid for the party leadership in 1988, Benn (1992:550) managed to win the support of only 111 CLPs.³²

³²Any conclusions, however, on the *changing* attitudes of the party activist are necessarily

tentative. Seyd and Whiteley's (1992a) study is certainly a commendable - and long overdue - analysis of the contemporary Labour Party's membership. However, it is essentially a "snapshot" of opinions and attitudes in 1988 and 1989; it does not trace their evolution over a sustained period of time. Thus on the basis of their survey, it is not possible to determine whether the marginalisation of radical, or "hard Left", party activists by the late 1980s is due to a change in their own attitudes, or to an influx of more moderate members and activists in the course of the 1980s.

In turn, the Left's internal schism, and changing attitudes on the part of the trades unions and active party membership were, together, to have an important effect on the role and functioning of the party's NEC. Prior to the 1983 election, the NEC was already acquiring a more right-wing complexion. Union resentment at the 1981 Benn campaign cost the Left dearly in elections to the NEC at the party's 1981 and 1982 annual party conferences. Most notably, the unions moved swiftly to remove Benn from his chairmanship of the NEC's Home Policy Committee, and Eric Heffer from the chairmanship of its Organisation Committee³³ (Shaw 1994a:37). By 1985, the unity and cohesion of the Left on the NEC had evaporated (Seyd 1987:169), and by 1989 (that is, in the wake of Benn's 1988 campaign), its representation on the NEC had been further diminished (Minkin 1991:356). In addition, however, the NEC's gradual shift back to the right was accompanied by a reassertion - tentative, at first - of its traditional disciplinary role. Such developments, as Shaw notes, facilitated the renewal of its traditional partnership with the party's parliamentary leadership and hence the "reconstitution of the managerial centre" within the party. As such, the short-lived "managerial regime" of the Left was brought to a close (Shaw 1988:298).³⁴

³³The formidable right-winger John Golding, Labour MP, Political Officer of the Post Office Workers' Union and the quintessential Labour Party "fixer", organised the unions' manoeuvrings. The Left immediately dubbed him the party's "Witchfinder-General".

³⁴In fact, as early as December 1981, the NEC decided to establish an enquiry into the presence of the Militant Tendency within the party (Seyd 1987:161). Though this achieved very little, the decision itself provoked a furore and further damaging divisions within the Left and set a precedent for a renewed, and much more effective, offensive at the 1986 annual party conference, when a

The Consequences of Change

The changes described above were to have profound consequences, after the 1983 election, for the structure of power and authority within the party. Chief among these was the eventual acquisition by the party leader of an unprecedented degree of authority. In many ways, as I have noted, conditions inside the party in 1983 were favourable for the reassertion of leadership power. In particular, the division and realignment of the Left afforded the leadership, for the first time since the 1960s, a firm basis of support in all key Party arenas (Shaw 1994a:39). Moreover, the electoral college in and of itself had given an unprecedented mandate to a leader who, in the person of Kinnock, had a distinct view of the party's future purpose, electoral strategy and internal structural arrangements: to re-establish the authority of the leader, restore the supremacy of the PLP over policy, re-establish control over the NEC, marginalise the Left, and rid the party of the Militant Tendency (Seyd 1987:167; Shaw 1994a:30).

National Constitutional Conference (inheriting many of the NEC's disciplinary powers) was established, and the expulsion of several prominent Liverpool members of Militant was overwhelmingly confirmed (Shaw 1988:301).

Such a process was, of course, a gradual one. The power, influence and morale of the radical Left did not dissolve overnight and indeed was reanimated by the miners' year-long strike in 1984-85, and the continuing bitter confrontations between the Thatcher government and several Labour-controlled authorities throughout the country, most notably over the government's rate-capping policy (and later, the poll tax). As such, political militancy which was ostensibly *external* to the party constrained the leader's *internal* room for manoeuvre. For example, the 1984 annual party conference (Kinnock's first full conference as leader) was, for all intents and purposes, dominated by the miners' strike - then at its height - and the tactics being pursued by the miners' leadership.³⁵ Nonetheless, Kinnock proved particularly adept at capitalizing, swiftly, on the disastrous outcomes of these various confrontations. In this regard, the 1985 annual party conference was a landmark for the party leader, and a turning point in Labour's transformation into a more tightly controlled party (Shaw 1994a:35-36). Kinnock used the crushing defeat of the miners to attack the still-powerful figure of the NUM President in particular, and industrial militancy in general. Meanwhile, a series of appalling tactical blunders by Liverpool City Council gave him a long-awaited opportunity to attack the Militant Tendency and to launch a sustained organisational drive to oust it from the party. From this point on, a demoralised radical Labour Left was continually on the retreat.³⁶

³⁵For a discussion of the constraints imposed by the miners' strike on the party leadership, see Richards (1996:140-144).

³⁶In terms of the contemporary history of the radical Left in Britain, several commentators

pinpoint 1985 as a watershed year. Thompson (1993:139), for example, notes that the "leftward momentum that had existed since the late 1970s, founded on a real if ambiguous degree of mass mobilisation within the labour movement and at the grassroots of the Labour Party, was now wholly dissipated. Inside the Labour Party the left conclusively lost the initiative..". See also Heffernan and Marqusee (1992).

In terms of the party's internal structure of authority, such developments during the first phase of Kinnock's leadership heralded, initially, a return to what we may term the historical norm - that is to say, by 1985-86, a "pattern of concurrent pro-leadership majorities in all key Party institutions was restored" (Shaw 1994a:41). As such, Kinnock was able to oversee the transfer of responsibilities from the NEC to the Shadow Cabinet. The influence over policy formation of the NEC, and especially of its Home Policy³⁷ and International Committees, declined sharply. As early as December 1983, the NEC was effectively stripped of its domination over the policy-making process through the creation of a series of Joint Policy Committees comprising six NEC members, six Shadow Cabinet members and selected trade unionists (Lent 1997:11). The NEC therefore reverted to being a buttress of, rather than a site of opposition to, the party's parliamentary leadership.³⁸ Yet matters went further, for by 1986, not only had responsibility for policy innovation passed largely into the hands of the leader and a small group of senior Shadow Cabinet colleagues, but the Leader's Office itself had been transformed into the major site of power within the party (Shaw 1994a:41,110). By the time of the 1987 election - and in complete contrast to the

³⁷The Home Policy Committee, under the chairmanship of Benn between 1974 and 1982, had been a constant thorn in the side of the party's parliamentary leadership.

³⁸This represented a remarkable reversal of the situation which had prevailed between 1979 and 1983, when the parliamentary front bench had been effectively sidelined, and development of policy lay largely in the hands of the NEC - that is, affording a major say to politicians whose base of power lay in the extra-parliamentary party (Shaw 1994a:109).

For the Left, the demise of the NEC represented an "erosion of accountability to conference" (Lent 1997:11).

1983 campaign - Kinnock dominated the procedure by which the party's manifesto was produced, as well as its actual contents (Minkin 1991:460).

However, it was not until the aftermath of the 1987 election that the longer-term effects of increased leadership power became apparent. Indeed, as with previous campaigns, the election proved to be a catalyst for further change. The widely acclaimed efficiency and professionalism of Labour's campaign undoubtedly strengthened Kinnock's position (Jenkins 1988:347), for the party had achieved its primary goal of clearly reestablishing itself as the principal opposition party - Labour's lead over the Liberal/SDP Alliance had increased from 2.2% in 1983 to 8.2% in 1987. Nonetheless, with an increase in its share of the vote of only 3.2%, the party's electoral recovery had been modest, and ambiguities in key policy areas had persisted.³⁹ It was in such circumstances, in September 1987, that the party leadership launched the Policy Review. As part of a long-term attempt by the leadership to change the party (Smith 1992:17), the Policy Review represented a radical and significant overhaul of both party policy and doctrine. In the period between the 1987 and 1992 elections, the commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament was dropped, the virtues of the market place and the private sector acknowledged, and the role assigned to the state in economic planning reduced to an absolute minimum.⁴⁰ Substantively, therefore, the Policy Review entailed the reevaluation of a range of party positions: from its general attitude towards

³⁹Such ambiguities were a function of continuing internally-generated constraints on the party leadership in the 1983-87 period. On the critical issue of defence policy, for example, the emerging coalition between the realigned "soft" Left and the Right of the party was forged only at the cost of retaining a commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament. As in 1983, the issue once again proved damaging especially when, in the midst of the 1987 election campaign, Kinnock was cornered into a ludicrous advocacy of "guerilla warfare" as an alternative means of deterring the supposed Soviet threat.

⁴⁰In fact, the 1992 election manifesto did not contain a single pledge to extend public ownership; moreover, it was the first in the party's history that contained no commitment to the modification of existing property relationships (Shaw 1994a:88).

capitalism and the market to its more specific, and longstanding, commitment to equality and social justice. As such, it merits sustained analysis.⁴¹ For the purposes of this paper, however, I emphasise the following. The grip on the party machinery which the party leader had attained was an essential precondition for the implementation of such a drastic change in the party's programme (Shaw 1994a:51). *That is, while the contents of the Policy Review were formulated in response, undoubtedly, to many external events, the ability of the party leadership to actually implement it was a direct function of internal organisational change.* Indeed, what is notable is that its implementation encountered little, if any, internal resistance (Ellison 1994:205; Thompson 1993:153). This, in turn, reflected a general, profound and perhaps permanent change in the entire structure of authority within the party that came to the fore following the 1987 election. In particular, the trend towards a *concentration* of leadership power was accentuated. After the 1987 defeat, there emerged a tighter disciplinary regime, a more centralised decision-making structure and the intensification of control by the party's parliamentary elite (Shaw 1994a:xii).

To the extent that the NEC had a separate and identifiable role, this was no longer in terms of shaping policy, but rather in terms of maintaining internal party discipline. As such, the party reverted to the stringent disciplinary regime of the 1950s and 1960s (Shaw 1994a:116). Far from being an arena for debating party policy, the NEC became, once more, the base from which disciplinary measures were sanctioned - whether against entryist organisations such as the Militant Tendency or against CLPs which had adopted parliamentary candidates deemed unacceptable by the party's national leadership (Seyd and Whiteley 1992a:51).⁴² In

⁴¹For perceptive discussions of the relationship between the contents of the Policy Review and the traditional tenets of British social democracy, see Shaw (1994a:103-107), Smith (1992) and Ellison (1994, chapter 9).

⁴²According to press reports of the 1997 election campaign, the party's national leadership has intervened to an unprecedented degree to impose parliamentary candidates on certain constituency parties. See, for example, Fran Abrams, "New Labour forced into old bottles", *The Independent*, 29 March 1997.

any case, general disarray and division led to the "collective policy weakness" of the Labour Left on the NEC. After the watershed year of 1985 (when the Left had, in fact, held 9 out of 13 policy committee chairs on the NEC), the Kinnock leadership commanded a consistent and unassailable majority on the NEC (Minkin 1991:409).

A similar pattern held true for the relationship between the party's parliamentary leadership and the trades unions. It remained true, of course, that the unions - as the party's principal financiers, sponsors of many Labour MPs, and wielders of votes on the NEC and at the party's annual conference - continued to influence the internal affairs of the party. Indeed, Minkin (1991:402) shows that informal consultative processes between the party's parliamentary leadership and the major union leaders actually increased during Kinnock's leadership. Yet the media-generated image of the party leadership somehow being 'under the control' of the unions was always grossly inaccurate. In fact, from 1985 onwards, the unions generally reverted to their historic role of protecting the parliamentary leadership. Thus while the Labour leader and senior colleagues could never "declare independence" from the unions, the dominance of the PLP leadership in policy formulation became increasingly evident, especially with respect to the Policy Review (Minkin 1991:460). The TUC itself was never a part of the Review process, though a great deal of private dialogue took place between party offices, TUC departments, and the research and political officers of individual unions. A "pivotal agenda-setting relationship" developed between the Leader's Office and senior TUC officials, and a "Contact Group" of senior Shadow Cabinet members, TUC General Council members and senior union and party officials emerged (Minkin 1991:468-469). Yet Minkin (1991:478) concludes that by 1990, in terms of this interaction, the parliamentary leadership dominated the relationship to an historically unprecedented extent. Between October 1989 and October 1990, 17 policy statements were issued independently by PLP spokespersons, while trade unionists

on the NEC were sidelined. The unions' input was essentially passive and supportive.⁴³

⁴³Such passivity, of course, was also a function of "external" factors, such as government legislation, changing economic conditions and a changing industrial relations environment. As such, in many cases, unions - aware of the need to return Labour to power - *chose* to refrain from interfering in the affairs of the party. Nonetheless, I would still insist that organisational changes within the party had also *restructured* the relationship between the party leadership and the unions. The substitution of informal contacts for previously formal ones was a reflection of the increased power of the party leader. For example, the Labour Party-TUC Liaison Committee which, in formal terms, brought together senior members of the NEC, PLP Front Bench and the TUC, had virtually ceased to function by 1990 (Minkin 1991:478). On the general loosening of party-union ties, see also Alderman and Carter (1994).

The final, and perhaps most important, set of longer-term effects of greatly enhanced leadership power, grew out of the leadership's attempts to restructure its relationship with party activists and the wider party membership. A central goal of the Kinnock leadership was to curtail the powers gained by party activists in the late 1970s and early 1980s which, in its view, had led to electoral disaster (Seyd and Whiteley 1992b:34-35). To this end, measures were taken to introduce and consolidate more direct methods of internal party democracy, thereby effectively bypassing the party activist. This entailed the extension of individual membership rights, via the use of 'One-Member-One-Vote' (OMOV) in the selection and reselection of parliamentary candidates (Farnham 1996:587) and in elections for the party's Leader and Deputy Leader (Alderman and Carter 1995:439). Direct balloting for the constituency section of the NEC was introduced, and the powers of CLP General Committees (hitherto responsible for the selection of MPs) curtailed. The latter reform reduced the accountability of MPs to their respective CLPs, as the General Committees had been the only institutional mechanism with which activists could monitor the behaviour of MPs (Shaw 1994a:118-119). In more general terms, as Shaw (1994:120) points out, opportunities and incentives for institutionalized horizontal communication were being diminished and being replaced by more direct vertical communication between the centre and the rank and file. As such, by 1990, the party had abandoned the principle of delegatory democracy enshrined in its constitution for more than sixty years, and had moved towards a system of individual-member democracy (Seyd and Whiteley 1992a:23). Rule changes secured at the party's 1993 annual conference confirmed this trend. Voting in each section of the electoral college was henceforth to be conducted on the basis of OMOV (Alderman and Carter 1995:439).⁴⁴

⁴⁴Parallel changes took place within the union movement. Thus despite resistance from some unions, the trade union block vote was abolished, and members of affiliated unions given the right to be balloted individually, thereby undermining significantly the capacity of the 'trade union barons' to determine conference votes. In addition, the unions' share of the electoral college vote was reduced from 40% to 33.33% (the same as for the PLP and the CLPs), while the NEC was authorised to reduce progressively the unions' share of the party conference vote from 70% to 50% once individual party

The emergence of this type of internal restructuring has had, it would appear, three principal consequences. The first relates to the marginalisation - and possibly the permanent or irreversible marginalisation - of the radical Left within the party. What amounts to a new and larger "selectorate" has made it much more difficult for the radical Left, as the last fundamentally "oppositional element"⁴⁵ inside the party, to mobilise. The aforementioned introduction of direct balloting for the constituency section of the NEC further undermined the radical Left (Shaw 1994a:118-119).⁴⁶ Moreover, since the early 1950s, the constituency section of the NEC had been the indispensable launching pad for attempts by the radical Left to gain a majority on the NEC as a whole and, hence, to check the power of the party leadership. As such, in terms of the suffocation of radical dissent, the consequences of direct enfranchisement of the party membership "may well be far-reaching" (Shaw 1994a:120;108; see also Webb 1992).

membership had reached 300,000. (It stood, in fact, at 315,000 by January 1995) (Alderman and Carter 1995:441-2,444-5,454).

⁴⁵I use the word opposition in a strong sense here, to denote that element within the party which has a fundamentally distinctive view of what the Labour Party should and can be, and which adheres to an alternative electoral strategy.

⁴⁶Shaw (1994b:164) points out that no research has been undertaken on the effects of these rule changes, "but they do appear to have reduced the influence of the hard left, whose representation on the NEC was by 1993 eliminated with the defeat of Tony Benn". That said, two members of the Campaign Group of MPs were, surprisingly, elected to the NEC at the party's 1994 annual conference (Alderman and Carter 1995:455).

The second consequence relates to the role of the party membership itself. It is noteworthy that Seyd and Whiteley (1992a:152) found the vast majority of party members, in the late 1980s, to be strongly supportive of Kinnock and the quality of his leadership. In addition, and perhaps surprisingly, 71% of party members rejected the view that the leader was too powerful (1992a:50). Yet in conditions of direct democracy, with the intervening role of the party activist severely curtailed⁴⁷, it appeared that by the 1990s, the individual party member was most likely to be in a position where he or she could only respond to the agenda formed by the party's central authorities (Shaw 1994a:121). As such, an effect of concentrated leadership power (especially when combined with a tougher disciplinary regime, the fragmentation of the Left, and the weakening of constituency organizations) has been a "loss of membership vitality" and "mounting evidence of organisational atrophy" - especially at the constituency level, "Labour's main locus for local mobilisation and coordination" (Shaw 1994a:223 and 121). Thus while organisational "modernisation" has made the party much more efficient and professional in terms of raising funds, presenting its policies to the electorate and, indeed, in actually recruiting new members, no clear sense has emerged as to what political input the party membership should make to the party (Seyd and Whiteley 1992a:202).⁴⁸ As such, by the late 1980s, the membership appeared to be passive,

⁴⁷In this context, Seyd and Whiteley (1992c:159) noted that in 1989, the "awkward squad" now accounted for only a very small proportion of the party's membership.

⁴⁸As Webb (1992:284) notes, "modern electoral-professional parties may seek to maximise their memberships, but they do not see the bulk of ordinary members as fulfilling the same roles once expected of them in the old parties of mass integration".

rather than active, disengaged rather than engaged: the "Labour Party appears to be a 'de-energized' and 'de-activised' organization" (Seyd and Whiteley 1992b:42; 1992a:202).⁴⁹

⁴⁹Seyd cites the marginalisation of party activists and an increasingly "de-energised" party membership as important factors in the party's 1992 election defeat (Seyd 1992:240-241).

The third effect relates to the manoeuvrability of the party leadership, and specifically the party leader. As Shaw (1994a: 122-123; emphasis added) describes, "by 1992, the structure of power in the Labour Party had undergone a profound change. The highly pluralistic, deeply polarised Party characterised by the *institutionalised dispersal of powers* and weak central authority had been replaced by a powerful central authority exercising tight control over all aspects of organisational life". As a consequence, the party leader now enjoyed an unprecedented degree of autonomy and independence from any potential sites of countervailing power (Shaw 1994a:120). The growing room for manoeuvre enjoyed by the leader had become increasingly apparent during the late 1980s. For example, in 1989, the party leadership reversed Labour's position on unilateral nuclear disarmament almost nonchalantly.⁵⁰ Yet despite the fact that at the time, 72% of party members wanted a non-nuclear defence policy (Seyd and Whiteley 1992a:52), the leadership's decision met with a surprisingly muted response (Shaw 1994a:166).⁵¹ The relative ease with which the leadership was ultimately able to resolve this most contentious of issues undoubtedly set the precedent for Blair's later successful attempt to delete Clause Four from the party's constitution. Representing the party's historic commitment to the nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange, Clause Four was, for the radical Left, something akin to the Ark of the Covenant. As such, it mobilised successfully to secure a vote supporting Clause Four at the party's 1994 annual conference. Yet by staking his own authority on the issue at a Special Conference held on 29 April 1995, Blair won overwhelming support (notably among constituency party members) for scrapping Clause Four (Alderman and Carter 1995:455). His ability to succeed - where predecessors had failed - reflected not just the organisational

⁵⁰In a television interview on 9 February, 1989, Kinnock was asked "Would it be right to say that, to the ordinary Labour voter, unilateralism is over?" He replied "Oh yes .. Nobody will be surprised about that - I said it last year" (cited in Benn 1992:558).

⁵¹At a meeting of the NEC on 9 May 1989, the Left's proposal to decommission Polaris and Trident, remove US bases in the lifetime of a Parliament, withdraw from NATO, switch from military to civil development, and adopt a non-aligned foreign policy, was defeated by 21 votes to 4. In fact, a demand

weakness of the Labour Left, but an astonishingly strong "innovating capability" (Shaw 1994a:164) now available to the party leader.⁵²

Conclusions: Some theoretical reflections on the case of the Labour Party

for a recorded vote *to reaffirm Conference policy* was defeated by 18 votes to 8 (Benn 1992:566).

⁵² Again, the increased room for manoeuvre enjoyed by the leadership was not solely a function of factors internal to the party. For example, successive electoral defeats, and long years in opposition, undoubtedly had an impact on the general mood of the party membership, and its willingness to allow the leadership to do that which it deemed necessary for electoral victory. In these circumstances, the leadership's constant warnings that the public articulation of dissent within the party would be exploited by a hostile media were effective (Shaw 1994a:224).

What *is* beyond doubt is the changing nature of the party's annual conference. Compared to the bloody and highly public spectacles of division and acrimonious debate of the early 1980s, the conference had, by the early 1990s, become a much more docile affair dominated by the party leadership. For example, in 1991, the NEC's decision to expel two prominent Militant Tendency MPs was endorsed by the conference by a majority of nine to one, thereby demonstrating "Labour's near unanimity" (Shaw 1994b:164). Predictably, the radical Left viewed such a transformation with dismay. After the party's momentous 1980 conference, Benn had proclaimed "there is no doubt at all that the British Labour Party conference is the most democratic body of its kind in the world" (cited by Jenkins 1988:117). Ten years later, he lamented that "it is now all stage-managed for the [television]. It is symbolic of the separation between the leadership and the membership" (Benn 1992:605).

Given that change, as I noted at the outset, does not simply happen, the history of the Labour Party between 1979 and 1997 demonstrates the importance of taking into account what I have termed the "internal life" of political parties if we are to understand why, when and how they change. More specifically, the organizational structure of parties has implications for their relationship with the wider political environment in which they operate. Three sets of concluding issues are worth emphasizing.

(i) Why do parties change? Why does party change take the form that it does?

Parties are not unitary actors. They contain an array of constituent elements and different sites of power, each with competing visions of what the party should be, and the goals that it should adopt. This is a critical consideration, especially with respect to the alleged *rationality or irrationality* of the strategies that parties adopt and the responses they make to changes in the environment in which they operate: "by allowing for multiple goals in theory, we can explain some apparently non-rational action taken by parties, or factions within parties, that arise when observers assume that parties pursue only a single goal of winning votes" (Harmel and Janda 1994:273).⁵³

⁵³For the purposes of this paper, I set aside these authors' problematic insistence that although parties may have numerous goals, each will nonetheless have what they term a "primary goal" which will vary from party to party and perhaps within an individual party across time (1994:265). They do not explain, however, why different parties adopt different primary goals, nor the process by which a particular primary goal emerges in the first place nor how a primary goal within an individual party may change over time. As such, it seems more accurate to depict parties as having, at any one

time, a multiplicity of competing goals, rather than an (arbitrarily assigned) primary goal.

The value of allowing for competing rationalities within a single party is best illustrated by considering the changes which took place within the Labour Party between 1979 and 1983 - that is, precisely that period of time in which the party, according to most commentators, adopted a wholly “irrational” strategy. For the reasons described in this paper, it was the Left's strategy which, by and large, dominated during this period. This strategy was based on the fundamental assumption that with internal constitutional and organisational change, and with the consequent adoption of a radical platform, all else would follow. Consequently, the Labour Left concentrated on internal party arrangements (Seyd 1987:103). Such a preoccupation with the internal life of the party was, as several authors have pointed out (including those sympathetic to the Left's cause), flawed and dangerous. Thompson (1993:121, 118), for example, refers to the Left's emphasis on winning positions and resolutions as the key to political change and ideological success⁵⁴ and its "fatal disposition" to give priority to internal party considerations "as against serious engagement with a deeply conservative popular culture and sentiment". Seyd (1987:102) also argues that concentration on political advance through

⁵⁴Certainly it is the case that for many activists, the internal life of the party effectively becomes, for all intents and purposes, his or her political universe. This mentality has perhaps never been captured better than by the "old Bolshevik" cited by Stephen Cohen (1980) in his biography of Bukharin: "the history of the party is the history of our life".

internal structural reforms came at the expense of "developing a radical programme which combined intellectual credibility, practical application and popular support".⁵⁵

⁵⁵Healey (1989:467) complains that the Left never explained how a Leftward shift "would persuade workers who had just voted Tory to vote Labour next time, or how people who had not bothered to vote at all could be inspired to man the barricades of the class war". Interestingly, in his reflections on his 1981 bid for the Deputy Leadership of the party, Benn (1992:500) acknowledges the error, albeit in more guarded tones: "I realised that .. it was all about the Labour Party and wouldn't register with most [people] in terms of their own interests .. the trouble with the 1981 deputy leadership campaign was that it was directed at members of the Party, whereas it should have been directed at the public..".

Yet while the Left's preoccupation with the internal affairs of the party may have been flawed, it was not irrational, if we take into account the basic assumptions which underpinned the Left's vision of the party. For unlike the Right, which remained convinced of the need to remain, more or less, in line with the state of public opinion, the Left clung tenaciously to the view that the party could shape, mobilise, convince and - more condescendingly - "educate" public opinion.⁵⁶ Fundamentally, the Left assumed that a "Left-wing programme would be self-validating with the electorate .. that its viability could be taken for granted" (Thompson 1993:116). Such an assumption may have been wrong or unrealistic,⁵⁷ but it was not irrational - rather it reflected a different rationality which goes a long way to explaining why the party adopted the strategy that it did. As such, the notion of "competing rationalities" within a single party helps *explain* change, rather than merely *describing* such change as irrational.

(ii) *When and how does change take place?*

In keeping with Panebianco's premise that parties are basically conservative organizations which will not change simply for the sake of change, debate has naturally focused on the *sources* of change. A great deal of attention has been paid to the role of exogenous sources of change - that is, changes in party strategy are externally induced by changes in the environment in which parties operate. This general focus is in keeping with the assumption that parties are shaped by their

⁵⁶Hence Benn's otherwise preposterous comment in the wake of the 1983 election defeat that "for the first time since 1945, a political party with an openly socialist policy has received the support of over 8 1/2 million people. This is a remarkable development by any standards" (cited in Ranney 1985:219-220).

⁵⁷Shaw (1994:25), for example, notes that the Left's "faith in the capacity of the party to mobilise opinion appeared not to have been dented by increasing evidence that many of its central policy planks were wholly out of line with public sentiment". Elsewhere, he notes the Left's calls for "determination" and "audacity" as means of overcoming the domestic and international obstacles to the implementation of radical socialist policies. As such, the Left had an "exaggerated view" of the power acquired through victory in the electoral process (1994a:14-15).

environments, and that therefore parties that do not "fit" will perform less well. In comparison, far less attention has been paid to internal sources of (or obstacles to) party change (Harmel and Janda 1994:263-264).

In this paper, I have attempted to separate, empirically, externally and internally induced sources of party change, and to underscore in particular the importance of internal factors. Thus it seems that the catalyst, or initial spur, for change is externally induced⁵⁸ - in the case of the Labour Party, the "shocks" of the 1979 and 1983 electoral defeats, for example, provoked change by undermining the credibility and authority of certain party actors and enhancing that of others. In the case of 1983, the scale of the party's defeat severely damaged the credibility of the radical Left and provoked a realignment of forces both within the Left itself and between the party's different sites of power.

Nonetheless, external factors may be necessary, but are not sufficient, to induce change in parties. Thus a shift in party strategy may require constitutional and organizational change or, at least, may involve a battle for control of a party's existing organisational structure. To this extent, factors internal to the party are crucial. Thus the 1979 election defeat, as I demonstrated, catalysed changes in the Labour Party's internal balance of power which had, in fact, been underway for a considerable time.⁵⁹ It is the nature of these internal changes - what amounted, in

⁵⁸This is not necessarily the case. The death or resignation of a party leader may, for example, act as a catalyst for change - as Richard Crossman callously remarked of the demise of Gaitskell, "in death there is hope". In fact, in the case of the modern Labour Party, leadership change - whether as a result of death (Gaitskell, Smith), of resignation following electoral defeat (Kinnock), or of voluntary resignation (Wilson in 1976) - did not lead to any significant change in party strategy. The exception would be the resignation of Foot in 1983 which heralded - though did not cause in and of itself - changes in party policy and strategy.

⁵⁹A question worthy of further research is that of whether a party out of power is more likely to change strategy than a party in power. In the case of the Labour Party, the Left's critique of the party leadership existed long before 1979, but only came to the fore in the wake of the 1979 election defeat. This suggests that party leaderships in power have, for an array of reasons, considerably greater capacity to crush or ignore demands for change from within the party. In contrast, out of power, "electoral and organizational deterioration are likely to raise questions about the style of leadership and the representative nature of the party. For activists, criticizing the party representatives and leaders is likely to be less costly .. when leaders have failed to produce votes, offices or policy. Failure

the 1979-83 period, to a battle waged within and between the party's constituent elements for the "life and soul" of the party - that is crucial to understanding changes in party strategy.⁶⁰

(iii) What are the consequences of internal change (party organization) and do they matter?

in these crucial areas is likely to delegitimize the party leaders" (Koelble 1996:255).

⁶⁰Again, it would be wrong to discount the weight of external factors in shaping internal battles. For example, as I have pointed out, external events may constrain the room for manoeuvre that a party leadership has, thereby affecting the pace at which a party changes. In the 1983-1987 period, several "external" events constrained Kinnock's ability to rearrange the party's internal balance of power as a means of effecting changes in the party's strategy.

That said, the 1979-83 period stands out as an extraordinary example of internal party struggle almost completely obliterating wider environmental concerns.

The nature of party organization, and changes in party organization, have consequences for the fortunes of political parties. Parties characterised by centralised leaderships and compliant memberships undoubtedly have a greater ability to adapt to a changing environment⁶¹ than those in which power is diffused between competing constituent elements. In the case of the Labour Party, the unprecedented power held by the current party leadership has considerably enhanced the adaptability of the party, in terms of its ability to effect and maintain changes in strategy and policy.

In addition, it seems that the nature of internal party organizations has electoral consequences. Given the rarity of "a party that is both unitary and transparent, democratic and disciplined" (Maravall 1996:36), parties in which power is internally diffused are more likely to be punished electorally. Thus at the same time as Tony Benn, in the early 1980s, was proclaiming the democratic virtues of the Labour Party as an organisation, the electorate castigated the party for being divided, faction-ridden and incoherent. Subsequently, a realignment of the organizational structure of the party - but specifically, a recentralization of power in the hands of the leadership - were preconditions for the overcoming of policy divisions. Yet one must be cautious. Common sense tells us that ideological and policy divisions may well become "institutionalized" in a situation where power is internally dispersed between a party's different constituent elements. This does not mean, however, that a rigid and centralized internal organizational structure will be able to contain or obscure fundamental divisions over policy and ideology - as the electoral debacle of the British Conservative Party in May 1997 illustrates. As such, the exact nature of the relationship between internal organizational structure on

⁶¹Whether they *choose* to do so is another matter, as the contemporary history of certain West European Communist parties (most notably, the PCF) illustrates.

the one hand, and divisions over policies and ideology on the other, undoubtedly requires further investigation.

Such considerations on the significance of the internal life of parties lead us, in the final analysis, to a perennial, normative and unresolvable debate - that of whether the democratic nature (or otherwise) of parties themselves (internally) should matter. A somewhat cynical reading of the history of the Labour Party between 1979 and 1997 is that the internal battle had little to do with the democratic nature of the party *per se*. As I have argued, constitutional and organisational changes were always *means* and not ends in themselves.⁶² Thus the organizational changes promoted by the Left in the early 1980s, and by the party leadership in the late 1980s and early 1990s, were always framed in terms of the need to "democratise" the party; ultimately, however, what mattered to both Right and Left was the adoption of certain policies.

Nonetheless, the issue is not quite so simple, for the internal party battle that I have described revolved also around competing visions of what the party should be: a moulder or reflection of the electorate's preferences. In the early 1980s, certain party leaders contemplated (with horror) the electoral consequences of the policies that the party adopted. In contrast, the Left, for its part, argued for the party's capacity to mobilise and shape public opinion. The outcome of this conflict is now not in doubt - the party's internal battles in the 1980s and 1990s has enabled the party leadership to be more responsive to, and act in accordance with, the perceived preferences of the wider electorate. Yet, as is the case with modern political parties in general, this has left the party membership in a curious and

⁶²I therefore reject the tendency of certain authors (for example, Koelble [1996], Harmel and Janda [1994]) to assume that it is only party leaderships which are concerned with the wider electoral consequences of the policies that a party adopts.

ambiguous position. Given that they are not merely "organizational soldiers" (Maravall 1996:10), it is an irony, that as individual party membership continues to increase, the power and influence of the party member in general, and the party activist in particular, continue to decline.

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