

# Briefing Note

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## THE 1982 LABOUR CONFERENCE AT BLACKPOOL

The Labour Party Conference opened in Blackpool on 27th September with Labour at its most unpopular point for decades. Although Labour held the safe seats contested in the two most recent by-elections, it did so only with significantly reduced majorities, and Labour candidates were in third place in the five preceding by-elections which took place over the past year (Croydon NW, Crosby, Glasgow Hillhead, Beaconsfield and Mitcham and Morden).

Satisfaction with Mr. Foot's leadership, as measured by opinion polls, has for several months been lower than for any previous Labour leader in government or opposition - well below 20% for most of the period since April. The latest Gallup Poll, published on September 16th, showed support for Labour at 30½%, compared with 44% for the Conservatives and nearly 50% for Labour at its high point in March 1980. A more recent Gallup Poll, published by the Sunday Telegraph on 26th September, showed that 55% of Labour supporters and 62% of the general public thought that Mr. Foot should stand down for some other leader.

### "Militant Tendency" and the Register

Controversy in the weeks before Blackpool had centred round the future of the "Militant Tendency", an extreme Trotskyist group which has infiltrated many constituency parties. On its first day, the Conference voted by over 5 million to 1½ million to support a register of non-affiliated organisations which would give the Party's leaders the power to expel Militant supporters. This came after threats by various large unions to hold back funds if action were not taken; a vote by the Party's National Executive, never considered a particularly moderate body, in favour of the register; and finally a passionately argued appeal by Mr. Foot, knowing he had the block votes of most of the big unions.

The idea of a "witch-hunt" or "purge" of extremists was vigorously resisted by Mr. Benn: "Over the next 12 months or so we have to devote ourselves very clearly to the task of seeing that nobody, but nobody, is expelled . . . ." (Daily Telegraph, 28th September 1982). Mr. Reg Race, Labour MP for Wood Green, was even more vociferous: "It's time we got rid of clapped out septuagenarians who have had their day . . . . It doesn't matter what resolutions are passed by conference if we say we will not implement them." (Daily Express, 27th September 1982; Mr. Foot is in fact 69).

### Action, Not Words ?

The country will doubtless watch with interest how many of the extremists are expelled. The well-funded Militant Tendency is estimated to include 5 members of the editorial board of Militant newspaper, about 60 full-time organisers, about 3,000 newspaper sellers and activists, and not least, nine Militant supporters already selected as Labour parliamentary candidates. These nine have been at pains to insist that they had no "organisational" or "formal" links with the Militant Tendency. One of them, Mr. D. Nellist (Coventry, South East) said: "I buy Militant but I buy Tribune and Labour Weekly as well, I even buy The Times but that doesn't make me a capitalist". (Times, 28th September 1982). Mr. Roy Hattersley, Shadow Home Secretary, explained the Party's dilemma: "The problem is not Militant, about whom we always talk because Militant is so easily identifiable and so unpleasant that most people are prepared to squash it . . . . the problem is those organisations which talk in the language of democratic socialism." (Daily Express, 27th September).



Mr. Hattersley also displayed characteristic cynicism on the Militant episode: "A decision to deal with the Militant Tendency is worth a million votes". He added the extraordinary statement: "It's not our proposals which worry the people, it's our behaviour" (Guardian, 27th September 1982).

"We have got the policies"

The so-called moderates like Mr. Hattersley have, of course, acquiesced in the substance of Labour's Programme 1982 - wholesale nationalisation and state control, withdrawal from the EEC, and unilateral disarmament. No wonder Mr. Benn declared, after the defeat of three Left-wingers in the NEC elections (one Leftist Foot supporter Miss Joan Lestor, was defeated by Mrs. Audrey Wise, the "hard-left" former MP), that there had been "a big swing to the right, but we have got the policies" (Morning Star, 29th September). As Mr. Pat Wall, one of the Militant prospective candidates (Bradford North), told Mr. Foot: "You cannot witch-hunt ideas" (Daily Mail, 28th September 1982).

So the first three days of the Conference showed it endorsing Leftist policies:

- A motion demanding the abolition of private medicine, private hospitals and clinics and all private health insurance schemes, and the nationalisation of the pharmaceutical industry, was carried. The Conference also endorsed an NEC proposal for a new rash of hospital strikes.
- While a motion to nationalise all banking institutions in the UK was narrowly beaten, an NEC statement threatening the nationalisation of "one or more" of the big clearing banks was endorsed.
- Not only would a Labour government repeal all the Trade Union legislation passed by the Conservative Government but it would introduce retrospective legislation providing for the reimbursement of any fines on trade unionists under the Government's measures. As the Guardian commented "If trade unionists believe in the early return of a Labour government such phrases are the strongest possible incitement to cost-free illegality".
- While a motion to nationalise the top 200 companies was defeated, one which committed the Party to nationalise 25 top companies was passed.
- There was a decisive victory for the Left on what one speaker called the single most important issue before the Conference when a motion in favour of unilateral nuclear disarmament was carried by nearly 5 million votes to nearly 2 million. Because the majority is more than two thirds, the unilateralist commitment must be included in the Party's programme from which the election Manifesto is drawn. The Conference also, by a narrower vote, against NEC advice, approved a call for the nationalisation of the armaments industry.

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