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## LABOUR'S U-TURNS

The image of the Labour Party as a divided and factional party has been further confirmed by events this week. So too has the image of Mr Foot as a vacillating leader unable to control his party, or even make up his mind about what sort of party he wants it to be.

### **The Tatchell Affair**

Following a long period of acrimony, Mr Robert Mellish, MP for Bermondsey, announced in July 1981 that he would not be standing at the next General Election. He claimed that he had been forced out by the 'left'. He summed up his attitude recently when he said: "I am opposed to the Bermondsey Labour Party and all it stands for" (*The Times*, 22nd November 1982). Mr Peter Tatchell was duly selected by the Bermondsey Labour Party as prospective candidate for the next General Election.

Mr Tatchell later gained notoriety in November 1981 through an article in *London Labour Briefing* in which he said that the Labour Party was "stuck in the rut of obsessive legalism and parliamentarianism". He also called for "more imaginative and defiant forms of protest" which could be "combined with the industrial might of the trade unions" to form "more militant forms of extra-parliamentary opposition which involve mass popular participation and challenge the Government's right to rule". He also criticised the NEC and Regional Executive Councils for failing to mobilise the Labour movement under the banners of "Jobs and Better Housing For All", "Democratic Control of the Police" and "Freedom of Assembly and Demonstration".

It was at this juncture that Mr Foot, who was clearly unhappy about the whole affair, declared in the House of Commons that "the individual concerned is not an endorsed candidate of the Labour Party and so far as I am concerned never will be endorsed" (*Hansard*, 3rd December 1981, Col. 389).

Mr Mellish then declared that if Mr Tatchell did not withdraw he would stand down as Member of Parliament for Bermondsey and force a by-election in order to give the voters of Bermondsey the opportunity to show their disapproval of the extremism of the local Labour Party.

Mr Mellish pursued his battle with the constituency Labour Party and was threatened with expulsion after supporting three independent Labour candidates in the local elections in May 1982. In August he resigned from the Labour Party and on 1st November he resigned his seat in order to galvanise the National Executive Committee into action over the conduct of the local party, believing that they would never consent to Mr Tatchell's candidature. Mr Tatchell's earlier selection as prospective candidate was, however, confirmed by the local party on 9th January 1983.

Mr Foot performed a somersault by backing Mr Tatchell's candidature in a letter to him on 10th January. He said: "I was glad to see the statements which you made both before and after your selection about your allegiance to the Labour Party's views on parliamentary democracy" (*Guardian*, 11th January 1983). Mr Mellish commented: "Michael Foot has done an about turn, everyone knows that. The idea that anything has changed is absolute nonsense" (*Guardian*, 12th January 1983).

### **The Militant Tendency**

Another issue which is continuing to split the Labour Party is the attempt by the right-wing to expel supporters of the Militant Tendency, an avowedly Trotskyist group. In December 1981, the Labour NEC set up an enquiry into the activities of the Tendency and this found that the Tendency was in effect a party within a party, and in breach of the Labour Party's constitution. Supporters of the Militant Tendency deny this and claim that there is no organisation which people can join, and *Militant* is simply a newspaper whose editorial line a number of party members support. But the NEC's enquiry judged that "the Militant Tendency is a well-organised caucus, centrally controlled, operating in the Labour Party", and that it was not a group "formed solely to support a newspaper". They concluded that the group was in breach of Clause II of Labour's constitution which renders ineligible for affiliation, organisations which have their own programmes and propaganda.

The report recommended the establishment of a register for non-affiliated organisations within the party and said that in its present form the Militant Tendency would not qualify for registration. This recommendation was endorsed by the NEC and passed at the Labour Conference by 5,173,000 to 1,565,000. This majority is deceptive however, as the register was pushed through by the union block votes; the register was overwhelmingly opposed by the Constituency Labour Party section.

Despite the denials of Mr Foot and Mr Jim Mortimer, the Labour Party General Secretary, the left wing of the Labour Party believe that the expulsion of Militant supporters will be merely the first step in a campaign by the right to purge the Labour Party of the left. As a consequence, a campaign to defeat the 'witch-hunt' is drawing support from all sections of the left. The suspicions of the left do have some foundation. Mr John Golding MP, the new right-wing chairman of the NEC's Home Policy Committee, has recently admitted that there are other groups within the party whom he would like to get rid of: "I think many of the other extreme left groups are a threat without being in actual breach of the constitution. I believe that we've got to deal with them in a separate way" ('A Week in Politics', Channel 4, 13th November 1982).

As there is no formal membership of the Militant Tendency, the NEC has been faced with the difficulty of knowing precisely who to expel. The obvious candidates are the five members of Militant's editorial board, but in addition to them there are eight Labour parliamentary candidates who support Militant and over 60 paid staff. Mr Mortimer attempted to confine the expulsions to the five members of the editorial board and urged that this should be done forthwith. But after the NEC had received legal advice suggesting it was leaving itself open to court action, he was instructed not to take any action. The Militant Tendency have announced that they will fight any expulsion through the courts. In December, Militant unsuccessfully sought a court injunction to prevent the Labour Party from proceeding with any expulsions, and the NEC passed a motion declaring that the Tendency was ineligible for affiliation to the Labour Party. However, at the same meeting they postponed any attempt to decide upon a legally-sustainable definition of a member of the Militant Tendency.

At a meeting of the NEC's organisation committee on 10th January 1983, Mr Mortimer presented a paper setting out the options of expulsion or the dissolution of Militant as an organisation within the party. He pointed out that any attempt at expulsion might well fail in the courts, as a number of other groups had been declared ineligible for registration, such as the Labour Friends of Israel, but only the Militant Tendency was under threat of expulsion. A decision on what course to pursue was deferred until 26th January.

If Labour backs down over expulsions then it will lose its credibility. But if it attempts them, it could well be defeated in the courts. Whatever the outcome, it is likely that this issue will drag on for some time to come.

JW/TS/JLS