

Time to renew New Labour

Ashamed of his party's recent by-election campaign, **Richard Burden MP** says Labour must look beyond the mere conquest of office

It is a difficult thing to admit, but I came away from a day working at the Littleborough and Saddleworth by-election with a feeling I have never before experienced as a Labour Party member, and one I hope never to experience again. It seemed that whatever happened on election day, Labour was going to lose. If we did badly at the polls, then that was obviously going to be bad for us. But the prospect of a Labour victory also held chilling implications for the future.

To have come from a poor third place to take a seat like that would have been greeted in some quarters as a tribute to the kind of campaign we ran there. Maybe the same will be said of the strong second place we did achieve. We may even be told that the Littleborough and Saddleworth experience is an object lesson for future campaigns. So what if our tactics were "robust"? They worked, didn't they? Well, that rather depends on why we are in politics in the first place.

I, for one, was ashamed of some of the messages we were putting out at Littleborough and Saddleworth, and I think the time has come to say so. Sure, the Lib Dems were smearing our candidate. That is nothing new. Labour activists all over the country are well used to dirty campaigning by our opponents, and for years we have prided ourselves on not stooping to those levels. We cannot make such a claim this time. Not only did Labour make personal attacks, but all too often we did not even pretend to have a political message—such as claiming in *The Rose*, our election week news-sheet, that our candidate was "more intelligent" than the other candidates.

When we did turn to "issues", moreover, our sales pitch was summed up by the following extract, again from our election week broadsheet: "The choice is, therefore, between the Liberal Democrat, and his view on drugs and hefty tax increases, and Labour's local candidate, Phil Woolas, raised here in the Pennines and committed to Tony Blair's New Labour."

Now Phil Woolas would indeed make an excellent MP. It is also true that the Liberal Democrat candidate had apparently suggested that cannabis could be

decriminalised. Labour does not have to agree, even though many people—including some senior police officers—would do so. However, to have skipped over what the Lib Dem actually said, and then to load our publicity with the innuendo that he has barmy views on drugs generally, both panders to ignorance and undermines serious debate about how to tackle the drugs problem.

And while we may not believe the Lib Dems have got it right on tax, to slag them off for even contemplating increasing income tax smacks of a populism that ducks the real questions that all parties must face about how to fund our public services. Given our often stated disgust at the way the Tories played the tax card at the last general election, you would have thought we may have had a few more scruples of our own.

What went on in Littleborough and Saddleworth represented a kind of political amorality in which anything goes as long as it looks like being to our electoral advantage. That, though, stems from a deeper problem with some people's approach to the New Labour project.

In many ways, Labour is now the most professional opposition party in history. We know how to hit hard. We have a press release ready for every banana skin the Major government drops under its own feet. And all the time, we have kept the heat on the Tories by avoiding saying or doing anything controversial ourselves that could provide them with a target to attack. Given what the Tories have done to Britain over the past 16 years, they deserve it. But the purpose of being a professional opposition is to become a government. And the purpose of Labour forming a government was always to create a fairer society, informed by the political principles on which our party was based.

But it is Labour's role as a *political* party that is now in danger. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Labour did get out of step with the British people. We suffered electorally and Britain suffered even more from the onset of Thatcherism. We were therefore right to commence a process of review, modernisation and renewal.

Now, though, being in the mainstream and getting into government are becoming ends in themselves. Labour wants so much to be seen as the natural party of government that we have started to define ourselves not by our beliefs but by proclaiming how representative we are of society as a whole.

But Labour is not representative of society as a whole, and neither is any other political party. We are a coalition of individuals and organisations sharing beliefs and values that we hope can win majority support amongst the British. But that is different from pretending that we are *ourselves* the embodiment of that

majority, or that we are somehow above politics. Of course, all parties want to win, but when any party starts to believe its own interests are, by definition, synonymous with those of the electorate as a whole, then political arrogance is on the march and democracy itself is the loser. Just look at the way Thatcher and her heirs have behaved over the past decade and a half. I do not want to see Labour end up as a more humane flipside of the same coin in the next decade.

But the dangers are there and they are real. Despite Tony Blair's stated desire in the Clause Four debate to renew our core principles, Labour is drifting towards becoming a US-style party—a ruthlessly effective electoral machine as the vehicle for those who want to go into politics rather than a radical party with a definable ideological base.

There was a lot of talk about "Clintonising" Labour back in 1992. After all, he had appeared endlessly flexible in his quest for the centre ground of

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US politics and he had won, whereas Labour had lost. What is surprising is that the Clinton approach still seems to hold so much appeal for some people in our party today. Public esteem in his administration has slumped as his flexibility has come to look more like muddle. Politics does not stop on polling day, and the Clinton chickens have come home to roost in the rise of the Republican right. Perhaps an even more worrying long-term result of the US style of politics has been the alienation of swathes of the American people from ever participating in the democratic process.

At least in the US, though, there is little pretence that the two main parties have consistent ideological "lines" and, outside election time, there can be a fair amount of free thinking within and between parties. Ironically Americanisation has seen New Labour actually increasing its demands for internal discipline.

Mechanisms for the party to communicate directly with its members may be more extensive than they have ever been. But such communication is essentially "top-down". Power is increasingly centralised around the leader's office, with immense pressure on everyone else to fall into line in the interests of unity and not jeopardising electoral chances, and so on. I am worried by the prospect of a

party continually concerned with avoiding the spread of negative images of itself, desperate to be elected as representative of mainstream opinion, and yet with its own inner sanctum holding a virtual monopoly on defining what such mainstream opinion consists of. I thought that kind of approach to political leadership went out of fashion when the Berlin Wall came down.

Such are the dynamics of Britain's winner-takes-all political process that the consequences of an obsession with *our team* winning have come to disfigure all our mainstream parties. This is true of the Tories' desperation to hang on to office, of Labour's determination to replace them, and of the Lib Dems' scramble to remain in business. If Labour is to remain true to its radical project of achieving a more equitable distribution of power in Britain, we need to commit ourselves to transforming the political process itself in a more pluralist direction.

When Tony Blair was elected leader, the ideas he put forward, and the style with which he did so, seemed to offer the prospect of such a transformation. I hope I was right about Tony, but I am not convinced that such a vision is shared by other key players in his inner sanctum. It is more than coincidental that some of those most associated with the course New Labour is now taking are trying to jettison our commitments to key constitutional initiatives, such as the creation of elected regional assemblies and a referendum on electoral reform. After all, if the *raison d'être* of political action is to get *our team* in, why on earth should we want to share power if we are successful?

The fact is that there should be more to our politics than that. Dispersal of political power is the life-blood of democracy. It reminds parties that they are minorities, not majorities—however "mainstream" they may claim to be. Radically restructuring the archaic way parliament works, a review of electoral systems and a devolution of power to a network of democratic local and regional institutions, could provide a barrier to any re-emergence of the appalling centralism that has allowed the Tories to increase social and economic inequality massively since 1979. And if a new constitutional settlement loosens party discipline or labels, it might just allow political debate to surface more often on real issues, rather than through ritualistic parliamentary contests of "my dad is bigger than your dad".

Such talk may be heretical for those for whom the horizons of New Labour do not go beyond the conquest of office. But such a transformation can only be good news for a rebirth of radical politics in Britain. And that should be good news for Labour, too.