

Editorial

"Labour Party Policy"

With the next general election drawing ever nearer, the attention of political and economic pundits – and legal pundits, too – focusses increasingly upon the prospect of the Thatcher Government's dozen eventful years of office being brought to an end, to be followed, presumably, by an administration led by Mr Kinnock. That prospective outcome is at the time of writing the bookies' and the pollsters' favourite. And the publication, in the middle of May, of Labour's Policy Review, a slimmed-down version of the substantial document endorsed by the Party Conference last October, gives an insight into what the post-Thatcher era might actually look like in policy and legislative terms.

The document underlines how much blinkered Bennite garbage, has been shed in the light of bitter experience: experience not only of three crushing electoral defeats but also of implicitly recognised failures of judgement and policy when the Party held office during the 1960s and 1970s. Thus it confirms

Labour's increasing sympathy towards (an issue that tore the Party assunder in the 1970s, and did much to pave the way for the SDP breakaway in the early '80s); and important moves towards a new realism about the proper relationship between a party in government – one which retains the rather anachronistic title of a "Labour" party – and the trade union movement.

A Labour government would seek to join the ERM "at the earliest opportunity"; the document implicitly recognises that, if management and unions allow wages to rise to levels that make companies uncompetitive in European markets, then job losses may follow. On trade union law, the document promises to restore a limited right for trade unions to take secondary industrial action in support of one another where they share a direct interest of "an occupational or professional nature"; these and other aspects of the package would be applied and interpreted by a new industrial court, chaired by a senior High Court Judge, assisted by lay experts from both sides of industry. Having abandoned the closed shop, and recognised the right

not to join a trade union (as set out in the European Social Charter) the Review affirms the Party's advocacy of one-hundred percent union membership at the workplace.

This is all very interesting, and is symptomatic of the Party's encouraging willingness to recognise many of its past mistakes, and a welcome realism about the major political imperatives and constraints of the 1990s; no doubt a good deal of it will be further glossed and patched in the run up to the election. But the tone of the document – like the image of the Party itself – remains resiliently a bit old fashioned. Amid the new harmonies, one can hear the depressing echo of a lot of very old and discordant tunes: the part of the document dealing with trade union law in a case in point. Peter Jenkins, writing in *The Independent* on May 16 put the sympathetic sceptic's viewpoint very well, if a shade brutally: "the new document addresses the party's problems more roundly than it does the country's".