Chapter VII

Conclusion

The forgoing analysis shows that the split in the Labour Party in 1981 was not the result of a sudden development, but a logical culmination of a series of wrangling persistent within the Labour party for a long time. Organisational matters, constitutional questions and major national and international issues had equally contributed to the split.

Historically speaking, the seeds of split in the Labour Party were very much embedded from the very foundation of the party. As a unified set up for its various constituents like the trade unions, the Fabian Society, etc., with divergent ideological and functional approaches on various questions, it suffered from tensions within the party from time to time. Moreover, there was an ongoing tussle between the trade unions and the rest of the Party organisation over the extent of their say in party matters.

It may be recalled that the Labour Party was born out of the desire of the trade unions to have their representation inside Parliament to promote their interest. But the party, over a period of time, grew beyond this mould and began to view issues from a much wider angle, than from an exclusively narrow angle emerged differing perception between the Unions and the organisational wing of the Party on various important questions. Indeed, the trade unions and the Party, as organisations, operated in
contrasting environments. While the unions presented themselves as conservative institutions, protecting sectional interests, the party. On the other hand, was dominated by its parliamentary elite and sought social reforms. But professionalised trade unionism and reformist Parliamentary politics were institutionally not on the same wavelength. Of course, this was notwithstanding the fact that, while for the Unions the historic connection of the party provided a political lobby to protect their class interests, for the party, the connection provided the necessary finance to maintain its political organisation. However, till late 1940s the relationship between the trade unions with the party was smooth mainly because of three factors; (a) the fundamental weakness of the Parliamentary Labour Party; (b) the wide spread economic depression and ominous spectre of dictatorship and. (c) the trade union activism in politics and their initiatives on foreign policy.

But, in the early 1950s, the stress in the relationship became discernible. Aneurin Bevan, the leading trade unionist, and his supporters demonstrated fundamental disagreement with the Labour party on the issues of nationalisation, defence and foreign policy. In the late 1950, the stress was further exacerbated by the development of “a revisionist school of socialism” within the Labour movement. Anthony Crossland’s ‘Future of socialism’ decried the class nature and industrial militancy of the unions. The ‘revisionists’, unlike the old labour ‘right’, were initiators of change and were attacking the ‘class consciousness’ of the unionists which aroused the sensibility of the trade unions.
Following the Labour’s third successive electoral defeat in 1959, the revisionist school was increasingly anxious to dissociate the party from the ‘cloth cap’ image which its links with the unions gave it. In addition, they criticised control of the trade unions over the party, and the decision-making in the union. The unions were not only critical of ‘socialist panacea’ of the revisionists, they were also anxious to show their political independence and autonomy to negotiate on behalf of their members. The inevitable conflicts between the party’s revisionists’ including Hugh Gaitskell and disaffected elements within the Unions, centred on issues like clause IV of the party constitution, industrial democracy and unilateral disarmament debates. Gaitskell wished to qualify Clause IV with declarations of socialist values other than nationalization, which implied acceptance of mixed economy. The trade union opposition to Clause IV represented the innate conservatism and sentimentality of the Union leadership. Harold Wilson, however secured the consent of trade unions to his voluntary income policy, by the rhetoric of the technological revolution which would lead to sustained and real growth. In 1971, the trade unions and labour party came to some formal agreement, when persons like Jack Jones, of the TUC urged an end to the stress and strain between the trade union and the intellectual wings of the party. David Basnett (GMWU) spoke of the need or argument on the broad lines of an equitable economic and social development. In January 1972, TUC – Labour Party Liaison Committee known as ‘Social Contract’ was formed. While social contract was a way of reconciling the trade unionism with the governmental objectives of the party it also encapsulated the seeds of stress. While on the trade union side expectation that the union was the vehicle of their aspirations lead to the growing
disenchantment with incomes policy, the constraint on the government side was the fear of destabilising and inherited mixed economy, and the desire to retain broad electoral support.

The phenomenal growth of the 'Left' in the Labour Party was another factor which precipitated the split in the Labour party. Of course, the 'Left' has its ancestors in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the Social Democratic Federation (SDF). Although SDF abandoned the Labour Representation Committee in disgust in 1901, it continued to have influence, and had occasionally shaped Labour Left Policies. The Fabian – intellectual, aloof and riven with feud – took little interest in the Labour Movement and even less in the party which they had helped to found. Thus, from the earliest days, the ILP wielded the most vocal, powerful and ambitious influence and was the source of many of the traditions and attitudes, which was later regarded as the Left Wing.

The adoption of the Party constitution in 1918 was an important event so far as the battle between the Left and Right was concerned in the later years in the party. The inclusion of Clause IV, which called for nationalisation, and control of each industry and service, was a triumph for the 'Left'. Indeed Clause IV gave the Labour Party an official socialist colouring, which had been rejected in 1900. Although Clause IV was accepted without much controversy, it became a live issue after the General Election in 1959 when it was felt by Gaitskell, that it caused harm to Labour's image.
In one sense, 1918 Party Constitution was a victory for the ‘Right’ also. Arthur Henderson, one of the co-authors of the Constitution, made the trades councils, and Labour Representation Committee, and not the myriad branches of the ILP, the main bases of the party organisation made it possible for anybody to be a direct member of the Labour Party without being a member of an affiliated society or union. This, in effect, destroyed the traditional role of the ILP as the main body responsible for political activity in the constituencies. Thus, ILP could no longer act as a catchall body for Labour activists and became, instead, a faction placed uncomfortably in competition with the new individual members’ section that grew fast in size and importance. In the later years, a deep and lasting hostility developed between these groups, the electoral oriented Parliamentary Leadership, and the semi-revolutionary outer fringe consisting of the ILP and other extreme groups.

Aneurin Bevan’s decision in 1951 to resign from office, followed by Harold Wilson, and John Freeman inaugurated a period of factional warfare of unprecedented bitterness, which for a time seemed to split the party. Bevan had pointed to a basic conflict over the party’s purpose and argued that revisionism attacked Socialist doctrine at its heart. In mid 1950, Bevan and Anthony Crossland shared many opinions, but their conflicts were not over principles, but over the extent of action: how much support for American foreign policy, how many arms and how many industries to be run by the state. At that time, tradition and approach divided the party into rival groups, but was held together by bonds of trust and friendship.
Labour’s third consecutive defeat at the polls in 1959 renewed the hostilities. Hugh Gaitskell’s attempt to remove nationalisation from the party constitution in the belief that nationalization programme caused loss of votes for the Labour Party, brought a predictable outcry from the ‘Left’. But, Gaitskell’s attempt was defeated by the Trade Unions, rather by the ‘Left’. Another plan, set out by Barbara Castle, then Minister of Employment and Productivity, in 1969, designed to limit the number of strikes was rejected by the trade unions. The plan called ‘In place of strife’ was bitterly opposed by the trade union MPs.

The retreat over ‘In place of strife’ was certainly a victory for the Trade Unions, than for the Labour Left. But, it was important for the labour Left, none less as it effected a shift in the alliances within the movement, which had profoundly affected Labour politics through out the following decade. The strength of the ‘Left’ within the two major unions—the Transport and General workers union and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (which together controlled almost a third of the total vote at the party conference) determined the issue. After 1974, the Labour government faced more or less consistent ‘Left-wing’ opposition from the NEC.

In the post 1970 election defeat, the pro-common marketers became identified with the Labour ‘Right’, while the Labour ‘Left’, led by Michael Foot, represented a rejection of both parliamentary sovereignty and participation in a ‘capitalist club’-the EEC. However, the Labour government referendum on the EEC in 1975 showed that the Labour party was controlled by the ‘Left’, with a trade union based national
executive and conference backed by the constituency activists, looking towards one
direction and parliamentary leadership looking in towards the other.

Meanwhile, the "left wing" influence encouraged the adoption of more radical
'platforms' for the party. The "Labour's programme for Britain 1973", the basis for
the Election Manifesto 1974 called for a massive and irreversible shift in the
distribution of wealth and income in favour of the working people, a phrase which
represented a different mood from that of parliamentary Labour party, and was
ignored.

The party's shift to the 'left' adversely affected the strength of the PLP and
strengthened the constituency parties. Two prominent right wingers-Dick Taverene at
Lincoln and Reginald Prentice at Newham North-East were rejected by their 'left
wing' constituency parties (with approval of the 'left-leaning' NEC). In 1978, the
traditional relationship between the constituency labour parties (CLP) and the MP
was almost blown by the Militant Campaign for Labour Party Democracy. The
election defeat in May 1979 set the process of left onslaught on the rightwing PLP
leadership. Overturning the decision of the previous year, the Conference accepted
the principle of mandatory re-selection of Labour MPs once in every Parliament and
also gave the NEC the ultimate control over the Party's Election Manifesto.

Having deprived the PLP of its traditional privilege of writing the manifesto, the
Labour Left planned to curtail the PLP's right to select the leader of the Party. Their
1983 election was the smallest since 1935. The decline in the electoral popularity of Conservatives was also unmistakable if one looked at the percentage of votes since 1951. It got 48 percent in 1951, 46 per cent in 1970, 44 per cent in 1979 and 42 per cent in 1983. Similarly the Labour got just 28 percent in 1983 compared to its 37 percent in 1970. But it was the strongest showing by the Centre party, the SDP-liberal alliance, since 1923.

The presence of the SDP–Liberal Alliance in British politics could not be just wished away if one took into account the 1983 election results. The Alliance received as much popular votes as the Labour Party. Its total 7,776,065, compared to the Labour Party’s 8,460,860 votes, just a little over 6 lakh of votes the Alliance got, though the Alliance got only 23 seats in the House of Commons. These results were to open up a debate in the country about the faulty nature of the electoral system, which is still heavily staked against the minority parties. There are already two important pressure groups, the Electoral Reform Society, which wants to introduce the Single Transferable Vote (STV) and then campaign for Electoral reform, which wants proportional representation (PR). SDP was likely to change the nature of British politics if a change in the electoral system was effected. However, one should not see the role of the new party in terms of replacing the Labour party, and restoring fundamentally the two party systems as it occurred when the Labour replaced the Liberals in 1920s. Instead, if the SDP succeeded, it would have transformed British Politics into a multi-party coalition System.
manoeuvrability in the Party Conference and their calculated efforts in making inroads into the trade unions, the CLP stalwarts led the conference to decide for an Electoral College to choose the Leader of the Party. The voting share given to PLP was almost of no significance and the right of 'selection' belonged to the Trade Unions and the Constituency Labour Parties, consisting of militant elements, who now had an easier and institutionalised procedure for discarding their MPs if they did not find them obliging.

However, all these developments pushing the Labour Party into the hands of 'Left' extremists made the moderates Social Democrats like William Rodgers, Shirley Williams and David Owen feel very uncomfortable. Adding to their disappointment with the changes in the Party Constitution were the views held by the Party Conference on foreign policy questions. Party Conferences decision for Britain's unconditional withdrawal from the EEC, and NATO, its commitment to unilateral disarmament, etc., had convinced the moderates, like Owen, that the attitude of the Labour Party was going against the trend of Social Democratic Parties in Western Europe, as well as against the trend of public opinion. Further, there was little chance for the 'right wing' to reverse the trend, since the counterattack to the increasing assault of the 'Left' was unorganised and weak. Therefore, the so-called 'Gang of Four', decided to break the political mould in Britain, sought a fundamental realignment in British Politics, and founded the Social Democratic Party.
On the part of the left, there was unwillingness to recognise that there was gradual shrinking of Party's base in 1980s, the left could not advance its policies without deepening its base of support in the working class outside the party. In stead of realising that there was need of period of consolidation, the pressure to advance within the party's structure was maintained. This eventually backfired as the trade unions exasperated of Tory Party's anti-union policies, started to bounce back to the centre. This was reflection of their own industrial weakness and the political weakness of the left to confront Thatcherism.

However, the left-right fights which rocked Labour in 1979-83 took place against the backdrop of relentless assault on working class power and socialist ideas by Thatcher government. Mot importantly, the split of the party and the birth of the SDP in 1981 had a traumatic impact on the electoral fortunes of the Labour party. Yet, the left of the Labour party went on their own way as if they were oblivious of the consequences of their policies and of the developments within the party.

The foundation of the Social Democratic Party provoked a genuine interest and excitement on an unexpected scale among the British electorate. The launching of the Party was accompanied by the declaration of the 'Twelve Tasks for Britain', which constituted a broad outline of the Party policy. By studying the policies and the electoral strategy of the SDP, and more important, the British Political System, one could judge whether SDP would stand up to the euphoria it had created in the beginning. The 'Gang of Four' had constantly stressed the freshness of their policies.
and approach. Their support for Britain's continued membership of the EEC, and their opposition to the unilateral disarmament and neutralism had clearly set the SDP apart from much of the rest of the Labour Party. Similarly, the SDP leaders are fairly committed to the cause of constitutional reforms aimed at Proportional Representation, more open government, greater parliamentary control over the civil service, and state financing of political parties.

In the end, question that naturally arose was: what were the implications of the formation of the SDP in British Politics? In the past, minority parties like Liberal Unionists, Asquithian Liberals, Commonwealth party etc., passed on to oblivion without making much impact on British politics. But, the birth of SDP has taken place in different circumstances. The traditional and class dominated pattern of political behaviour seemed to be breaking down in Britain. A declining post-industrial society appeared to be rejecting centralisation and concentration of power and wealth and demanding devolution. Moreover the British people are opposed to any kind of extreme, be it left or right, the mood of the country is more moderate and tolerant.

On the other hand, the electoral popularity of both the major parties was declining, as has been shown by the 1983 General Elections. Labour Party's electoral base had eroded since it still sang the old class tunes. Its total number of seats 209 it got after 1983 election was the smallest since 1935. The decline in the electoral popularity of Conservatives was also unmistakable if one looked at the percentage of votes since 1951. It got 48 percent in 1951, 46 per cent in 1970, 44 per cent in 1979 and 42 per
However, that was not to be. The SDP itself split in 1987 on the issue of merger with Liberals. While one faction of the party led by Roy Jenkins merged with the Liberals to form the new Liberal democratic Party, the remainder of the SDP led by David Owen maintained the distinct identity of the SDP, but could not sustain for long and disappeared into political oblivion. The promised realignment of political forces could not last long. Yet, the political space for the centre-left politics remained vacant.

In the Labour Party, there was serious rethinking on the issues that split the party along with radical overhauling of the party organisation. Neil Kinnock vowed to take on the Militant Tendency and ultra left groups in the Constituency Parties. The Militant Tendency was Trotskyite “entryst” group, which had managed to gain influence in some areas in the country but always acted in way aloof from the rest of the left. Neil Kinnock sought to expel some of them from the party on the charges of corruption and anti-party activities, and intimidation of opponents. In 1986, leading Militant members were expelled in Liverpool.

The trade unions were to be tamed in terms of introducing mass democracy instead of controversial block votes. One-man one vote (OMOV) became a popular slogan under the leadership of John Smith after Neil Kinnock. If Kinnock started the purge, John Smith worked on the internal democracy of the party, then Tony Blair sought to refurbish the ideological image of the party by bringing in radical reforms, most significant of those was the dropping of the clause iv of the party constitution.
The clause iv had become a burden on the image of the Labour Party for a long time.
Although in practice, most Social Democratic Parties in the continent dropped the idea of public ownership, the Labour Party was clinging on to it as, according to the left of the party, it represented the soul and the spirit of the party. After 4 successive defeats in 1979, 83, 87, and 92, the Labour Party was bracing itself for fundamental reforms in the Party. Tony Blair argued about the heavy price the Party was paying in each election and rallied the party around dropping and rewriting it. The removal of the clause had divisive impact on the party. Some of the trade union leaders led by the president of the Miners Union left the party to form their own party. But the massive victory of the Labour Party in the May 1997 General elections marginalised the negative impact and set Labour on the course to renewal of the Party and the country wrecked in many sectors by 18 years of Tory rule.

Although the Social Democratic Party almost disintegrated, its policies were vindicated as the Labour Party adopted almost all the policies-ideological, foreign policy issues, economic issues, defence policy, organisational issues like election of the party leader, writing of he manifesto and so on. In fact, since 1987, it was regaining of control by the so-called right of the party. In future, if the Labour Party failed to deliver, it may face the wrath of the left once again, but it will be a different situation as this time the party has come on a new agenda, new politics and a new consensus on a platform of social justice with marketisation. Tony Blair’s concept of socialism aimed at preservation of its principles not the strategy is appealing to the

*see Appendix-I for the old and the new clause iv and the new aims and objectives of the party.*
people at the moment. Although the left of the Party supported Tony Blair initially to get rid of Conservatives, there seemed to be a serious rethinking on the socialism of the present day. The traditional left of the party accuse Labour of carrying on with the Thatcherite legacy with differentiated style and a different rhetoric. None the less, with Conservatives in disarray, and a new image of the labour, the latter is on the rise until it makes a dreadful mistake or is caught in sleaze or other controversies, it is unlikely that the present consensus under Tony Blair will be disturbed.