Preface

The split in the British Labour party and the subsequent formation of the Social Democratic party in January 1981 marked a major development in the British political scene which had far reaching implications for British politics. Historically, the Labour Party had all the characteristics of a coalition of different well demarcated groups like the trade unions, the co-operative societies, the tribune groups, the Fabians the Moderates, the Leftists and so on. As these inner party groups had maintained different ideological perspectives, there was constant division amongst them about party priorities and approaches to different issues which came from in Britain from time to time. Besides the ideological differences, there was tension in the party amongst the constituents over the constitution of the party, election of the leader, drawing up of the party manifesto, foreign policy, economic issue etc. However, such differences had not reached point of split until 1981.

The rift in the party was brewing up from 1959 onwards, following the third successive defeat of the party in General Elections which led to a debate between the moderates and the leftists over the party's ideology—mainly the interpretation of the clause IV of the Party constitution. In 1969, the divide between the party and the trade unions became wider when the former attacked the corporate position of the trade unions. The Labour left became more critical of the official line of the party after the
defeat of the party in 1979 General elections. At the 1979 Party Annual Conference
the left made an advance by seeking greater accountability of the Parliamentary Party
and more power to the party conference.

Constitutional issues were exacerbated by the formation of a group called ‘Campaign
for Labour Party Democracy (CLPD) by some extreme elements in the party. This
group, with the support of some trade unions, brought in changes in the election of
the leader, writing the election manifesto, and selection of the parliamentary
candidates by the constituency parties, much the discomfiture of the moderates. The
moderates in the party protested by reminding that the founding fathers of the Labour
Party, themselves trade unionists, deliberately decided not to create a Trade union
party but to establish a constitution for the Labour Party that made it national party.
However, their opposition was outorganised by the CLPD. Added to the
organisational matters were other important foreign policy issues like British
membership of the European Community, unilateral disarmament. Following the
gradual weakening of the Moderates in face of ascendancy of the left in the party, the
former resigned from the party and formed a rival Social Democratic Party. This
became a turning point in the history of the Labour party. Both organisational and
ideological changes and the formation a new party caused realignment in British
politics, made the Labour party unpopular with the electorate and pushed it o
opposition for 17 long years until 1997.
The objective of this study is to analyse the factors which led to the split and its implications for British politics on the established two-party system and on the centrist politics of the county in general. The third objective of the study is to examine the nature and extent of differences between the Labour Party and the Social Democratic party on various issues.

The study is analytical in character and was carried out on the basis of the primary and secondary material available in India and the United Kingdom. The author had the opportunity to interview number of leaders on both sides of the ideological spectrum—the left in the Labour Party and the moderates who constituted the Social Democratic Party. During the field work, the Annual party Conferences of both Labour party and the Social Democratic Party were also attended.

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