Chapter 2. *1979-83: Weak Agency and Labour's Electoral Nadir*

Introduction

The period from 1979 to 1983 represented, in more ways than one, a nadir for the Labour Party. The 1974-9 government was brought down on a vote of no confidence following a winter of industrial action. Many felt that Callaghan should have called the election in late 1978, when Labour's electoral prospects seemed better, and in hindsight it appears difficult to disagree. Nonetheless, on May 3, 1979, the Conservative Party won a majority of 43 seats in the House of Commons, and Margaret Thatcher became Britain's first woman prime minister.

Table 2.1: **British General Election Results, 1979 and 1983.**[1]

Party	MPs		% Share of Votes	
	1979	1983	1979	1983
Conservative	339	397	43.9	42.4
Labour	269	209	36.9	27.6
Lib/SDP Alliance	11	23	13.8	25.4
Plaid Cymru	2	2	0.4	0.4
Scottish National Party	2	2	1.6	1.1
Others	12	17	3.4	3.1
Total	635	650	100.0	100.0

Within the next four years things went from bad to worse for Labour. The Party experienced a period of intense in-fighting which undermined the Party's credibility and led to the creation in 1981 of a new centre-left party in the shape of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). At the 1983 general election, as Table 2.1 shows, the Party barely managed to finish in second place behind the Conservatives in terms of votes won, and had its worst electoral performance (in terms of its share of total votes cast) since the First World War.

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[1] Source: Butler and Butler, 1994: 219.

It was argued above that, from a dialectical understanding of the structure and agency relationship, structures can either constrain or facilitate agents in their quest for electoral success, and that agents can often transform structures through strategic behaviour. It should be remembered that in the discussion of the impact of both internal and external structures on agents, the agents in question at each level of the framework (respectively, the Party Leadership and the Labour Party *qua* collective agent) are regarded as office-seekers whose primary goals are electoral success. Although it will become apparent in the examination of internal structures that other actors within the Party may have goals which are more concerned with, for example, achieving ideological purity, these actors are not considered to be the focus of the study, since they have never been representative of either the Party's Parliamentary Leadership or the Party as a whole. In this chapter it will become clear that structural factors undoubtedly acted as constraints on both the Party and its leadership during the period from 1979 to 1983 in several areas identified in the framework, and that agents seemed, for the most part, incapable of transforming these structures to their, and the Party's immediate electoral advantage. The discussion of this period begins by examining internal structural factors which affected the ability of agents within the Party to advance Labour's electoral interests, before considering the impact of external structural factors on the Party as a collective agent in the second part of the chapter. Data principally from the 1983 British Election Study are used to examine the relationships between structural factors and electoral behaviour.[2]

I. *Internal Structural Factors: Labour's Civil War*

> *A political party does not truly exist unless it is divided against itself.* -- Hegel[3]

i. Organisational Change and the Left's Ascendancy

In the period from 1979 to 1983 there were a number of changes made to the organisational structure of the Labour Party which were to constrain the Party's leaders in the Shadow Cabinet

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[2] The 1983 British Election Study was directed by Anthony Heath, Roger Jowell, and John Curtice. The data are based upon face-to-face interviews with 3955 respondents who were eligible to vote in the 1983 election. For the technical details of the study, see Heath *et al.* (1985), Appendices I-III. This chapter also draws upon data from the British Election Studies of 1974 (October) and 1979, which were directed by David Robertson, Ivor Crewe, and Bo Särlvik. Unless otherwise indicated, the original directors of these studies bear no responsibility for any analyses and interpretations contained herein.

[3] Quoted in Heffernan & Marqusee (1992: 205).

and the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP).[4] These changes were in response to what those on the left of the Party saw as an act of 'betrayal' on the part of Jim Callaghan's government, which like most Labour governments, was dominated by right-wingers. The angry mood of the Party at large became quite apparent at the 1979 Labour Party Conference (held in the autumn following the election defeat), where a number of delegates sharply criticised the Callaghan government, in particular for ignoring the views of the Conference and the National Executive Committee (NEC) both when formulating government policy and in drafting the 1979 election manifesto. To a sympathetic audience of delegates, Tom Litterick, a former MP who lost his seat at the election in May, said:

> ... Speaking of fiascos, I have in my hand a sheaf of documents, each one is labelled "Labour Party Campaign Handbook". ... It was these documents that your NEC sought to incorporate in our election manifesto this year. Then, one day in April of this year, Jim Callaghan turned up, and [throwing the documents to the floor] this is what he did to your policies. The end result was that fatuous vacuous document called 'The
> Labour Party Election Manifesto of 1979'. 'Jim will fix it,' they said. Ay, he fixed it. He fixed all of us. He fixed me in particular.
> *(Applause)* (*RACLP*, *1979*: 186)[5]

In an atmosphere described by one commentator as 'poisonous', the prevailing view amongst delegates, and reinforced by the Party's General Secretary Ron Hayward, was that the Party lost the 1979 election because the PLP and the Shadow Cabinet had ignored the views of the NEC and Conference. Thus, the left of the Party, which now dominated the NEC and many Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs), was keen to ensure that this would be less likely to happen in the future.

This was not an entirely new argument. The 'Campaign for Labour Party Democracy' group (CLPD) was established in 1973 for this purpose, but its proposals were taken more seriously after the 1979 defeat. Specifically, the CLPD proposed three amendments to the Party Constitution which would fundamentally alter Labour's organisational structure. Firstly, it sought the mandatory re-selection of all sitting Labour MPs, a move designed to make members of the PLP more accountable to constituency activists; secondly, it proposed that the election of the

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[4] At this point, it is necessary to point out that Labour's parliamentary leaders almost always come from the right-wing of the Party, and on the occasions when a left-winger reached a high position of power, he or she invariably moved to the right as well. Therefore, when one speaks of individual agents within the Party, one is usually referring to leaders in the Shadow Cabinet or the PLP who were on the right of the Party. The import of this distinction should become apparent below.

[5] Throughout this thesis '*RACLP*' is used as shorthand for the *Report of the Annual Conference of the Labour Party*, so that, for example, '*RACLP*, *1979*' refers to the 1979 Conference report. Note that the year refers to the *Conference* year, and *not* the year of publication (which is usually the year after).

Party Leader and Deputy Leader should be a matter for the entire Party (i.e., the PLP, CLPs, and affiliated organisations such as the trade unions) and not the PLP alone (which was the current arrangement); and thirdly, it proposed that the final responsibility for the content of election manifestos should rest with the NEC alone, and not jointly with the Cabinet or Shadow Cabinet Ministers.

The issue of mandatory re-selection of MPs was most controversial since, in the eyes of many MPs on the right of the Party, such a procedure would undermine the independence of MPs and make them accountable to only a relatively small number of activists rather than the constituency as a whole. This would place a considerable constraint on MPs, especially those who disagreed with their constituency activists, and would increase the left's influence in the Party. This policy, however, had the full support of the NEC, which -- crucially -- was now dominated by left-wing MPs such as Tony Benn, Eric Heffer, Dennis Skinner, and Frank Allaun.[6] The 1979 Conference approved a proposal to examine the issue of re-selection and suggest a Constitutional amendment which would be placed before the 1980 Conference. At that conference, the amendment was passed by 3,798,000 votes for to 3,341,000 against (*RACLP*, *1980*: 297).[7] Under the new rules therefore, all MPs faced a larger degree of constraint and uncertainty in their actions, since any Member whose opinions differed from their local constituency activists now faced the prospect of losing their jobs, even if they were preferred by the majority of the constituency's electorate.

The second proposed amendment to the Party Constitution related to the election of the Party Leader and Deputy-Leader. According to Clause VI of the Party Constitution, the Party Leader and Deputy-Leader were elected by the PLP alone. It was the view of the CLPD, however, as well as activists and MPs on the left of the Party, that the franchise should be extended to the wider Labour movement, again in order to dilute the right's control and influence over Party affairs. An unsuccessful attempt was made to pass an amendment at the 1979 Conference which would have established an electoral college, but the matter was raised again at the next year's

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[6] The Labour Party's National Executive Committee was divided into four sections for the purposes of electing its members: Division I comprised of Trade Union representatives (elected by the Unions themselves); Division II consisted of a representative elected by socialist societies (e.g., the Fabian Society); Division III was elected by the Constituency Labour Parties; and Division IV consisted of women members, to ensure that women were represented on the NEC. Traditionally, the right had dominated the NEC, but now the left had the majority. The MPs mentioned above (Benn *et al.*) were all elected in Division III (CLPs), an indicator of the left-wing make-up of most CLPs at the time.

[7] At this time, the high figures were due to the trade union 'block votes', which reflected the size of the unions, rather than the individual members of the Labour Party itself. Under the block voting system, trade unions controlled ninety per cent of votes at the Party Conference.

Conference.[8] A number of proposals and formulae were suggested in relation to the composition of the planned 'electoral college' (which would also elect the Deputy-Leader), and indeed the Annual Conference of 1980 was unable to reach agreement on the issue. The final decision was therefore carried over to a Special Conference held in January 1981.

At the Special Conference held in London, proposals for the composition of the electoral college fell into four categories:

> *i.* 30 per cent of the votes would come from the PLP, 30 per cent from the CLPs, and 40 per cent from affiliated organisations (30:30:40);
> *ii.* 33 per cent of votes to each of the PLP, CLPs, and affiliated organisations (33:33:33);
> *iii.* 50 per cent to the PLP, and 25 per cent to the CLPs and affiliated organisations respectively (50:25:25); or,
> *iv.* an electoral college consisting of all *individual* members of the Party on the basis of 'one member, one vote' (OMOV). (Seyd, 1987: 118-9).

Of the four choices outlined above, the second option was the original NEC proposal, the first was an amendment proposed by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW), the third choice was favoured by the PLP (for obvious reasons), whilst the fourth option was proposed by Dr David Owen and Bill Rodgers, two senior right-wing MPs who were alarmed by the left's seizure of the Party.

To the dismay of the PLP and the right-wing of the Party, it was the first option which won the day, largely thanks to the 429,000 strong USDAW block vote (Seyd, 1987: 121), and the crucial abstention of the AUEW.[9] Anticipating that the PLP would lose control over the Party leadership however, Jim Callaghan had since retired as Leader, so that his successor could be elected under the old system. Only two serious candidates emerged: Michael Foot, Callaghan's deputy who was seen as the only candidate who may have been able to unite the Party, and Denis Healey, the former Chancellor who came from the right of the Party. Foot narrowly defeated Healey, who in turn became the Deputy-Leader. After the electoral college system had taken effect, Tony Benn challenged Healey for the Deputy-Leadership; not only did he fail to defeat the incumbent, but more significantly, his actions also split the left-wing of the party into two factions.

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[8] An examination of the votes cast at the 1979 Conference on the issues of mandatory re-selection and the election of the Party Leader shows that in one case -- mandatory re-selection -- the vote was carried with a majority of over 900,000 votes, but on the issue of electing the Party Leader, the motion was *defeated* by almost the same margin (*RACLP*, *1979*: 454). This was due to the 928,000 strong block vote cast by the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW). Fascinatingly, McSmith (1996: 118ff) tells how the AUEW delegation was divided equally on each issue, and so their vote, and thus future Labour rules, ultimately depended upon one uncommitted delegate, Jim Murray, "a shop steward from Tyneside [who] once held the future of the Labour Party in his hands" (1996: 118).

[9] See note 8.

Only the CLPD's third proposal, which wanted to give the NEC sole control over the content of election manifestos, was narrowly defeated at the 1980 Conference (see below), but this represented only a pyrrhic victory for the Shadow Cabinet and the right. The decision concerning the manifestos was the only major vote which the left-dominated NEC lost during the Conference week (see *RACLP*, *1980*: 289-303).

In summary, it is clear that changes to the Labour Party's organisational structure instigated by the left constrained agents in the Shadow Cabinet. For the first time, they lost control over the NEC, which became dominated by the left with the result that a divide appeared in the Party between the Parliamentary Leadership and the rest of the Party. Moreover, any Labour Member of Parliament not agreeing with the radical policies favoured by many of the CLPs now faced deselection by their local Parties. Thus, agents in the Parliamentary Leadership effectively lost control of the Party at large, making it more difficult to present a disciplined Party to the electorate. The inability of agents within the Party to do anything to overcome these new constraints had two major consequences with regard to the Labour Party's future electoral hopes, which will be discussed more fully below: it allowed a series of radical policies to be passed by Conference which proved to be unpopular with the electorate and most of the Shadow Cabinet, and it ultimately led to the decision taken by several right-wingers to leave the Labour Party to form the Social Democratic Party.

Table 2.2: **Respondents' Perceptions of Unity and Divisions in Major Parties, 1983[10]**

Respondents' Views of Political Parties:	*Political Party:*	
	Conservative Party	Labour Party
United (%)	69.8	8.1
Divided (%)	23.9	88.1
Neither or both (%)	2.5	1.1
Don't know (%)	3.8	2.8
Total	100.0	100.1
(N)	(3952)	(3949)

An examination of data from the 1983 British Election Study suggests that the divisions in the Party between the left-wing NEC and CLPs, and the right-wing PLP and Shadow Cabinet did

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[10] Source: 1983 British Election Study. In this and subsequent tables column totals may not always equal one-hundred due to rounding.

little to encourage voters to support the Labour Party in the general election. Several years of in-fighting and Party Conferences dominated by disagreements and defeats for the Leadership gave voters the not unreasonable perception that the Party was hopelessly divided.

Table 2.2 displays respondents' perceptions of unity in the two major parties. Whilst almost seventy per cent of respondents believed that the Conservative Party was united, only a little over eight per cent thought the same of Labour. In contrast, nearly ninety per cent of respondents thought that the Labour Party was divided. When the same data are cross-tabulated with the respondents' voting behaviour in Table 2.3, it is shown that, unsurprisingly, almost three-quarters of those who thought that Labour was divided voted for other parties. Although the data are not shown here, even amongst Labour voters, the number of respondents believing the Party was divided was extremely high.

Table 2.3: Vote by Respondents' Perceptions of Labour Party, 1983 (percentages)[11]

Party Voted for in 1983:	*View of Labour in 1983:*			
	United	Divided	Neither or both	Don't Know
Conservative	18.7	47.7	32.2	45.1
Labour	65.2	25.1	54.3	31.2
Alliance	7.8	13.8	10.2	7.7
Liberal	4.3	9.1	3.2	11.8
SDP	1.8	3.1	0.0	2.9
Others	2.2	1.3	0.0	1.3
Total	100.0	100.1	99.9	100.0
(N)	252	2853	29	70

χ^2= 201.747, df=15 (p<.001).

Given that such large numbers of respondents thought that the Labour Party was divided, it is not surprising to find that many also questioned Michael Foot's leadership abilities. A series of

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[11] Source: 1983 British Election Study. In all tables in which there are separate columns for 'Alliance', 'Liberal' and 'SDP', the 'Alliance' column represents respondents who voted for or preferred an 'Alliance' candidate or policy, but could not identify whether the candidate or policy was from the Liberals or the SDP. In order to identify the total number of respondents choosing the 'SDP/Liberal Alliance' therefore, the figures in the three columns need to be combined.

questions were asked relating to respondents' approval of the major party leaders in the British Election Study, and in most cases Foot trailed badly behind all of the other leaders. Table 2.4 relates to a question which asked which leader was 'most likely to get the most out of a team'. Fewer than one in twelve respondents thought Foot to be the most capable leader in this regard, and the overwhelming majority of these voters voted Labour. In contrast, those who preferred other leaders (especially Thatcher and Steel) were more evenly spread across *all* parties, suggesting that Foot was unable to inspire confidence in all but the Labour faithful. Although Foot's dithering leadership style was not contrasted favourably with Mrs Thatcher's 'conviction' approach to leadership -- summed up in her famous phrase 'There Is No Alternative' -- it could also be said that Foot was thought to be less likely to get the most out of his team simply because, to use a sporting analogy, it was not entirely clear whether all of his team were kicking towards the same goal. This is not to say that the Conservatives were completely united, but the nature of Labour's organisational structure made its divisions more apparent.

Table 2.4: **Vote by Party Leader Most Likely to Get the Most Out of a Team, 1983 (percentages)[12]**

Party Voted for in 1983:	Party Leader:				
	Thatcher	Foot	Jenkins	Steel	None, DK
Conservative	68.7	3.3	17.3	19.9	29.4
Labour	15.9	91.0	35.4	29.7	41.8
Alliance	8.3	3.4	25.9	23.1	15.3
Liberal	4.9	1.6	12.8	19.3	6.8
SDP	1.5	0.0	6.8	6.0	3.0
Others	0.7	0.7	1.8	2.0	3.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
(N)	1695	251	199	745	309

χ^2=1268.510, df=20 (p<.001).

Whilst it is not possible to establish causal relationships between voters' perceptions of disunity in the Labour Party and voting behaviour using survey data collected after the fact, it is not inconceivable to suggest that Labour's internal problems were harmful to their electoral fortunes.

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[12] Source: 1983 British Election Study.

In their own analysis of the data in *How Britain Votes*, Heath *et al.* state that although no-one can be sure how a united Labour Party would have made a difference to the outcome, they "[do] not ... deny that disunity damaged Labour" (1985: 165).

ii. Party Policy and the 1983 Manifesto

The Labour Party's rules regarding the formulation of party policy and its electoral programmes are set out in Clause V of the Party Constitution:

> 1. The Party Conference shall decide from time to time what specific proposals of legislative, financial or administrative reform shall
> be included in the Party Programme.
> No proposal shall be involved in the Party Programme unless it has been adopted by the Party Conference by a majority of not less than two-thirds of the votes recorded on a card vote.
> 2. The National Executive Committee and the Parliamentary Committee of the Parliamentary Labour Party shall decide which items from the Party Programme shall be included in the Manifesto which shall
> be issued by the National Executive Committee prior to every General Election. The Joint Meeting of the two Committees shall also define the attitude of the Party to the principal issues raised by the Election which are not covered by the Manifesto. (*RACLP*, *1982*: 260)

The nature of policy-making in the Labour Party in the period from 1979 to 1983 is somewhat unusual. Unlike other decision-making structures which have already been discussed above, where Party rules initially favoured agents in the Shadow Cabinet and the PLP (e.g., in electing the Leader), but were changed to constrain the power of these agents in the Party's decision-making framework, the Constitutional rules regarding the Party Programme were more ambiguous. Whilst the formal basis for policy-making lay with the Party Conference -- the 'parliament of the Party' -- and the manifestos were the joint responsibility of the Shadow Cabinet and the NEC, during the Callaghan government it was the Shadow Cabinet which had *de facto* control over both areas. Here was an example then, of agents informally transforming the nature of decision-making structures within the Party in order to improve, in their view at least, the Party's chances of electoral success. In the aftermath of the 1979 defeat, however, this arrangement came in for much criticism.

In a report written by Geoff Bish, then the Secretary of the Party's Research Department (reprinted in Coates (ed.), 1979), the complaint was made that the PLP, and the Labour government in particular, were paying little attention to either resolutions passed at Conference, or policy proposals emanating from the NEC. "Despite all our efforts to prepare careful and detailed proposals," wrote Bish, "the status of the NEC vis-à-vis the Labour Government was, in practice, that of a pressure group, just one among many" (1979: 164). As far as the extra-

Parliamentary Party's role in government decision-making was concerned, the situation was no better, with Bish complaining that the opinions of other major interests such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the City, and the TUC carried more weight than the NEC (1979: 165).

What was more galling in the eyes of the Party at large, however, was the manner in which the 1979 election manifesto was drawn up. Delegate after delegate, including the one quoted above (Litterick), argued that in addition to betraying the promises set out in the 1974 manifesto, Jim Callaghan and his colleagues in the Labour government ignored much of the Party's policy commitments when drafting the 1979 manifesto. A series of joint Cabinet/NEC working groups were set up as early as 1977 to discuss the next manifesto, but, by early 1979 it was a draft produced by staff at No.10 Downing Street which became the basis for discussion (Bish, 1979a: 198). Thus, the final manifesto, *The Labour Way is the Better Way*, had watered down many areas of official Party policy, including removing the commitment to abolish the House of Lords and replacing it with a promise only to "abolish the delaying power and legislative veto" of the second chamber (Labour Party, [1979] 1990: 297).

The NEC tabled an amendment to Clause V of the 1980 Party Conference in Blackpool, which proposed to give the NEC the final say over the election manifestos. Despite the left's other successes at the Conference, and a speech in favour of the amendment by the left's hero, Tony Benn, the amendment was narrowly defeated by 3,625,000 votes against to 3,508,000 votes for (*RACLP*, *1980*: 148).[13] A second, unsuccessful attempt was made to amend Clause V at the 1981 Conference, although significantly, on this occasion the NEC was recommending that the Conference reject the amendment, with Michael Foot himself making the NEC's case. Again the result was close, with 3,254,000 votes in favour, and 3,791,000 votes against (*RACLP*, *1981*: 212).

Despite these defeats for the left, however, it has to be remembered that since Section 1 of Clause V stipulated that all policy has to be approved by Conference. And since the left still remained dominant in the Party at large at this point in the early eighties, a succession of left-wing policies were added to the Party Programme. Between 1979 and 1982, Conference approved policies related to, *inter alia*, the re-nationalisation of privatised industries and an increase in public ownership, the repeal of Conservative trade union legislation, socialist economic planning, the abolition of private education, withdrawal from the EEC, unilateral nuclear disarmament, and the re-unification of Ireland (*RACLP*, *1979*, *1980*, *1981*, *1982*). Many of these new policy commitments were included in the NEC's *Draft Labour Manifesto* (1980a), and all were to be found in the comprehensive *Labour's Programme 1982* (1982a), a statement of party policy which ran to almost three-hundred pages.

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[13] Significantly, one of the delegates speaking in opposition to the motion represented the General and Municipal Workers' Union (GMWU), which had a large block vote at the Conference. Thus, the GMWU's 650,000 votes against the proposed amendment was crucial to the left's defeat.

All of these policies also found their way into Labour's 1983 election manifesto, *The New Hope for Britain*. Approximately twenty-thousand words in length, the document was "the longest [manifesto] produced by a major party in modern times" (Kellner, 1985: 68). Described by Michael Foot in the introduction as a "programme of socialist reconstruction" ([1983] 1990: 347), it certainly was a document filled with radical left-wing policies.[14]

One may wonder, then, why the Shadow Cabinet appeared to acquiesce so easily to the demands to include such policies in the manifesto -- the 'Clause V meeting' to discuss the manifesto was the shortest ever, with only Peter Shore dissenting on behalf of the right.[15] This appears all the more surprising, perhaps, when one considers that by early 1983, seven left-wingers on the NEC had been replaced by right-wingers, Tony Benn had been replaced as Chair of the crucial Home Policy Committee by a right-winger, and right-wingers also remained in a majority in the Shadow Cabinet (Shaw, 1996: 167). One interpretation, however, is that the right was acting strategically in order to defeat the left in the longer term. Shaw states that "[it] seems highly probable that the right's willingness to virtually nod through a manifesto stuffed with left-wing ideas was a calculated move: if the Party was going to capsize, it might as well sink to the ocean bed with a red flag tied to its mast" (1996: 167). Similarly, Butler and Kavanagh also suggest that this was a deliberate tactic on the right's part: the Party was well behind in the polls anyway, so it would be advantageous to "[saddle] the left with the responsibility for an election defeat" (1984: 61).

Evidence from the British Election Study gives only mixed support to the view that Labour's left-wing policies were responsible for its defeat. Respondents were asked which party's policies came closest to their own in a number of policy areas, and the results are shown in Table 2.5.

In each of the areas of defence, controlling inflation and 'law & order', more than half of respondents felt that the Conservative Party's policies were closest to their own (although these areas have traditionally been associated with the Conservatives in the past). The Conservatives' policy of privatising public industries also appeared more popular than Labour's (vague) plans to increase public ownership again. In areas related to social policy, however, such as reducing unemployment and spending on the National Health Service and the welfare state, Labour's policies appeared more favourable to voters. Indeed, when asked what was the most important issue when deciding to vote, nearly thirty-nine per cent of respondents chose 'unemployment',

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[14] The 1983 manifesto has since taken on a somewhat mythical quality in the media, and, it should be said, the Labour Party itself. However, although the document was undoubtedly radical, and was compared (in a Conservative advertisement) to the 1983 general election manifesto of the Communist Party, the word *socialist* appears only six times. Moreover, Shaw (1994: 13) points out that only one sentence of the lengthy document was devoted to extending public ownership *beyond* re-nationalising the industries privatised by the Conservatives.

[15] Gerald Kaufman (then a member of the Shadow Cabinet) was famously to describe the 1983 manifesto as "the longest suicide note in history".

more than any other issue.[16] It appears therefore that on issues which should have benefitted Labour, this was not the case. This may have been partly due to questions of salience (although this seems less plausible at a time when unemployment was very high), or because voters were not convinced that Labour could make a significant difference to the problems at hand (Crewe, 1983: 59).[17]

*Table 2.5***: Party with Views Closest to Own by Policy Area, 1983 (percentages)**[18]

Party with views closest to own:	Policy Area:					
	Defence	Unemploy-ment	Inflation	Welfare Services	Nationalis-ation	Law & Order
None	2.1	3.3	2.0	1.9	2.5	2.3
CON.	51.4	29.5	54.6	24.9	42.6	55.4
LAB.	18.8	39.7	20.7	45.5	24.5	17.8
Alliance	8.4	9.3	6.5	9.5	7.1	6.3
LIB.	4.3	5.2	3.7	5.0	3.1	3.5
SDP	2.6	2.6	1.7	2.6	2.0	1.6
Others	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1
DK	12.2	10.2	10.6	10.4	18.0	12.9
Total	99.9	99.9	99.8	99.8	99.9	99.9
(N)	3944	3941	3940	3938	3938	3940

In other areas, Labour's manifesto promises seemed to be more clearly unpopular. Table 2.6 shows that, in contrast to Labour's promise to "Repeal Tory legislation on industrial relations and make provisions for introducing industrial democracy" (Labour Party, [1983] 1990: 349), most respondents were in favour of stricter curbs on trade unions. Similarly, Table 2.7 indicates

[16] Source: 1983 British Election Study.

[17] Crewe's analysis was based upon a BBC/Gallup poll taken after the election.

[18] Source: 1983 British Election Study.

that only about fifteen per cent of respondents agreed with Labour's policy of withdrawal from the Common Market.[19]

Table 2.6: Should the Government Pass Stricter Trade Union Laws? (percentages)[20]

Yes, it should	56.8
Does not matter	5.7
No, it should not	30.5
Don't Know	7.0
Total	100.0
(N)	3942

Table 2.7: Respondents' Attitudes to the Common Market (percentages)[21]

Leave Common Market	14.9
Stay if Better Terms Agreed	54.1
Stay Anyway	27.1
Don't Know	3.8
Total	99.9
(N)	3933

Therefore, whilst some of Labour's policies were out of step with much of the views of the British electorate, it is not clear that Labour's shift to the left in many policy areas was as damaging as many commentators and Labour Party leaders have since suggested. The policies may have constrained many members of the Shadow Cabinet who disagreed with many of the policies, reducing their enthusiasm for campaigning, but it would be disingenuous to suggest that policies alone contributed to Labour's defeat. Indeed, Heath *et al.* go so far as to suggest that

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[19] However, only just under fifty-one per cent thought that the issue of Britain's membership of the EEC was 'extremely' or 'quite' important, with forty-nine per cent regarding the issue as 'not very important' (source: 1983 British Election Study).

[20] Source: 1983 British Election Study.

[21] Source: 1983 British Election Study.

"had people voted according to the detailed stances of each party on the most important issues of the day, Labour would not in fact have gone down to defeat at all" (1985: 89).[22]

Nevertheless, although the evidence blaming policies for Labour's defeat is somewhat equivocal, this perhaps represented the one area in which, in the long-term at least, the Party's leaders in the Shadow Cabinet were able to transform a short-term constraint into a long-term resource. Of course, they were helped by the trade union block-vote system which defeated the proposed amendments to Clause V, but nevertheless, their decision to approve a manifesto with which many of them clearly disagreed, in hindsight, can be looked upon as agents working within structural constraints to transform the long-term nature of policy-making in the Party. Whilst it is not clear that the manifesto caused the defeat (after all, it is unlikely that more than a fraction of the electorate actually read the entire document), Labour leaders have since been able to use the resources available to them as leaders to thoroughly discredit and disown the 1983 manifesto, holding it up as an alleged example of what happens when the Party at large is given such influence over policy-making. This, in turn gave them justification for re-establishing their control over policy-making. In 1997, the current Clause V remains virtually identical (an extra paragraph has been added in relation to European elections), but, even with an NEC which is now dominated by the right, the right of the Shadow Cabinet to have a considerable influence over Labour policy and manifestos has never been seriously challenged since.

iii. Labour's Identity Crises

It is difficult to recollect an extended period of history in which the Labour Party has been truly of one identity (due in large part to the Party's origins), and indeed the same could be said for many political parties of Labour's size and national prominence. But during the 1979-83 period Labour's identity fragmented to an extent which was hitherto unknown in the Party. Thus, as the Labour Leadership became increasingly concerned with attempting to control the Party's own affairs, it had less time and energy to devote to challenging Mrs Thatcher's government. Like so many of the problems which engulfed the Party at this time, the roots of the Party's identity crisis lay in the Labour governments of 1974-79 and earlier.

The dominant strand of thought in the Labour Party since the fifties has been variously referred to as 'revisionism' or 'Keynesian social democracy', and was most clearly associated with Hugh Gaitskill (Leader from 1955 until his death in 1963) and Anthony Crosland, whose classic work, *The Future of Socialism* (1957) represents the major exposition of revisionist thought. Briefly stated, revisionism rejected Labour's earlier commitment to state ownership of the means of production, instead favouring Keynesian monetary and fiscal policy to control demand with the purpose of maintaining full employment and economic growth in the context of a mixed-market

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[22] Heath *et al.* instead claim that the election would have ended in a dead heat between the Conservatives and Labour.

economy. Socialism's traditional commitment to equality and social justice was also thought to be viable in a mixed economy, due to the existence of the welfare state. It was basically this policy which represented the 'collectivist consensus' throughout the fifties and sixties, as the Conservative Party also adhered to the same broad principles.[23]

The problem with Keynesianism (or, at least, the form it took in Britain[24]), however, was that it was of little success when there was neither full employment nor economic growth. The oil shocks of 1973 introduced a period of 'stagflation', and in 1975 unemployment in Britain passed the one million mark, which was then regarded as unacceptably high. The failings of Keynesianism became especially apparent in 1976 when the Labour government was forced to take out an IMF loan to support the pound, a move which, due to the conditions of the loan, forced a switch to more monetarist policies.

It was this crisis of revisionism (discussed more fully in Jones, 1996 and Shaw, 1996) which gave rise to the challenge of the left in the Party which was ultimately to bring about the changes in the organisational and policy-making structures discussed above. But aside from these constraints imposed on agents in the Leadership in their attempts to make the Party electorally successful, the weakness of their position was further exacerbated by the disappearance of any semblance of unity in the Party after 1979. Even the trade union movement, which had traditionally veered towards the right of the Party and had not been keen to interfere overtly with the powers of the PLP, fragmented and moved to the left (Minkin, 1992: 194-6). Thus, the identity crisis in the Party undermined the intellectual authority of the Leadership's revisionism within the Party, and it also damaged the Party's image in the eyes of the electorate.

The extent of the divisions appearing between the Shadow Cabinet and the rest of the Party became apparent at the 1980 Party Conference, where on the very first day Tony Benn (who was no longer an MP since the election of 1979) made a speech calling for -- in the first *month* of a new Labour government -- legislation to introduce widespread nationalisation, withdrawal from the European Economic Community, and the abolition of the House of Lords (*RACLP*, *1980*: 51-2). "If the [1979] conference had been unpleasant," write Crewe and King, "the 1980 conference seemed to most right-wingers to be not only unpleasant but positively insane" (1995: 49).

Benn (who regularly topped the poll in the CLP section of the NEC ballot) appeared to make a tactical error in 1981 which factionalised the left still further and ultimately undermined its strength. After the new electoral college was put in place, Benn took the first opportunity to put it

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[23] Indeed, the policies of successive Chancellors of the Exchequer -- Hugh Gaitskill from Labour, and R. A. Butler from the Conservatives -- were so similar that *The Economist* coined the term *Butskellism* to describe them.

[24] In *The State We're In*, Will Hutton argues that, in the British context, "Keynes' ideas had been traduced" (1996: 245).

into practice by challenging Denis Healey for the Deputy-Leadership. This move was opposed by the Leader, Michael Foot, who clearly wanted no further divisions in the Party. Nevertheless, Benn persisted with the challenge, much to the chagrin of even many left-wing MPs. In the election itself sixteen left-wing MPs, including Neil Kinnock, chose to abstain from the ballot rather than vote for Benn, which was enough to secure Healey's victory. Having split from the Bennite left, Kinnock and the others became identified with the 'soft' left (as opposed to the Bennite 'hard' left). However, the damage to the Party, and Foot's attempts to unify it against the Tories, was done. In Eric Shaw's words, "[the] battle, fought under the spotlight of intense media interest, offered to the public a spectacle of a party tearing itself apart and Labour's poll ratings tumbled as millions of its supporters flocked to the SDP" (1996: 165).

In addition to the divisions within the Party between the Bennite left, the 'soft' left, and the right, Labour's image as an extremist party was exacerbated by other factors which undermined the Leadership's attempts to present Labour to the electorate as a united and moderate party.[25] The main factor concerned a number of groups which represented what David Webster (1981) called 'modern British Trotskyism'. Many of these groups were in existence in the seventies and were themselves highly factionalised.[26] In common however, they believed in extra- (or anti-) parliamentary action to bring about socialism by revolutionary means. One of the largest and most well organised of these groups was the Militant tendency (publishers of the newspaper *Militant*), formed by Ted Grant.[27] The chief tactic of Militant was 'entryism' (or 'entrism') -- a means of infiltrating the Labour Party so that the radical left would have a base for leading what it saw as the inevitable revolution. Since many Labour branches and CLPs were essentially moribund in the seventies, Militant was able to recruit many impressionable young activists and students, imbue them with the works of Trotsky through pamphlets such as *Entrism* (1973),[28] and then instruct them to covertly take-over their local Labour Party branches.

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[25] Only the case of Militant is discussed here, but Foot's authority was also notably undermined by Bermondsey CLP's decision to select Peter Tatchell as their candidate for a by-election in 1982. Tatchell was a radical left-winger (but not a Trotskyite) whom Foot was (perhaps deliberately) led to believe espoused anti-Parliamentary action. At first Foot tried to annul the selection by the CLP, but was ultimately defeated on the issue. In the by-election itself, the Liberal candidate won what was a very safe Labour seat, with a majority of over 9000 -- a swing of 48 per cent (Shaw, 1988: 226-8; Crewe and King, 1995: 191-2).

[26] Michael Crick notes that "Trotsky's followers have suffered possibly more divisions in Britain than anywhere else. And what makes the progression particularly difficult to understand is that as one sect has replaced another, each has felt obliged to compose its name from a holy list of about twelve words, among them: Workers, Labour, Socialist, International, Revolutionary, Marxist, Communist, Militant, Group, Party, Tendency and League. According to the rules of the game of 'Select-a-Sect', you can pick any two or three from the above list and make yourself a new Trotskyist grouping" (1984: 27).

[27] For more details about Grant and his role in revolutionary politics, see McSmith (1996: 89-117).

[28] I am grateful to a former Labour Party activist for providing me with copies of this and other Militant pamphlets.

The question of Militant infiltration had been raised as early as 1975, when Labour's National Agent, Reg Underhill, prepared a report concerning the tendency's alleged activities (Shaw, 1988: 219), but the left's dominance of the NEC and its reluctance to take action against what they saw as fellow socialists meant that the report had little effect. However, as the left's dominance of the NEC receded, there were more calls (especially from the PLP) to investigate the tendency, and take action against it if necessary.

The findings and recommendations of the second investigation of Militant, the Hayward-Hughes report, were published in 1982 and its authors found that Militant was indeed an entryist group with its own organisation and programme -- in other words, a 'party within a party'. However, the report's proposals for dealing with Militant and other such organisations were problematic and led to a protracted legal process which at one point saw Militant leaders take the Labour Party to the High Court (see Shaw, 1988: 230-53).[29] By 1983 the investigation had resulted in the expulsion of only five Labour Party members -- those who were on the editorial board of the *Militant* newspaper. The issue would continue to remain a thorn in the side of the Labour Leadership for several more years, but its immediate effect was to undermine the Leadership's attempts to present a united party to the electorate. Instead it was the case that many senior figures in the NEC, such as Tony Benn and Eric Heffer, whilst not necessarily agreeing with the policies of Militant, certainly sympathised with its members' plight to remain in the Party. Rather than being able to use the disciplinary rules and resources of the Party to assert his authority and project an image of strong leadership (comparable to that of Mrs Thatcher's image), Michael Foot was instead accused by Labour members of leading a 'witch-hunt',[30] and the publicity surrounding the whole affair in the Press led to the widespread belief that Labour was overrun with Marxists and Trotskyites, even if their significance was ultimately greatly exaggerated.[31]

The extent to which voters perceived Labour as a divided party has already been discussed above. Table 2.8 describes respondents' perceptions of extremism in the two major British parties for 1983 and (in parentheses) October 1974. Two features of the tables are particularly striking. The first is that whilst nearly fifty per cent of respondents thought Labour was extreme, almost the same amount also thought that the Conservatives were extreme. Moreover, when these figures are compared with corresponding data from the British Election Study carried out following the October 1974 general election (no corresponding question was asked in 1979), there is very little

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[29] One of the barristers advising the Labour Party was a young Tony Blair.

[30] Foot was actually reluctant to take action against dissident elements within his Party; he was himself threatened with expulsion from the Party in the fifties by right-wingers due to his association with the left-winger Aneurin Bevan, and regarded such measures with distaste. However, his interest in maintaining Party unity (not to mention his great belief in Parliamentary democracy) persuaded him that such action was necessary in Militant's case.

[31] Shaw notes that "Few voters possessed either the knowledge or inclination to distinguish between the Trotskyist and Bennite left. And the press made no attempt to enlighten them" (1988: 246).

difference -- if anything, it is the Conservative Party which appeared to become more extreme over the previous decade.

Table 2.8: **Perceptions of Extremism in Major Parties, 1983 (Oct. 1974)[32]**

Respondents' Views of Political Parties:	Political Party:	
	Conservative Party	Labour Party
Extreme (%)	48.5(42.1)	49.3(49.2)
Moderate (%)	40.3(46.6)	36.6(41.0)
Neither or both (%)	5.7(7.7)	7.7(6.6)
Don't know (%)	5.5(3.6)	6.3(3.2)
Total	100.0(100.0)	99.9(100.0)
(N)	(3951)(2314)	(3950)(2314)

Table 2.9: **Vote by Respondents' Perceptions of Labour Party, 1983 (percentages)[33]**

Party Voted for in 1983:	View of Labour in 1983:			
	Extreme	Moderate	Neither or both	Don't Know
Conservative	57.9	28.1	40.8	43.3
Labour	13.9	50.3	27.5	28.7
Alliance	15.8	9.7	14.5	8.7
Liberal	8.5	7.5	13.2	11.7
SDP	3.2	2.3	3.3	4.5
Other	0.7	2.1	.7	3.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
(N)	1647	1135	246	177

χ^2=492.888, df=15 (p<.001)

[32] Source: 1983 British Election Study; Oct. 1974 British Election Study.

[33] Source: 1983 British Election Study.

Table 2.9 shows the same 1983 data cross-tabulated with respondents' vote preferences. Perhaps not surprisingly, the majority of respondents who regarded Labour as being extreme (nearly eighty-five per cent of them) voted for parties other than Labour. Given the similar figures for extremism in the two major parties, did this affect Labour's electoral support?

The presence of a revitalised centre party in the shape of the Liberal/SDP Alliance may have heightened perceptions of extremism in the two major parties (this was one of the Alliance's campaign tactics), which perhaps accounts for perceptions of extremism in the two 'traditional' parties. But Labour's image as an extreme and divided party did damage it. Analysing data from the BBC/Gallup election poll, William Miller (1984) noted that "Almost half the Labour identifiers who voted Conservative or alliance quoted one or other of these factors as influencing their vote: 14% mentioned disunity, 20% extremism, and 10% mentioned both" (1984: 381). Miller goes on to suggest a link between Labour's disunity and its alleged extremism, with perceptions of the latter deriving from the former. Clearly therefore, the factionalised nature of the Party presented an image to the public which constrained Party Leaders' attempts to 'sell' the Party to the electorate. This is not the same as saying that Labour's organisational structure constrained the Leaders (as discussed above), however, although the two concepts are very closely related. The image/identity structure which constrained Labour Leaders had more to do with the presentation of the Party, its links to extreme left groups, and the rift between the Bennite left and the traditional right, rather than its organisational characteristics. What is true, however, is that although such divisions may have existed even if the organisational structure of the Party had been different, the latter created a strategic platform on which the ideological differences manifested themselves more fully in the public's eyes, thus exacerbating the electoral consequences of Labour's identity crisis.

The above discussion has concentrated on internal structural factors which for the most part constrained Michael Foot and other agents in the Shadow Cabinet in their attempts to present the Party as a credible electoral challenger to Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. Labour's poor performance in the 1983 election demonstrated that Foot and his colleagues clearly failed in this respect, and Labour had Britain's 'first-past-the-post' electoral system to thank for being able to remain the strongest opposition party. The Shadow Cabinet was hindered by the organisational structure of the Party which allowed the left to make several changes to the Party's Constitution which made it more difficult for the agents in the Shadow Cabinet to enjoy the kind of autonomy from the Party at large to which they had been accustomed in the past. The fact that such divisions, between the Shadow Cabinet and the PLP on one side and the NEC and CLPs on the other, were so obvious to the electorate did little to advance Labour's cause; if the Party seemed barely able to manage its own affairs, this was hardly an encouraging sign for voters electing a new government to run the country.

However, not all of Labour's problems resulted from the structural constraints imposed upon agents within the Party leadership. A number of external structural factors also served to constrain the Party as a collective agent, which shall now be discussed below.

II. *External Structural Factors*

i. Political Structures: The Changing Party System

British political life, the plurality electoral system, and even the layout of the chamber of the House of Commons are all indicative of, and best suited to an adversarial two-party system. Of course, there have always been more than two parties represented at Westminster (indeed, for what is supposedly a two-party system the number of parties represented at Westminster is exceedingly high[34]), but for approximately the first twenty-five years following the Second World War, the party system was for all intents and purposes a two-party one, with Labour and the Conservatives between them receiving around ninety-per cent of all votes cast at general elections. During the seventies this phenomenon was less apparent as the Liberal Party increased its share of the vote. Moreover, this period also saw a shift towards what was referred to as (following the similar phenomenon in the United States) 'partisan dealignment', as voters' loyalties to the major parties weakened considerably (see Butler and Stokes, 1974; Särlvik and Crewe, 1983). However, the predominance of the Labour and Conservative parties in relation to the strength of the Liberals was never seriously questioned. In the early eighties this orthodoxy was for a time threatened, with particularly severe consequences for the Labour Party.

It was noted above that the Social Democratic Party (SDP) was formed largely as a result of the left's takeover of the Labour Party. All four of the SDP's founders (the "Gang of Four") were formerly senior figures in the Labour Party.[35] In many respects, the SDP represented the type of party which the triumvirate of Owen, Rodgers and Williams vainly envisaged for the Labour Party: a centre-left, West European-style social democratic party.

The considerable (and in the initial stages sympathetic) media coverage given to the SDP at its launch contributed to a strong performance in the opinion polls. Between October 1981 and March 1982 (the month in which Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands) the SDP and the Liberals (which had established co-operative relations) led both Labour and the Conservatives in the monthly Gallup polls of voting intentions, reaching a remarkable peak of fifty points in December 1981. Such ratings for third parties in British politics were unprecedented in recent

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[34] This is largely a product of the political system of Northern Ireland, where mainland parties do not contest seats.

[35] David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Shirley Williams all formed the SDP directly from the Labour Party, whilst Roy Jenkins returned from a spell at the European Commission, during which he had allowed his Labour Party membership to lapse.

memory, and some SDP members, "tempting fate, even began to talk about the share-out of offices in an SDP-Liberal government" (Crewe and King, 1995: 133).

The immediate effect of the SDP's formation on the Labour Party was the defection of twenty-eight MPs from Labour's benches to the new party. However, the main consequence of the new political landscape was the appearance of an alternative choice of centre-left party which was able to attract many disaffected voters who had previously voted Labour.

Table 2.10: **'Flow of the Vote', 1979-83 (percentages)**[36]

Party Voted for in 1983:	Party Voted for in 1979:					
	CON.	LAB.	LIB.	Other	Didn't Vote	Not Eligible
CON.	84.6	8.3	15.5	10.7	47.2	44.2
LAB.	3.2	66.8	3.1	10.3	24.8	32.0
Alliance	6.9	13.0	34.2	24.6	16.4	15.6
LIB.	3.4	7.2	41.2	1.9	8.0	3.6
SDP	1.5	4.0	5.7	1.9	2.5	2.8
Other	0.3	0.7	0.3	50.5	1.2	1.7
Total	99.9	100.0	100.0	99.9	100.1	99.9
(N)	1282	1095	293	47	241	216

Table 2.10 describes changing patterns in voting behaviour between the general elections of 1979 and 1983. Two points emerge from the table. The first is that the Conservative Party was clearly more successful than Labour when it came to retaining the support of those who voted for it in 1979. Whilst nearly eighty-five per cent of Conservatives who voted for the party in 1979 continued to display the same allegiance in 1983, in the case of the Labour Party only two-thirds of its 1979 supporters remained loyal four years later. The second and more important point however, is related to where the Labour deserters' votes went. Just over eight per cent voted Conservative, but nearly a quarter of 1979 Labour voters supported the SDP/Liberal Alliance in 1983. When this figure is compared with the number of Conservatives who switched to the SDP/Liberal Alliance (just under twelve per cent), it becomes clear that the Labour Party was disproportionately affected by the emergence of a strong third party alternative.

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[36] Source: 1983 British Election Study.

Once the SDP split had taken place in 1981, there was little that the Labour Party *qua* a collective agent could do to stop the leakage of its support. The Party's internal squabbling had already reached a critical stage (which was the chief reason for the split in the first place), but whilst the denunciation of defectors to the SDP was one of the few things which could unite those who remained in the Labour Party, this façade of solidarity was clearly not enough to dissuade Labour supporters from switching their support to the (by comparison) modern and forward-looking new party.

If the Labour Party's attempts to achieve electoral success were undoubtedly constrained by changes to the structure of the party system, however, it was undeniably helped by the structure of the British 'first-past-the-post' electoral system. Whilst the Labour Party received only a little over two per cent more of the total votes cast than the SDP/Liberal Alliance, it won nine times as many seats in the House of Commons (209 against 23 for the Alliance). The explanation for this discrepancy lies in the geography of electoral behaviour in 1983. Whereas the Labour vote was heavily concentrated in a number of areas -- South Wales, Central Scotland and the North of England -- the Alliance vote was spread more evenly across the country, meaning that it finished second behind either the Conservatives or Labour in a large number of constituencies. Not surprisingly, the Alliance parties consistently argued in favour of introducing an electoral system based on the principle of proportional representation, but since this proposal lacked the backing of either of the two major parties, the idea remained dormant.[37]

ii. Socioeconomic Structures: The Changing Working Class

During the seventies and eighties, British psephologists increasingly became concerned with two changes in the British electorate. The first concerned the loosening of loyalties to the major parties -- partisan dealignment -- and the second was related to the relationship between class and voting behaviour. Whilst there has been little disagreement between political scientists with regards to partisan dealignment, there has been an enormous amount of controversy over the alleged occurrence of 'class dealignment' in Britain.

The class dealignment thesis holds that the traditional link between voting behaviour and occupational status (i.e., where manual voters tended to vote Labour and non-manual workers tended to vote Conservative) has disappeared, as voters began to vote on the basis of other factors (see, e.g., Butler and Stokes, 1974; Särlvik and Crewe, 1983; Franklin, 1985; Rose and McAllister, 1986). Class dealignment was used to explain the decline of electoral support for the Labour Party over the last few decades. This new orthodoxy was challenged by Heath *et al.* in *How Britain Votes*. They argued that whilst there had undoubtedly been a decline in the levels of

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[37] If the 1983 election was contested under a system of pure proportional representation, the Labour Party would have received only approximately one-hundred and seventy-nine seats whilst the Alliance parties would have received one-hundred and sixty-five. No party would have had an overall majority.

voting for one's 'class party' -- which they termed *absolute* class voting -- the best indicator of class dealignment was the level of cross-class, or *relative* class voting. In this respect, using a more sophisticated class schema than the traditional manual/non-manual dichotomy, they showed that there were no clear patterns of dealignment in *relative* class voting; instead, the data from successive British Election Studies only showed "trendless fluctuation" (1985: 35). According to this argument then, class dealignment could not be blamed for Labour's poor performance at the election: "Labour remained a class party in 1983; it was simply a less successful class party than before" (Heath *et al.*, 1985: 29).[38]

In arguing that class dealignment had not taken place to the extent that previous political scientists thought, and therefore could not be used to explain satisfactorily Labour's electoral decline, Heath *et al.*'s controversial claims started a rather heated debate between the main protagonists on both sides (see Crewe, 1986; Heath *et al.*, 1987; Dunleavy, 1987; Heath *et al.*, 1988). But perhaps the most crucial observation made by Heath *et al.* was that "In focussing on class dealignment political scientists have concentrated on minor rearrangements of the furniture while failing to notice a major change in the structure of the house" (1985: 35). Regardless of whether there had been class dealignment or not, what *was* clear was that the class composition of the British electorate had changed irrevocably, with more serious implications for the Labour Party's electoral support.

*Table 2.11***: Class Composition of the Electorate: 1964 and 1983 (percentages)[39]**

	1964	1983
Salariat	18	27
Routine nonmanual	18	24
Petty bourgeoisie	7	8
Foremen and technicians	10	7
Working class	47	34
Total	100	100
(N)	1475	3790

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[38] The decline in *absolute* class voting for the Labour Party is demonstrated by the fact that in the 1983 British Election Study, only 49% of respondents belonging to the 'working class' category voted Labour, compared with 55% in 1979, 63% in October 1974, and 70% in 1964 (Heath *et al.*, 1985: 32-3).

[39] Source: Heath *et al.*, 1985: 36.

Table 2.11, which uses the five-fold class schema,[40] shows that since 1964 changes in occupational structures had significantly altered the class composition of the electorate. The proportion of blue-collar workers in the electorate fell greatly between 1964 and 1983, as the white-collar service sector grew in size. Thus, even if there had been no class dealignment as Heath *et al.* suggest, Labour had still witnessed a considerable decrease in the size of its traditional electoral base of support. Heath *et al.* calculate that this change in class structure alone may have explained as much as half of Labour's decline in support between 1964 and 1983.

It is clear that Labour was affected by the changes to the occupational and socioeconomic structures of the British labour force and the electorate. Obviously, there was little the Party *qua* agent could do to reverse the changes in these structures, but it also appeared to singularly fail to adapt to these changes; the policies in the 1983 manifesto had little appeal to the aspiring lower-middle and working-classes who wished to buy their council houses or own shares in privatised companies. In the 1979-83 period therefore (although the trend started long before then), socioeconomic structural factors acted to constrain the Labour Party in its attempts to win votes, and the Party displayed little in the way of agency to minimise the impact of structural change.

iii. Media and Communications Structures

The broadcast and print media are crucial to election campaigns, since they provide the principal channels through which political parties can communicate their messages to the electorate. In broadcasting on television and radio, strict rules govern the coverage of elections on television news and current affairs programmes, to ensure impartiality. Political advertising in Britain is forbidden; instead parties are allocated Party Political Broadcasts (PPBs, know as Party Election Broadcasts (PEBs) during election campaigns) on the basis of their relative sizes. In this respect (in theory at least) television coverage should neither constrain or facilitate one political party's electoral fortunes *per se*; much depends on the what is being covered and how the parties put their message across.

Labour's PEBs contrasted greatly with the Conservatives', lacking the professionalism of the Saatchi & Saatchi produced campaign. Since Michael Foot was regarded as an electoral liability in contrast to Margaret Thatcher, Labour's emphasis was on his team of Shadow Cabinet members. According to Harrison however, this may not have been the only motive behind this approach, stating that Labour PEBs were dominated by "the competition among senior politicians for a place in the sun, with an eye to a post-election leadership contest. Effective electioneering was secondary. One [PEB] had no fewer than nine participants" (Butler and Kavanagh, 1984: 151-3).

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[40] See Heath *et al.* 1985: 16, for definitions of each category.

In PEBs and television coverage more generally Labour's presentation was less slick and professional than either the Conservatives' or the Alliance's, but in many ways the damage was self-inflicted. Foot's meandering oratory was ill-suited to a television campaign, and the effort put into presentation was somewhat haphazard. In one memorable press conference shown on television, the table Michael Foot was sitting behind collapsed in front of the assembled representatives of the media.

It is difficult to gauge what impact television coverage had on Labour's 1983 electoral performance, but it was unlikely to have been a positive factor. A poll taken the day before the election on behalf of the BBC and the Independent Broadcasting Authority reported that twenty-one per cent of respondents claimed television had influenced their vote choice. Amongst new voters and those voting for a party other than the one they voted for in 1979, the figures were nearer forty per cent (Butler and Kavanagh, 1983: 174). Given that Labour did particularly badly when it came to attracting new voters or converts in 1983, its failure to take advantage of the broadcast media, at the very least, probably did not help its cause.

Labour was constrained more obviously by the structure of the newspaper industry. Unlike television, no rules ensuring fair coverage to parties exist for the press, meaning that most of the newspapers, especially the mass-readership tabloids, are shamelessly biased. The particular problem for Labour was that most of the papers were pro-Conservative in their bias; in the 1983 campaign only the tabloid *Daily Mirror* (*Daily Record* in Scotland) urged its readers to vote Labour, whilst the overwhelming majority of the other newspapers favoured a Conservative win.[41] Thus the content of many newspaper articles was heavily weighted against Labour. According to Martin Harrop, Conservative supporting newspapers accounted for approximately seventy-five per cent of newspaper in circulation in 1983 (1986: 139). Amongst respondents in the British Election Study who read a newspaper during the election campaign, almost sixty per cent read a pro-Conservative newspaper, and, not surprisingly perhaps, most of them also happened to vote Conservative. Whilst the direction of causality is difficult to establish (i.e., are people's votes influenced by the newspaper they buy, or is the newspaper they buy influenced by people's political preferences), hostile coverage in the press was a factor which Labour had to face in the 1983 election campaign. Like other external structural factors, there appeared little the Party could do to prevent this (although the idea of a socialist daily paper to redress the balance somewhat was raised at the 1983 Party Conference (*RACLP*, *1983*: 203)). Unless the ownership of the newspapers changed hands to the control of more sympathetic owners, or at least the editorial policies were to change, the status quo seemed likely to continue, leaving Labour relatively powerless to influence or transform the structure which was inherently biased against it.

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[41] The normally pro-Conservative *Financial Times* was not published during the campaign due to an industrial dispute. The liberal/left-leaning *Guardian* could not bring itself to support either Labour or the Alliance (the parties the bulk of its readers voted for), instead merely expressing a wish that the Conservatives would not win a landslide victory.

Summary

It is clear that the period between the general elections of 1979 and 1983 was not the most illustrious in the Labour Party's eighty-three year history. The Party suffered its most serious split since 1931 and went on to its poorest performance at a general election since the First World War.

Examining this period from a structure and agency perspective, it can best be summarised by a number of structural constraints on both levels of the theoretical framework, with very little success in the way of intentional agency to react to or transform the nature of the constraints. This is not to suggest however that structures inevitably determined outcomes at all times; rather, agents had the potential for action, but they failed to use it to their advantage.

As far as internal structures were concerned, the Party Leadership found that many of the rules and resources previously available to it were now unavailable, and the organisational structure of the Party meant that there was little the Leadership could do to prevent this. Realising that this was the case, a number of MPs left the Party to form the SDP. Thus, the Leaders' attempts to present the Party as united, reasonable and competent were mortally weakened by disunity, disagreements over policy, and allegations of extremism.

External structures were to constrain the Party's electoral campaign, but, as was suggested in Chapter One, they were not so easily transformed. Most damaging was the change to the party system, which seriously threatened Labour's position as the main opposition party. If Britain did not operate on a first-past-the-post electoral system, the consequences would have been much more severe.

Socioeconomic change continued to erode Labour's traditional working class electoral base, but the Party seemed incapable of adapting to the new realities. Finally, Labour again faced the perennial problem of a hostile press, which constrained the Party in its attempts to get its message across to the electorate, but its own television campaign left much to be desired.

Much of the evidence from this period highlights the weaknesses of examining a political party's electoral fortunes from either a structuralist or a voluntarist perspective. The former, whilst perhaps most comforting for the agents concerned, would overlook the inadequacies of agents in many situations, whilst the latter would fail to look at the bigger picture, e.g., attempting to present Labour's decline purely in political terms, when socioeconomic factors also played a part. A dialectical perspective, on the other hand, is able to provide a more complete interpretation of the factors which contributed to Labour's defeat in 1983.