Introduction: The Labour Party, Electoral Success, and Failure

Labour's Electoral Background

> The British Labour Party would be one of the most successful political
> parties in the Western world if it did not lose so many general
> elections. (McSmith, 1996: 1.)

The Labour Party is one of the oldest and largest parties of the mainstream Left in Western Europe. Formed in 1900 by representatives from the Trades Union Congress (TUC), the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Social Democratic Federation (SDF),[1] and the Fabian Society, the Labour Representation Committee's (as it was known until 1906) purpose was to represent the interests of trade unions in Parliament. In this early period this was the Party's only mandate; transforming society, or advancing the interests of the wider working class were not central concerns.[2] Moreover, it did not even have the support of all trade unions (which in turn only represented a small, highly skilled number of workers). Only after the 'Taff Vale' judgement of 1901, which made unions financially liable for losses incurred by businesses due to industrial action, did the majority of unions decide that some form of parliamentary representation was necessary (Fielding, 1995).

Within a quarter of a century, however, the Labour Party had taken the Liberal Party's place in the British two-party system, and in 1924, under the leadership of Ramsay MacDonald, the Party briefly formed its first minority government. This administration was only to survive for a few months, but in 1929 Labour was again able to form a minority government which lasted until 1931. In an attempt to cope with the crisis of the Depression, however, MacDonald defected from Labour in 1931 to lead the Conservative dominated National Coalition government.[3]

Labour's greatest electoral success came in the 1945 general election, following the end of World War II, when Clement Atlee led the Party to victory with a huge parliamentary majority. This success was significant not only for the fact that it was the first time a Labour government was able to command a majority in the House of Commons, but also because of the radical economic and social reforms the government introduced. Atlee's government created the modern welfare state, including the National Health Service (NHS), drastically reduced levels of poverty and

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[1] The SDF, impatient with the gradualist tendencies within Labour, split from the Party in 1921 to form the Communist Party.

[2] For the purpose of clarity, throughout this thesis the capitalised 'Party' is used to refer to the Labour Party, and 'party' is used when referring to parties more generally.

[3] MacDonald's 'betrayal' of the Party helped to arouse a great deal of suspicion amongst activists towards the leadership, which has been a feature of the Labour Party ever since.

introduced an extended programme of nationalisation. It also established the so-called 'collectivist consensus' to which both Labour and Conservative governments adhered until the Thatcherite reforms of the eighties.

Table 1.1: **Labour Party performance in British General Elections, 1945-92**[4]

Year	Seats Won/Total Seats[a]	Share of Votes (%) Won
1945	393/640*	47.8
1950	315/625*	46.1
1951	295/625	48.8
1955	277/630	46.4
1959	258/630	43.8
1964	317/630*	44.1
1966	363/630*	47.9
1970	287/630	43.0
1974 (Feb.)	301/635*	37.1
1974 (Oct.)	319/635*	39.2
1979	269/635	36.9
1983	209/650	27.6
1987	229/650	31.7
1992	271/651	35.2

[a] An asterisk indicates occasions on which Labour formed a government following the election.

In the last thirty years however, the Labour Party (arguably, like Britain itself) has been in what until very recently seemed like a state of terminal decline. Whilst the Party was in power between 1964-70 (under Harold Wilson) and 1974-79 (first under Wilson and then James Callaghan), it was never able to repeat the success of its 1945 victory, and its electoral support has declined precipitously (see Table 1). In the February 1974 general election, the Party's share of the

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[4] Source: Butler and Butler, 1994: 216-9.

electoral vote fell below forty per cent for the first time since the thirties. It has remained there ever since.

Labour's defeat in 1979 was not surprising. The minority government was fatally weakened by its inability to impose wage restraints on trade unions in an attempt to curb inflation. In the winter of 1978-9, the so-called 'Winter of Discontent', Britain was beset by a large number of industrial disputes. Reports in a hostile media of garbage not being collected, and in an extreme case, the dead not being buried, handed the Conservative Party a huge propaganda boost in the 1979 election campaign.[5]

The Labour Party has remained in opposition since 1979, whilst Britain has been radically altered by Thatcherism. Following that defeat, the Party has since lost general elections in 1983, 1987, and 1992. Now, as the general election approaches on May 1, Labour looks set to return to power. At present there appears to be a widespread consensus that the Conservative Party, led by John Major, is unlikely to win what would be an historically unprecedented fifth consecutive term in office. The 'received wisdom' is that, barring any severe mishaps, Tony Blair will lead a Labour government into the twenty-first century.[6]

Of course, history has shown that the British electorate does not always conform to the received wisdom. Many commentators and most psephologists and opinion pollsters predicted that the Conservatives would lose the 1992 general election -- a hung Parliament was predicted by most -- only for them to be returned to office, albeit with a greatly reduced majority in the Commons.[7]

History also provides an interesting parallel for Labour's predicament following its defeat in 1992. When Labour lost a third consecutive general election in 1959, many wondered if it would ever win again (in fact, it won four of the next five elections).[8] Perhaps not surprisingly therefore, similar questions were asked in the wake of the defeat in April 1992.[9]

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[5] The Conservatives clearly feel that the 'Winter of Discontent' remains an emotive image in the minds of the electorate -- it was still a feature of their electoral and advertising campaigns of 1992 and beyond.

[6] When asked about the Labour Party in a recent edition of the *Fabian Review* (Vol. 108, 5: 10), one commentator, Polly Toynbee, remarked "... I never under-estimate the party's inability to shoot itself in the foot ...".

[7] The government's majority of 21 had been eradicated as a result of a record number of consecutive by-election defeats, and the defection of two Conservative MPs to opposition parties. When the Prime Minister called a general election in March, he led a minority government.

[8] See, e.g., Abrams and Rose (1960), and Crosland (1960).

[9] This was reflected in a number of academic and journalistic articles on Labour in the aftermath of the election. For example, Heath *et al*'s (1994) edited volume based on the 1992 British Election Study is titled *Labour's Last Chance?* In John Curtice's Electoral Behaviour seminar at Strathclyde in 1994, my own presentation was in response to Abrams and Rose's still relevant question: "Must Labour Lose?"

It is clear, then, that the task facing the Labour Party in recent years has been considerable: how to make the Party electorally successful once again, not only against a Conservative Party which has now been in power for almost as long as all previous Labour governments put together, but also against the backdrop of a serious decline in support which has now lasted around thirty years. 'Can Labour Win' in 1997?

Insofar as 'Yes' seems a more credible answer than it may have appeared in 1983, the next question is surely *Why?* -- what conditions for electoral success have changed in the interim? If Labour is indeed about to return to power it would represent a remarkable turnaround in the Party's fortunes, one which requires some investigation. This thesis examines how Labour has attempted to make itself re-electable whilst in opposition since 1979. A comparative analysis of strategies adopted by the Party under successive leaders, from James Callaghan to Tony Blair, will show that whilst there have been many changes in the Labour Party since 1979, there has also been a considerable degree of continuity. This raises a number of questions which will be addressed in the following pages: Why has the Labour Party failed electorally over the last two decades? In what ways have different leaders attempted to improve the electoral position of the Party, and why have some strategies appeared to have been more successful than others? Have obstacles to electoral success materialised from within the Party as well as from outside of it?

In answering these and other related questions, a number of internal and external factors which have had an impact on the electoral success of the Labour Party since 1979 are identified and examined from a comparative perspective. The approach to this study is guided by two related, theoretically informed claims made about the nature of political party change. Briefly stated, it is argued that: *i. a political party and its leaders, in their attempts to secure re-election to positions of governance, can be both constrained and facilitated in a number of ways by what are considered to be* structural factors -- *factors which exist both within, and external to, the party itself;* and *ii. hence, the relative success of the Labour Party and its different leaders since 1979 can best be understood in terms of the abilities of the Labour Party (as a collective actor) and its individual leaders to craft strategies and policies which are best suited to the structural factors which affect them, so that they may better adapt to, and perhaps, transform structural constraints, whilst taking advantage of enabling structures.* For example, from this perspective one could argue that Tony Blair's success in rewriting Clause IV of the Labour Party's Constitution (the Clause which describes what the Party stands for) -- succeeding where Hugh Gaitskill failed in 1959 -- was attributable to Blair's ability to identify and strategically overcome some structures in the Party which had been obstacles to such a change, whilst exploiting other structural opportunities to his advantage.

Literature Review

Of the major political parties in Britain today, the Labour Party has attracted by far the most academic research. In contrast, the Conservative Party has been subjected to relatively little academic attention until quite recently. During the eighties and nineties, studies of the Conservative government focused more on Thatcher and Thatcherism, rather than the Conservative Party itself.

The Labour Party, on the other hand, has been widely studied. This is undoubtedly due in large part to its organisational set-up, which is more institutionalised and democratic than the Conservative Party.[10] Thus, in recent years, the Labour Party Conference (Minkin, 1978), the Party's mass membership (Seyd & Whiteley, 1992), and the Party's links to the trade unions (Minkin, 1992), have all proved to be fruitful areas of research for political scientists. In addition, however, other aspects of Labour Party politics have come under academic scrutiny, in particular its internal (but nonetheless very public) crises of the late seventies and early eighties, a period which saw both the seizure of the Party control by the 'hard' Left, and the infiltration, or 'entryism', into the Party by extremist Trotskyite groups (see, e.g., Whiteley, 1983; Seyd, 1987; Shaw, 1988). It was these events which ultimately culminated in a split within the Labour Party, which led to the creation of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) in 1981.[11] In more recent years, attention has been given to the so-called 'modernisation' process within the Labour Party (Shaw, 1994, 1996; Jones, 1996). Both of Shaw's recent works, as well as Tudor Jones' just published study centre around Labour's aims and objectives during the different periods being studied; Shaw's emphasis is on the rise and decline of Keynesian social democracy within the Labour Party, whilst Jones' is on revisionism within the Party from Gaitskill onwards.

Whilst these studies are all, to varying degrees, related to Labour's electoral success, none deal primarily with that very topic. In his preface to his latest book, Shaw admits that "little is said (directly at least) about the problem of Labour's faltering electoral fortunes" (1996: viii).

It is clear, then, that despite the great deal of academic interest in the Labour Party, which has not ceased (quite the opposite, in fact) since the Party has been in opposition, there is still room for studies which more explicitly examine the Labour Party in the context of electoral success and failure. This thesis attempts to go some way towards accomplishing this task.

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[10] Unlike the Conservative Party, for example, which does not even have a formal membership outside the parliamentary party (supporters join Constituency *Associations*, which are only affiliated to the parliamentary party), and does not involve its supporters in decision-making, the Labour Party, through its Annual Conference and membership ballots, gives more power to its mass membership.

[11] There is an excellent account of the events which led to the birth of the SDP in Crewe and King (1995).

As an attempt to interpret the electoral fortunes of the Labour Party since 1979, this comparative-historical study constructs and employs a theoretical framework which is principally informed by the work of the social theorist Anthony Giddens (see Giddens, 1976, 1981, 1984). It should be pointed out that Giddens himself does not set out to construct a framework for empirical research on the basis of his understanding of the relationship between structures and agents. Therefore, a secondary, but nevertheless important, aspect of this thesis is to examine the use-value of Giddens' theory in a practical empirical research framework.

Organisation of Thesis

The following chapter outlines the theoretical framework which is employed in the study. As a precursor to this, the main positions which have been taken in the structure and agency debate thus far in the social sciences are reviewed. Naturally, given its importance to the framework, particular attention will be given to Anthony Giddens' "structuration" theory. The framework itself is then developed, describing how a dialectical understanding of the structure and agency linkage is utilised on two levels. Most importantly, there is a discussion of the structural factors existing both within and outside of the Labour Party which, it is argued, are most crucial to the Party's electoral success or failure.

The next three chapters will apply this framework to an analysis of the Labour Party since 1979. Chapter Two will cover the period from the election defeat of 1979 to 1983, examining the Party under the leadership of James Callaghan (briefly) and Michael Foot. The Party under the nine-year leadership of Neil Kinnock -- a period spanning two general elections -- will be discussed in Chapter Three, whilst Chapter Four will look at the Party from 1992 until the eve of the 1997 general election, during which time the Party has been led first by John Smith until his death in 1994, and now by Tony Blair. In each period the structural factors affecting the Party's electoral strategies, and the responses of the Party *qua* agent and of agents within Labour to these structural factors, will be examined and compared.

The concluding chapter will review the main findings of the study, not only to comment on what appear to be the most significant structural factors *vis-à-vis* electoral success and failure and their implications for the strategies which the Labour Party (and perhaps other parties of the Left) may adopt in the future, but also to assess the usefulness of the theoretical framework developed on the basis of Giddens' structuration theory.