Chapter 9
The Political Impact of the Media

Introduction

'Media effects' research, supported by extensive survey and experimental research over a sixty-year period, provides the main source of evidence about media influence.[1] Its constantly reiterated argument is that people are not empty vessels filled only with media messages. On the contrary, people have values, opinions and understandings, formed by early socialisation, membership of social networks and personal experience. This inclines people to understand, evaluate and retain media information in highly selective ways that accord with what they think already. Even when people are exposed to media information on a topic they know nothing about, they still have core beliefs and general orientations – 'interpretive schema' – that predispose them to 'process' selectively this information. People, in this view, are not easily manipulated, still less controlled by the media. This cautious assessment has been revised in the last two decades to acknowledge that the media can significantly affect what people think about ('agenda-setting') and influence frameworks of public understanding ('framing').[2] Even so, the central conclusion of this work is, still, that the media do not *determine* public attitudes and behaviour.

Effects research is complemented by 'reception studies', a research tradition indebted to literary studies and the methodology of commercial focus group research. It argues that meaning is not fixed and inscribed in 'media texts' but is created through the interaction of

audience and media. This active process of meaning-making is strongly influenced by the 'discourses' that audiences derive from everyday life. Even more than effects research, this tradition emphasises the wayward and selective nature of audience responses.[3]

This cumulative academic work has done little to diminish exaggerated public belief in the ubiquitous power of the media.[4] Yet the conclusions of both effects and reception studies are – in broad terms – correct. They are supported once again in this overview of the consequences of media reporting of municipal radicalism in London over a period of almost twenty-five years. As we shall discover, the tabloid press did not determine the thinking of its readers. When the media appeared to be dictating public policy, this was frequently an illusion.

Yet, academic exasperation with public perceptions of media omnipotence should not give rise to an over-reactive understatement of media influence. This chapter points to times when the media affected public attitudes. This, then, raises the question of why significant media influence was exerted on some occasions but not others. The answer, we will suggest, has usually to do with the pre-existing attitudes of audiences and the wider context in which the media operated.

This overview also leads in an unexpected direction. It suggests that the media may have had a greater influence on the political class than on the general public, and on the politics of political parties than on the electorate. Its implication would seem to be that more attention should be given to examining interactions within the Westminster village, if we are obtain a better understanding of the political power of the British media.

Mirage of Media Power

At first glance, the sequence of events suggests that the press was mainly responsible for the closure of the GLC. Between 1981 and 1983, the right-wing popular press campaigned against the GLC, mobilised public and political pressure for the GLC to be closed down, and was rewarded with a last minute addition to the Conservative party 1983 general election manifesto, committing the party to closing down County Hall. That proved to be the GLC's death warrant when the Conservatives won the general election.

However, this imputation of press influence is based merely on inference and chronology. This is typical of the way in which media

influence is discerned and mythologised. A detailed examination of the evidence invites a different conclusion.

The assault on the GLC did not originate in the 1980s press but in local, right-wing animosity towards metropolitan government in London that extended back to the nineteenth century. This animosity was based on four things: the belief that an all-London council would always tend to be controlled by the 'left'; dislike of its high-spending, high-rate policies; even greater hostility towards its redistributive politics (especially in relation to space, since this led to the relocation of the poor from the overcrowded centre to the spacious suburbs); and a tenacious localism that saw metropolitan government as an encroachment on the authority of local borough councils.[5]

For a time, this hostility was neutered politically by the lack of influence of Conservative Party members within their own party. However, grassroots opinion found an eloquent champion in the right-wing politician Enoch Powell, who published in 1955 a detailed plan for closing down County Hall. By the 1970s, party activists were becoming a significant force within a changing Conservative Party. Conservative London borough leaders lobbied inside their party in 1973 to such effect that the GLC might well have been abolished if the Conservatives, rather than Labour, had won the 1974 general elections.[6] The abolition campaign temporarily lost momentum in the later 1970s when the Conservatives won the 1977 GLC elections, and reversed policies that right-wing activists had found especially objectionable. But opposition to the GLC among numerous London Conservative activists, councillors and MPs remained. It resurfaced with increased intensity when the Livingstone administration took charge in 1981.[7]

By then, the GLC was already a widely criticised, weakened institution.[8] Central government had undermined the council's planning role by reversing key decisions. Local borough councils had obstructed the GLC's housing programme (which effectively came to an end in 1980 when most of the GLC's housing stock was transferred). The GLC's transport policy had fluctuated in the 1960s and 1970s from plans for a massive road-building programme to subsidised public transport, both of which had been abandoned, while traffic congestion in London grew steadily worse.

These failures prompted some people from the political left and centre to join right-wing critics in attacking the GLC. The council was inherently ineffectual, it was argued, because it was squeezed between an

interventionist central government and resentful local boroughs. Its political failures partly arose from tensions between the inner city and the suburbs in a city that lacked, it was argued, a shared identity and understanding of a common purpose. Above all, the root of the GLC's problem lay ultimately in a failure of conciliation. The London County Council had been redesigned as the GLC – with a broader electorate, and less power – in order to placate the right. But the right had never been won over by the change, leaving Londoners with a weak institution that lacked legitimacy.

The GLC was further undermined by the deepening political conflict that developed in the Thatcher era.[9] Livingstone's regime invested the GLC with a new role by redefining its purpose. However, this put the GLC on a collision course with the government, which was moving towards a different – and fundamentally opposed – understanding of the role of local government. Public choice arguments in favour of a depoliticised, devolved system of local government that was cheap, efficient and more financially accountable had already gained ground in official circles in the early 1980s. This was linked to a political vision of national regeneration through individual initiative and enterprise, the slimming down of government, and the repudiation of planning and 'corporatist' politics. The GLC thus embodied everything that Downing Street visionaries opposed. The GLC propped up loss-making companies; it subsidised an anti-business counter-culture; it was a wasteful talking shop with views on defence, peace and Northern Ireland; and its ultimate justification was strategic planning, an 'illusion' inherited from the mocked Heath–Wilson era.

The key issue that brought this conflict to a head was public finance.[10] Although the government had been elected in 1979 on a good housekeeping mandate, it had greatly increased public spending. Left-wing metropolitan authorities had contributed to this 'overspending' by sidestepping the government's new grant penalty scheme. Between 1978/9 and 1983/4, the GLC increased its expenditure in real terms (allowing for inflation) by 65 per cent and the Metropolitan County Councils by 22 per cent, compared with a 4 per cent increase among other local authorities in England during the same period.[11] The government found itself in a further quandary. Although it had promised in 1979 to abolish the rates, it could not agree (at that time) on what should replace it. Yet, it needed to get a grip in an area where, in the view of the

prime minister, it had been insufficiently effective. As Patrick Jenkin, the minister charged with abolishing the GLC, recalls:

> In the end, the cabinet said, well, if we are going to have a credible local government policy – we can't abolish the rates – we have got to have rate capping, and we have got to get rid of the GLC and the six Met counties. It was the Prime Minister who led from the front on this one.[12]

The tabloid press perhaps contributed to this decision by making the GLC 'notorious', thereby increasing its symbolic significance as a rebel authority. The tabloids also mobilised political pressure for abolition. Above all – and this was perhaps their most significant input – they conveyed the impression that the abolition of the GLC would be easy. The cabinet assumed that the GLC was 'wildly unpopular', and that its removal would present few political difficulties.[13]

However, the press's role was secondary. Demands for abolition were initiated not by the press but by right-wing activists, councillors and business people. Indeed, considerable political momentum had already built up in favour of abolishing the GLC long before right-wing newspapers became converts to the cause. This momentum became irresistible when the government, galvanised by a sense of failure, decided to take effective steps to control local spending. Even without the press's intervention, it is doubtful whether the GLC would have survived. After all, the six metropolitan county authorities – largely ignored by the tabloid press – were also closed down in 1986.

The tabloid press cannot even be credited with winning public support for the GLC's closure. Despite campaigning against the GLC for almost five years, right-wing tabloids only persuaded one in four Londoners that the GLC should be abolished. In fact, tabloid newspapers may well have convinced some people of the opposite. Their campaign conveyed the impression that the GLC was a victim of partisan spite; undermined the government's administrative case for closure; generated increased coverage of the GLC from less hostile media; and made the GLC seem important in the life of the community. Indeed, there can be fewer better illustrations of the limits of the popular press's power than its failure both to bury Livingstone as a politician, and gain public approval for the GLC's execution.

Contingent Influence

Yet, the popular press was not always so powerless. It was much more effective in its campaign against the 'loony left' London borough councils. This highlights the contingent nature of press influence – the way in which press influence depends upon the presence of other factors.

The 'loony left' campaign has been described already,[14] and its political fall-out briefly outlined.[15] Here, it is relevant to recall its timing, and focus attention on the havoc it created within the Labour Party. The assault on the 'loony left' boroughs of London overlapped with, and was an extension of, the anti-GLC campaign. It began in earnest with attacks on Bernie Grant, following the Broadwater Farm riot in October 1985 (preceded by 'warm-up' acts in the form of early attacks on Islington council, and coverage of the 1983 Bermondsey by-election). It intensified in the autumn of 1986, and peaked in the spring of 1987.

The key moment of lift-off occurred in November 1986, in response to the growing publicity generated by the McGoldrick affair, and the decision taken by Conservative government to make the 'loony left' a national political issue. In October 1986, Conservative Central Office sent out the first of its three 'research briefings' on the municipal left.[16] This was followed by a concerted, double-barrelled attack on the 'loony left' by two senior Conservative politicians on the same day, 17 November. Nicholas Ridley, Environment Minister, compared left-wing councils to the totalitarian regimes of Poland and East Germany ('the knock on the door in the middle of the night'), while Norman Tebbitt, Conservative Party Chairman, linked them to the possibility of a 'Berlin wall . . . erected around our country to keep us in'.[17] The virulence of these attacks smoked out Neil Kinnock, who sought to distance himself publicly from the 'loony left'. This produced a series of headlines in which Kinnock seemed to endorse tacitly the government's attack on a section of his own party: 'Kinnock slams town hall wreckers' (*Daily Express*, 20 November 1986), 'Kinnock blast at ''zealots'' for helping the enemy' (*The Times*, 20 November 1986) and the more explicit 'Loony left told to button up' (*Independent*, 23 November 1986).

It was a foretaste of things to come. The right-wing press turned the Greenwich by-election into a public trial of the municipal left. It framed the run-up to the by-election campaign in terms of whether Labour would choose a 'loony' candidate or not, followed by news that it had

(Labour's candidate, Deirdre Wood, had been a member of the left-wing Inner London Education Authority). This was capped by reports of Kinnock's dismay over the decision. 'What a disaster it is for poor Mr. Kinnock', mocked the *Sunday Express* (15 February 1987), while the *News of the World* reported him as saying 'Oh God, not Deirdre' (15 February 1987).

The response of Labour managers was to keep Deirdre Wood on a tight rein, and attempt to shift the political agenda to unemployment and welfare issues. Their efforts were unavailing partly because the 'loony left' was constantly featured in the tabloid press. The Liberal/Social Democrat Alliance and, initially, the Conservative Party also made the 'loony left' a central theme of their by-election campaigns. When the Alliance candidate, Rosemary Barnes, duly won the Greenwich by-election, not only the right-wing press but also most of the media hailed her victory as a public repudiation of the new urban left. 'The sins of the GLC', declared the BBC's political editor, John Cole, 'have been visited upon the Labour Party'.[18] 'The lesson of Greenwich', according to the pro-Labour *Daily Mirror* (27 February) was that 'the voters don't share the excitement of the zealots'.

In reality, Deirdre Wood's political profile approximated more to that of a 'traditional' Tribune supporter than of the new urban left.[19] And although Labour had held Greenwich for forty years, its loss was not quite the bolt out of the blue that it was widely represented to be. Greenwich had become increasingly gentrified, and its politics had consequently changed. Labour had only won the constituency with 38 per cent of the vote in the 1983 general election, making Greenwich one of Labour's twenty most marginal seats. Labour's by-election defeat was in fact less due to a decline of its vote (down 4 percentage points compared with 1983) than to a collapse of the Tory vote (down 24 percentage points). Rosemary Barnes was an early beneficiary of tactical voting.

However, these complexities were lost in the febrile atmosphere of the contemporary Labour party. On the night the by-election result was announced, right-wing Labour MPs called for 'desperate remedies to prevent a national disease for the Labour party'.[20] Their appeal was taken up the next day by London trade unionists demanding 'a clean-up' of the London Labour Party in order, in the words of Brian Nicholson, National Chairman of the Transport and General Workers, 'to reassure our traditional supporters that Labour is not a party of

lunatics'.[21] Similar views were expressed by Labour's former chief Whip, Michael Cocks, in the *Sunday Times* (21 March 1987), while BBC's *London Plus* (22 March 1987) reported 'an eleventh hour fight back against the hard left' by party 'moderates'.

The Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, lent his authority to this growing hue and cry. Speaking on BBC radio, he said that embarrassment was too 'mild' a word to describe his reaction to some left-wing activists in his party. In a formal statement of dissociation to the press, Kinnock declared that 'people at the fringe of our movement will have no influence, and get no influence on the leadership, our policies or the direction of the party'.[22]

These denunciations were levelled at unidentified left-wing activists. Those whom Kinnock had in mind were pinpointed in a confidential letter written by Patricia Hewitt, Kinnock's press officer, to Frank Dobson, Chairman of the London Group of Labour MPs, which was leaked to the *Sun* (6 March 1987). The letter seemed to vindicate the campaign against the 'loony left' by implicitly acknowledging that tabloid newspapers were voicing the concerns of ordinary voters. Though this letter has featured earlier, one small excerpt is worth re-quoting in which Patricia Hewitt concludes:

> It is obvious from our polling, as well as from the doorstep, that the 'London effect' is now very noticeable. The 'loony Labour' left is taking its toll: the gays and lesbians issue is costing us dear amongst the pensioners; and fear of extremism and higher rates/taxes is particularly prominent in the GLC area.

The media interpreted the leaked letter as the opening salvo in a civil war: 'Kinnock war on lefties' (*Star*, 6 March 1987); 'Kinnock tackles the loony left' (*Daily Mirror*, 6 March 1987); 'Gay left scares Kinnock (*Daily Mail*, 6 March 1987). 'A statement from the opposition leader's office', reported BBC TV's *Six O'Clock News* (6 March 1987), 'insisted that Mr Kinnock would make it crystal clear to a London Labour meeting that the few whose antics attracted sensational attention – in other words the loony left – had no influence . . .'. Speaking later in the programme, a flustered Neil Kinnock said 'I won't tolerate the nonsense that goes wrong – er, on – in and around the edges of the Labour Party'.

The leaked letter led to an orgy of public recrimination within the Labour Party. The Labour MP, Frank Field, appeared on television to

say that the party had come close to becoming unelectable and unworthy of being elected. He declared on BBC2's *Newsnight* (6 March 1987):

> Either we face the appalling prospect of the press picking them [the left] off between now and the election so that the electorate does not vote for them, and that means we do not have a Labour government. Or they get in under the cover of moderation, and totally transform the PLP [Parliamentary Labour Party] in the next parliament. Both prospects are pretty appalling.

This interview was followed by a studio debate between Jo Ashton, Labour MP and *Daily Star* columnist, and Russell Profitt, a left-wing parliamentary Labour candidate and race adviser to Brent council.

Ashton angrily declared 'we are seething up in the north' because the London 'loony left' was paving the way for another Conservative victory. 'It is no good blaming the media', exclaimed Ashton. 'It is not the media who says you have got to ban Baa Baa Black Sheep . . . and all the other nonsense'. Profitt replied that he was misinformed, and the exchange between them became increasingly acrimonious with each person raising his voice and interrupting the other. 'What chance have you of winning the election', asked the bemused programme presenter, Adam Raphael, 'if you carry on in this kind of vein?'

Despite behind-the-scenes attempts at peacemaking, conflicts simmered within the Labour Party for the next two months, and were widely reported in the press. Just the day before the announcement of the general election, Labour's left and right were still publicly blaming each other for the party's disappointing May local election results. Attacks on the 'loony left' from within the Labour movement even rumbled on during the general election campaign itself. Paul Gallagher, president of a leading trade union (EETPU), publicly blamed Labour's poor showing in the polls to:

> the perception that far too many people had of the Labour Party [as] a party dominated by fanatics, committed to extreme policies, catering exclusively to the most bizarre 'representative' minority causes, the advocacy of homosexuality, of inverted racism, of discriminatory feminism, of liaisons with terrorist organisations.[23]

The Conservative press stoked the embers of internal party conflict with a steady flow of 'loony left' stories: the alleged banning of 'wife jokes' by Camden Council, subsidised holidays for black pensioners in Lewisham, Bernie's 'barmy jobs for crooks', a proposal for condom machines in council children's homes.[24] These 'revelations' were sometimes presented as being part of a bigger story in which the leader of the Labour Party was vainly trying to control the party's lunatic elements. This added a new dimension to the tabloid representation of the 'loony left'. It came to symbolise not only left-wing excess, but also the party's internal turmoil, its weak leadership, its continuing extremism, and total unsuitability for public office.

The final phase of the 'loony left' campaign, during the May–June general election campaign itself, had an almost ritual quality. Some journalists argued that the 'loony left', and its allies, were poised to take over the national leadership of the Labour Party, just as they had done at County Hall. Attention was focused in particular on two 'loony' parliamentary candidates, Bernie Grant and Ken Livingstone: they were among the five most photographed Labour politicians in national dailies during the election campaign.[25] The 'loony left' also featured in the Conservatives' opening poster campaign, a party political broadcast and numerous candidates' election addresses.[26] But by then, this hardly mattered. The Conservatives had won the 11 June general election even before the official campaign had begun.[27]

This campaign against left-wing borough councils was different from the GLC campaign in three important respects. First, there was no fightback. The 'loony left' boroughs lacked the resources of the GLC, and were never able to turn the tide of public opinion. Second, television and radio did not provide a shield against tabloid attacks, in the way they had for County Hall. Broadcasters initially ignored the 'loony left' boroughs with the result that they were not given an opportunity to defend themselves and advance an alternative agenda to that of the tabloid press. This benign neglect then turned into attack, when broadcasters reported the McGoldrick story in a way that was rather similar to the press. Television tended also to concur with the press, during the aftermath of the Greenwich by-election, in portraying the 'loony left' as an electoral albatross around the Labour Party's neck. Third, the 'loony left' campaign triggered a low intensity civil war inside the Labour Party in marked contrast to the latter phase of the anti-GLC campaign when the entire Labour movement (including its privately critical leadership)

rallied behind County Hall. In short the press 'loony left' campaign was, unlike the GLC battle, an unmitigated disaster for the Labour Party.

Latent Misgivings

The 'loony left' campaign contributed to the pre-election decline of the Labour Party. As we have seen, this campaign lifted off in November 1985, and reached its dislocative zenith in the aftermath of the Greenwich by-election. This coincided with the downturn, and then collapse, of the Labour vote (see Table 9.1). Labour's support started to crumble in November 1986, and haemorrhaged in March and April 1987. In just seven months, those intending to vote Labour declined by a quarter. There was no recovery from this collapse. Labour's poor showing in the June 1987 general election – coming second with 31 per cent of the poll – was a direct consequence of this pre-election decline.

Table 9.1 *Decline of Labour Party Support 1986–7*

	1986					1987						
Month:	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	April	May (1–14)	May (ave.)	G.E.
% Lab:	37	39.5	40	38	36	38	36	32	30	30	32.5	31[2]

Source: Monthly averages of MORI, Harris, NOP, Marplan and Gallup polls.

[2] D. Butler and G. Butler, *British Political Facts 1900–2000*, 8th edn, (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 2000), p. 239. The general election was held on 11 June 1987.

That this connection between the 'loony left' campaign and Labour's pre-election decline was no coincidence is seemingly corroborated by the way in which perceptions of the Labour Party changed during this period. Some facets of the party's public image – for example its 'dangerous' defence policy – remained relatively stable. But images of the party that connected to the 'loony left' campaign changed rapidly. Thus, between October 1986 and April 1987, the proportion thinking that Labour was 'too extreme' increased by 15 percentage points, while those who said the party was 'too divided' rose by 12 percentage points (see Table 9.2). Those concluding that Labour was poorly led rose by 24 percentage points, while those thinking that Labour was the 'only party that can turn out the government' dropped by 31 per cent. The period of most pronounced deterioration in Labour's image was in the immediate

aftermath of the Greenwich by-election when the party was convulsed by mutual recrimination.

To understand why the 'loony left' campaign had such a strong impact, it is necessary to take account of pre-existing attitudes towards the Labour Party. Labour's result in the 1983 general election – following its extended civil war in 1979–1981, the 1982 Falklands War, and recollections of industrial strife and economic crisis during the Callaghan Labour government (1976–9) – had been abysmal. Labour won a smaller share of the vote *per opposed candidate* in 1983 than at any time since 1906, and came third or lower in 292 constituencies.[28] The party's own private research during the 1983 general election highlighted its crisis: it was widely judged to be economically incompetent, and was criticised on numerous other counts (including being both unprincipled and extreme). It seemed to be surviving perilously as a political force only because it was viewed as the party of the working class and the welfare state.[29]

Following Neil Kinnock's election as Labour leader in 1983, the party sought to reassure the electorate that Labour had become a more moderate party. This electoral strategy was pursued through symbolic changes, supported by some shifts of policy (most notably in relation to the European Union). For a time, it seemed as if this strategy was working. There was a gradual, if chequered, recovery of Labour's position in the polls after 1983 until the winter of 1984–5,[30] when television showed recurrent – and influential[31] – images of picket-line violence during a bitter miners' strike. However, when the strike ended, Labour's recuperation gradually resumed and seemed to gather momentum in 1986. This recovery only faltered and went into reverse when the 'loony left' campaign took off in November 1986.

This campaign was effective because it activated latent misgivings about whether Labour had really changed. Negative images of Labour had receded during 1983–4, revived during the 1984–5 miners' strike, were allayed again in 1985–6, and then were greatly strengthened by the 'loony left' assault. This assault thus did not create doubts about the Labour Party, but brought to the surface and crystallised doubts that already existed. This is why the campaign was so effective.

Thus, the high proportions of people who viewed the Labour Party as extreme, divided and badly led in April 1987 – shortly before the general election – were in fact very similar to those saying the same thing in January 1985, during the height of the bitter national miners' strike (see Table 9.3). Past doubts returned.

Table 9.2 *Perceptions of the Labour Party 1985–7*

	Jan '85 %	Jan '86 %	Sept '86 %	Oct '86 %	Jan '87 %	April '87 %
Too extreme	65	60	49	52	53	67
Too divided	75	63	67	61	56	73
Poor leadership	65	51	53	45	53	69
Economy worse under Labour	46	44	46	48	41	55
Lab. defence policy Dangerous	70	57	62	62	60	66
Looks after working class	41	47	38	44	45	39
Not clear what Labour stands for	72	63	57	57	59	67
Only party that can turn out government	53	39	49	59	53	28

Source: Gallup

Campaign's Relative Significance

A number of factors contributed of course to the 1987 election outcome. These other factors need to be taken into account – in a necessarily condensed way – in order to have a sense of the *relative* importance of the 'loony left' campaign.

The Conservative election victory of 1987 was not pre-ordained as a consequence of some underlying trend. The three overarching theories advanced to account for the Conservative ascendancy of the 1980s – the contraction of Labour's base, the decline of class, and growing ideological domination – have all come under sustained and telling attack.[32] The most persuasive of these, the claim that Thatcherism was a hegemonic ideological force,[33] is strongly qualified by survey evidence revealing the continuing strength of social democratic values, support for welfare policies and state economic intervention, and the emergence of an anti-authoritarian backlash.[34]

That Conservative victory was not assured is corroborated by the polls. The Conservatives were in political trouble during part of the period 1983–7, in marked contrast to mythologising accounts of their commanding position during the 1980s. Indeed, most polls put the

Conservative Party in third place in early 1986, and behind the Labour Party for most of that year.

But if there was no invisible motor powering the Conservatives to victory, the party had one crucial advantage that was the main reason why they won the 1987 general election. They were widely judged to be the best managers of the economy.

This reputation was partly an inherited asset. It was strengthened by the way in which the government expanded the economy at full throttle in the run-up to the election, inducing a shift from pessimism to optimism about the economy's future.[35] During the 1987 general election campaign, 54 per cent rated the Conservatives best on inflation compared with only 23 per cent who favoured Labour.[36] In key Conservative–Labour marginal constituencies, the Conservatives were considered by a margin of 50 per cent to 27 per cent to be best at managing the economy compared with Labour.[37] But perhaps the single most telling survey result was that relating to prosperity. The Conservatives were judged by 55 per cent to 27 per cent as more likely to promote living standards.[38] This commanding lead was based partly on a widespread perception of Labour incompetence. Fifty-six per cent thought it likely that there would be an economic crisis under a Labour government,[39] and 49 per cent predicted in effect that they would be worse off financially under Labour.[40]

The second reason why the Conservative Party won the 1987 general election was those opposed to it were split. The opposition accounted for the majority of the country: the Conservatives gained only 42 per cent of the poll in 1987. But this opposition vote was divided between Labour and the centrist Alliance of the Liberal and Social Democratic Parties. In Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system, the Conservatives' minority share of the vote was sufficient to produce a landslide victory in terms of parliamentary seats.

The 'loony left' campaign played a crucial part in deepening the division of the anti-Tory majority. It undermined the main electoral alternative to the Conservative Party – the Labour Party – by reactivating negative perceptions of the party. However, support for the party also eroded for other reasons. Labour was identified with union militancy: its leader, Neil Kinnock, was viewed critically; and Labour's commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament was unpopular (causing the Conservatives to be judged by a margin of 54 per cent to 23 per cent to have the best defence policies).[41] Despite some perceived strengths

(especially in relation to welfare issues), Labour did not have a cushion of high regard to fall back on.

One consequence of the 'loony left' crusade was to brand Labour as extreme. More people viewed Labour than the Conservatives as extreme in 1987 – a reversal of the situation before the campaign took off. Indeed, more people viewed Labour as extreme in 1987 than in 1983[42] – a remarkable result revealing that Labour's entire post-1983 election strategy, based on the cultivation of a moderate, reassuring image, had failed.

The image of extremism alienated support. No less than 42 per cent of Labour defectors in the 1987 election gave the party's extremism as a factor that had influenced their decision to withdraw support from the party (compared with 25 per cent in 1983).[43] Among the public as a whole, 27 per cent cited extremism as a disincentive for voting Labour, again up on 1983.[44] Another post-election survey[45] found that dislike of the 'loony left' was the aspect of the Labour Party that repelled the highest proportion of non-Labour and ex-Labour voters alike. Among the latter crucial group, 42 per cent agreed with the statement that the ''loony left'' would gain too much influence', and 29 per cent of them said that Labour was 'too dominated by the unions'.

These results must be viewed with a certain degree of caution since retrospective self-assessments do not always provide a reliable guide. Indeed, they probably inflate the importance of the 'loony left' campaign because they offer 'acceptable', publicity-generated reasons for deserting Labour. The need for caution is reinforced by another post-election survey[46] that once again gives prominence to Labour's extremism as a deterrent among Labour's 'potential voters'. But when this group was asked about how Labour might increase its support, the largest proportion (42 per cent) said that Labour needed to convince that it would maintain their living standards. This probably represented the paramount concern of many voters.

The issue of economic competence and Labour's public face cannot of course be surgically separated. The spectacle that Labour presented to the electorate in the aftermath of the 'loony left' Greenwich by-election – introspective, divided, its members at its each others' throats – can have done little to convey the impression of economic competence.

But while the 'loony left' campaign and negative perceptions of Labour's economic competence weakened Labour, they did not destroy the party. What happened was that some support merely ebbed away from Labour,

and was diverted to another weak challenger, the Alliance. The Alliance lacked a distinctive class base; its vote was difficult to consolidate because its supporters' views diverged on many issues; its dual leadership blurred its political identity; and, as the third force in politics, it was vulnerable to the charge that it represented a 'wasted vote'. The Alliance wounded Labour but lacked the strength to replace it.

Of course, a number of different factors influenced different sections of the electorate, and in this sense the causes of the election outcome were complex.[47] But if the Conservatives' greater credibility as economic managers was the main reason why they won, the 'loony left' campaign also played a significant part. It helped to divide the opposition, and force a wedge between its two main sections. It was a key factor in creating an 'anti-Labour majority' in 1987, and inhibiting the development of anti-Conservative tactical voting. It was only ten years later, when there was greater good will between Labour and Liberals, that tactical voting was to play a part in bringing Conservative rule to an end.

Labour's Lepers

The urban left became a scapegoat for Labour's failure in the 1987 election. Leading members of the Labour right blamed the 'loony left' for Labour's defeat. This view was also expressed by the Kinnockite leadership, and was duly amplified by political correspondents. As the BBC's political editor, John Cole, put it: 'I have no doubt that he [Kinnock] would believe that it's the London Labour Party and people like it have got Mrs Thatcher's majority'.[48] But more significantly, a number of leading members of Labour's left joined this chorus. For example Tom Sawyer, Deputy General Secretary of the left-wing National Union of Public Employees (and a pivotal figure within the left who had been part of the inner group who had organised Tony Benn's deputy leadership bid in 1981 and the anti-Falklands War campaign in 1982) publicly rounded on the London left: 'I think we lost the election in November 1986. We were leading the Tories in the opinion polls. Then there was a case called the McGoldrick case'. He added bleakly, 'the politics of gender and politics of race are dynamite, and they have got to be handled carefully. Unless we learn that lesson Labour might never be elected to government again'.[49]

In Labour's post-election inquest, much was made of the fact that the

Conservative Party's share of the vote rose 2 per cent in London, whereas it fell in most regions. This was taken to be tangible proof that the London left had been rejected by the public, and damaged the party. In this discourse of blame, the 'London effect' became a code word. It signified the London left's disproportionate defeat, Labour's alienation from the people, and the need for the party to 're-connect' to the concerns of the public.

The London left became lepers almost without friends. It was attacked by other sections of the left for wanting to deviate from class politics. According to Derek Hutton, former Deputy Leader of Liverpool council and a leading figure in the Trotskyist Militant Tendency, 'the London Left are more concerned about black mayors and gay rights than about building homes' and 'more concerned that we called . . . a manhole cover a personhole cover, than they ever were about real issues'.[50] 'People as a whole – especially older Labour voters', wrote a Scottish trade unionist in a rank-and-file paper, 'become anti-Labour when they see councils in London . . . subsidising all kinds of odd activities'.[51]

During this period of extended recrimination, some members of the urban left publicly confessed their sins, and expressed contrition. Graham Smith, a radical Ealing Councillor, wrote in *Tribune*: 'I plead guilty. I put my hand up . . . We have to admit we were wrong'.[52] Margaret Hodge, leader of left-wing Islington council (from whose Town Hall a red flag had once fluttered), argued that the urban left needed to leave behind the politics of gesture.[53] Public repentance was followed by a humble seeking of absolution. Camden Council, explained its press officer Jonathan O'Neil in 1991, had learnt the error of its ways. 'This tag as a loony left authority', he explained, 'is one we're trying very hard to shake. It refers to nearly ten years ago with a very different [Labour council] administration'.[54] 'We don't do gesture politics now', echoed Camden's new leader, Julia Fitzgerald, 'which wasn't always the case three or four years ago'.[55] The London Labour Party, concurred its senior organiser, Terry Ashton, had turned its back on the errors of the past.[56]

Labour's critics were not convinced. Further manifestations of the 'loony left' virus were detected in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and new health warnings continued to be issued. Typical of these was the caution issued by *Sunday Times* political correspondent, Andrew Grice, in 1992. 'Labour's ''loony left'' wanders in the wilderness' he wrote but then added ominously but 'for how long?'[57]

In this extended period of almost universal denigration of the 'loony

left', memories tended to be revised. The GLC had been widely praised, none more so than by Martin Jacques who wrote in 1986 that it was 'the *greatest* achievement of the labour movement since 1979' (original emphasis) and had advanced 'a new set of priorities – gender, race and sexuality – which will surely be a central part of the agenda of the 90s'.[58] Writing in 1991, Martin Jacques expressed misgivings about 'gesture politics' and 'high-profile stances on racism and sexism', although he recalled the GLC's cheap fares policy with approval.[59] Others were more acerbic. Ros Coward, a prominent feminist, scoffed at those who remembered 'Red Ken's rule [at GLC) as the heyday of the democratic left'. On the contrary, she declared in 1997, 'I remember it as the time the lunatics took over the asylum'.[60] In the context of this new received wisdom, it struck the journalist, Polly Toynbee, in 1997 as refreshingly odd that a senior Labour politician, Chris Smith, should praise what she called 'the old reviled GLC'.[61]

Mythologising the 'London Effect'

The tabloid campaign against the 'loony left' was thus mediated within the Labour party in a highly selective way. The 'loony left' became a symbol of electoral failure, and of the need for the party to adapt and change. Central to this discourse was unquestioned acceptance that there was a 'London effect', offering conclusive proof that the London left had been emphatically rejected by the public.

The concept of the 'London effect' had been first publicly advanced in Patricia Hewitt's leaked letter reporting that it was 'obvious' from the party's own research that fear of extremism was 'particularly prominent in the GLC area'.[62] In fact, this was very far from obvious. The relevant survey, commissioned by the Labour Party,[63] reported that 3 per cent more Londoners than the national sample said that a future Labour government would be 'too left-wing/communist'. This difference was no greater than the statistical margin of sampling error. Furthermore, there was no consistent difference in the responses of Londoners and the country as whole, in relation to issues like education and rates, where a 'London effect' should have operated. What in fact the party's polling evidence suggested, in an inconclusive way, was the *possibility* of a weak effect – not at all what Patricia Hewitt claimed.

The actual 1987 election results do not suggest that there was a strong 'London effect'. It is true that there was a modest 2 per cent increase of

the Conservative share of the vote in the capital, against the national trend. However, the Conservatives also increased their share of the vote in the south-east by the same amount. Both results could be mainly attributed to the disproportionate growth in the prosperity that took place in London and the south-east during the 1986–7 economic boom.

What most people also failed to notice was that Labour's share of the vote also rose by 2 per cent in London in the 1987 general election. It was the Alliance, not Labour, which fell back in the capital. The erosion of the centrist vote was not what people had in mind of course when they talked of the 'London effect'.

There was also no systematic voting trend against 'loony left' candidates and those standing in 'loony left' boroughs Some left-wing candidates, like the former GLC councillor Tony Banks, did exceptionally well, as did some candidates in 'loony' boroughs, like Islington's left-wing Jeremy Corbyn. Conversely, some right-wing Labour candidates standing in right-wing Labour boroughs, like Newham's Nigel Spearing, did badly. However, seven left-wing candidates in London under-performed. This could be attributed to a number of factors other than their politics. Four were black in an election where non-white candidates in general fared worse than average. Certain results could also have been influenced by sub-regional differences of swing within the metropolitan area (since Labour did better in south than in north London). Furthermore, the adverse swings experienced by some radical candidates were not enough in most cases to win or lose a seat. The best available inference, derived from a very careful sifting of the evidence, is that – at most – the 'London factor' helped the Alliance to retain one seat (Greenwich), and the Conservatives to win another (Walthamstow).[64] In short, what the 'London effect' amounted to was the possibility that it affected the outcome of just two seats.

Of course, the damage that the 'loony left' campaign inflicted on the Labour Party extended across the country, including London. But this damage was made worse by the way in which the Kinnock team mishandled the tabloid assault. It first tried to ignore it – something that proved unsustainable. Labour's leadership then implicitly endorsed the attack, reinforcing its damaging impact. Only in the final phase, shortly before the general election, did the Labour leadership opt for the strategy that it should perhaps have adopted in the first place. It attacked some 'loony left' stories as lies, and sought to play down the whole issue as overblown.[65] But by then, it was too late.

Effect on Labour's Political Development

Even if the 'London effect' was largely a myth, and the Kinnock team was less than adept in deflecting attacks, the 'loony left' campaign still influenced the political development of the Labour Party. Indeed, the way in which tabloid attacks were mediated within the Labour Party is central to understanding the nature of press influence.

The Labour left was already in decline by 1987. Its seeming strength in 1979–81 had been partly an illusion, based on championing the cause of activist democracy, and expressing widely shared activist disappointment with the Callaghan administration (1976–9). By 1982, the left was in a minority in all three major power centres of the party – the parliamentary party, the trade union movement and the National Executive Committee – and lacked electoral support for some of its most fervently held policy commitments. It had also split during Tony Benn's bid for the deputy leadership of the Labour Party in 1981 (when the left had come within 0.8 per cent of winning). This split led to a realignment of forces within the party, based on a new alliance of the centre-left and centre-right, that underpinned Neil Kinnock's election as party leader in 1983.

However, the balance of forces within the Labour Party was still fluid in the mid-1980s. There had been a formidable activist revolt against the parliamentary leadership. The left that organised this revolt still had considerable support in constituency parties and some trade unions. The existence of this support acted as a sheet anchor limiting the movement to the right that leading figures within the party felt was necessary. Moreover, the coalition of the centre-left and centre-right that Kinnock, and his allies, had constructed was still fragile. Some members of the right-wing Solidarity group within the Parliamentary Labour Party were critical of Kinnock in the lead-up to the 1987 general election, privately calling him a 'windbag' and viewing his commitment to unilateral nuclear disarmament as an electoral liability. Conversely, some members of the centre-left were alarmed by what they viewed as Kinnock's increasing capture by the Labour right. The two ends of the coalition thus pulled against each other, threatening to jeopardise its future.

The 'loony left' campaign helped to stabilise this coalition in a variety of ways. It was a personally traumatic experience for the relatively young team – Neil Kinnock, Charles Clarke, Patricia Hewitt and Peter Mandelson – who were in the front line attempting to defuse its

consequences.[66] They found themselves powerless to prevent Labour's pre-election collapse, culminating in the party's third successive election defeat. This collapse reinforced, in their view, the need for a fundamental transformation of the party that research and their own personal experience of failure indicated was necessary. Labour shifted much further to the right after the 1987 general election, and this helped to reconcile the Labour right to Kinnock's continued leadership. The third piece in the jigsaw was that prominent figures in the then centre-left – notably, Gordon Brown, Robin Cook, David Blunkett, Jack Straw and Tom Sawyer (who became General Secretary of the Labour Party) – supported Labour's rightwards drift. They successfully opposed the recreation of the broad left within the party and union movement, and blocked the revival of a combined Tribune–Campaign, broad-left slate of candidates for election to the shadow cabinet.

The tabloid assault on the urban left also widened fault lines within the Labour left itself. It promoted a rift between the new urban left and the traditional, class-based left, and between these two squabbling groups and the defecting centre-left. When Tony Benn stood for the leadership of the Labour Party in 1988, it was at the head of a disunited, demoralised and fragmented left, and resulted in his resounding defeat. This weakening of the left made the subsequent transformation of the Labour Party much easier.

The 'loony left' was also explicitly invoked to legitimate the continued rightwards movement of the Labour Party under Tony Blair's leadership, from 1994 onwards.[67] The phrase 'loony left' endured as a symbol of the left's dislocation from ordinary life, and became part of the vocabulary of British politics. It came to signify a time when Labour lost touch with the public, before it 'reconnected' and became electable. The tabloid demonisation of the 'loony left' was one of the paving stones that led to the national redefinition of the Labour Party.[68] This resulted in an electorally successful party – winning landslide victories in 1997 and again in 2001 – that was committed to neo-liberal, law-and-order, immigration control and Atlanticist politics, while retaining a strong social democratic commitment to public spending on the welfare state.

Effect on Radical London Councils

Mass circulation newspapers devoted considerable space to exposing, in unsparing detail, the 'daft' things that London borough councils did

with the ratepayers' money. It would seem reasonable to assume therefore that disclosure of these 'lunacies' would be followed, at the first opportunity, by electoral retribution. An angry public would hound left-wing councillors from office.

Borough council elections in London were held in May 1986, when the tabloid 'loony left' campaign was already under way. Elections were held again four years later, by which time the full facts of left-wing 'excess' had been widely publicised. Those who had escaped the wrath of the electorate in 1986 would surely be sent packing in 1990.

However, this is not what happened. In 1986, the London borough councils that the tabloid press had singled out for special attack before May 1986 – Camden, Hackney, Haringey, Lambeth, and Islington – all remained under Labour control. With one exception, Labour's share of the vote in these 'loony' boroughs actually increased – in two cases by a margin of 10 percentage points or more.[69] The exception was Islington, a borough where the majority of the Labour group on the council had defected to the SDP in the early 1980s. This established a strong SDP presence in Islington, and provided the foundation for a pro-Alliance swing in 1986, though not one strong enough to win the council.

The results in the 1990 local election were mixed. By then, the tabloid press had branded some ten London councils as 'loony'. There were swings to the Conservatives, of between 4 and 7 per cent, in three of these boroughs, at a time when there was a 0.5 per cent swing to the right in London as a whole. Two of these (Brent and Ealing) were lost to Labour, though not the third (Waltham Forest). As against this, there were swings to Labour, against the trend, in seven 'loony left' boroughs – Camden, Greenwich, Haringey, Islington, Lambeth and Lewisham.[70]

These mixed results can be explained away partly on the grounds that local elections did not coincide with the peak of the 'loony left' crusade, and left-wing local councils had an opportunity to make a new pitch to the electorate in 1990. Even so, the fact that so many 'loony left' councils did so well in both the 1986 and 1990 local elections requires some explanation.

There was local distrust of national media. For example, a survey in Camden found that national newspapers were nominated as the least reliable source of information about their local council.[71] This localism reinforced already existing scepticism about the reliability of the tabloid press. In 1988, only 12 per cent thought that tabloids like the *Sun* were truthful, and only 25 per cent said the same of middle-market tabloids

like the *Daily Mail*. By contrast, television and radio were thought to be much more reliable.[72]

In addition, people had ready access to a variety of different local sources of information about their town hall. In local surveys, the three most often cited sources tended to be local councils themselves, the local weekly press, and friends and neighbours. By contrast, the London-wide and national media were mentioned by relatively few people.[73] Selectively drawing upon these different sources, often with only a limited degree of interest in municipal politics, people tended to vote according to prior party allegiances.

However, some council administrations were more politically vulnerable than others. Surveys in Lewisham, Islington and Waltham Forest provide a glimpse into the dynamics involved. The left-wing administration in Waltham Forest was politically inexperienced, and pushed for rapid change (including a very large rate increase) in a community without a long tradition of radicalism. It got a frosty reception reinforced by hostile national press coverage. Thirty-five per cent complained in 1987 about excessive rate charges which, in the words of the MORI report, 'is an extremely high response to an unprompted question'. The areas where respondents were most inclined to think that savings could be made had all been highlighted in press criticism: services/advice for ethnic groups, entertainments and events, and services/advice for women.[74] In these circumstances, it is not surprising that there was anti-Labour swing in the borough in 1990.

By contrast, there was no rates rebellion in Islington. This was partly because rates, though high, had been increased incrementally over a period of years; and partly because Islington, then still one of the poorest boroughs in the country, had a significant number of people on low incomes who were exempt from paying. Unlike Waltham Forest, Islington also had a long history of radicalism and a sizeable socialist minority. This was reflected in survey responses: in 1987 41 per cent (and the majority under the age of forty-five) said they supported higher rates/taxes in order to try to reduce poverty in the borough. The Islington administration was also a battle-hardened group who won strong approval by introducing neighbourhood offices. Despite being a target of tabloid attacks a substantial and, over the period 1984–7, increasing number of residents said that they were satisfied with the council.[75] The 1990 swing in favour of the Labour council in Islington comes therefore as no surprise.

Lewisham provides a striking contrast to both these councils. Although it was also a target of tabloid attack, and sustained a modest reduction of relatively high approval between 1984 and 1987, 'loony left' issues seem not to have greatly concerned local residents.[76] There was, however, great deal of public indignation on the subject of poor road and pavement maintenance. In Lewisham, it seemed to be politics as usual in a strong Labour area unruffled by tabloid journalism.

But if the electorate in radical areas were often unmoved by the national press, this was very far from the case with the local political elite. Once again, it was the political class rather than the public that seems to have been most influenced by tabloid naming and shaming. During the later 1980s, radical councils in London shifted from the politics of the new urban left to the 'managerial left'.[77] This was partly because rate-capping and the limits of creative accounting (with no Labour government in sight) meant that left-wing councils no longer had the financial resources needed to take major new political initiatives. But it also had something to do with the personal reactions of 'volunteer' politicians unused to being in the full glare of ferocious press publicity. Some concluded that their attempt to change community attitudes through symbolic politics had backfired, and was not worth pursuing. Others were concerned that they might lose grassroots support. Misgivings gave rise to furious factional fights among some left council administrations. In the fallout that followed, some radicals – like Linda Bellos, leader of Lambeth council, who had been deeply upset by the way in which she had been stigmatised in the press as a 'black lesbian'[78] – left municipal politics altogether. Survivors like Margaret Hodge, whose leadership of Islington council was regularly linked to 'judo [or 'gym'] mats for lesbians',[79] stressed service delivery as a way of securing imperilled political support.[80] The anti-'loony left' campaign worked by intimidating the 'loons'.

Effect on Governmental System

During the 1980s, ten major statutes reduced the functions, resources or discretion of local councils and had the cumulative effect of greatly extending central government control.[81] Thus, the financial autonomy of local councils was curbed through the introduction of rate-capping, poll tax and the centrally determined business rate. Local authority responsibility for housing and education was reduced through the right

to opt out of local government control, the introduction of the national curriculum, and the creation of new agencies such as Housing Action Trusts. Local power to regulate and subsidise public transport was also curtailed. Above all, competitive tendering for key local government services was first introduced in 1989, and extended under John Major's administration. These reforms were part of an enduring revolution in which the role of local government was greatly reduced.[82]

The climactic moment of this change was the later 1980s, when the emasculation of local government was greatly accelerated. This emasculation was justified partly on the basis of the need to curb the 'loony left', and address the underlying malaise that had allowed left-wing extremists to flourish. Councils were unrepresentative, it was argued, because they were elected on low turnouts. They were unaccountable because low-income voters, exempted from paying the rates, could vote for profligate councils, and be insulated from the financial consequences of their actions. Council services were often inefficient due to local union domination and the absence of competitive market forces. Above all, some council administrations were going beyond what they government thought should be their central remit – delivering essential services in a cost-effective way. As Margaret Thatcher complained, a 'whole batch' of Labour councils were engaged 'not in crime prevention, but in police prevention', insisting on gay propaganda 'being forced on innocent children', and 'banning' competitive games.[83]

Yet, an impassioned and sustained attack on seemingly unpopular councils failed to win consent for the restructuring of local government. Although the poll tax was initially welcomed by a slim margin of 4 per cent in June 1987, it soon became unpopular. Two-thirds of the public opposed it by late 1987, and almost three-quarters by early 1990.[84]

The government's plans for compulsory tendering of local government services, though welcomed in principle by many in 1987, also encountered opposition. A Gallup survey found that by 1988 the large majority opposed the subcontracting of *their* local council services. Indeed, even the majority of Conservative supporters in this survey believed that their council would do a better job than private enterprise or central government in administering all but one service.[85] Local MORI studies during this period suggest that people opposed privatisation of local council services for three main reasons: they feared that prices would rise, quality would decline and community control would be reduced.[86]

Groups given the chance to escape from the incompetent town hall commissars of tabloid legend showed little enthusiasm for doing so. In nine local studies between 1987 and 1989, the proportion of councils tenants wanting to retain council management ranged between 69 and 94 per cent.[87] Although parents supported, in principle, the right for schools to opt out of local authority control, they were opposed to it in practice. Successive polls in 1987–8 showed that those wanting *their* schools to opt out were in a small minority.[88]

Numerous surveys also registered lack of support for increased centralisation. For example, in 1987, only 15 per cent said that councils should be controlled more by central government.[89] The large majority, to judge from a survey in 1986, believed that increased government control over local council spending would result in worse services and reduced local accountability.[90]

Two reforms – council house sales and the introduction of the national curriculum – won enduring public support. But what is striking is how little public acceptance there was for most of the measures that eroded local democracy in the 1980s. Given the outpouring of official justifications for these measures, and the scale of negative coverage of left-wing councils legitimating reform, this lack of public enthusiasm requires an explanation.

One reason was that many people were not as disenchanted with local government during the 1980s as critics on the right (and also on the left) imagined. The Audit Commission survey of local government in England and Wales in 1986 found that 53 per cent were satisfied with the way in which their council ran their area, compared with 26 per cent who were dissatisfied.[91] Dissatisfaction with *central* government (52 per cent) was in fact twice as extensive as it was for *local* government.[92] The level of satisfaction with local councils was also higher in 1986 than it was in 1981.[93] In short, there was no consensus that local government needed to be 'fixed'.

The second reason was that the nature of the 'fix' – greater market provision and increased central control – did not accord with contemporary public attitudes. In the 1980s, the majority disapproved of the privatisation of British Gas, British Telecom, electricity and water supply.[94] This absence of a neo-liberal consensus helps to explain why so many people were opposed to privatisation of local government services.

There was also significant distrust of the extension of central government control. In 1987, only 5 per cent thought that government had too

little power, compared with 48 per cent who said that it had too much.[95] Surveys in the 1980s register growing disapproval of government heavy-handedness.[96] Local government had also been long defended in Britain as an agency accountable to local communities that functions as a check on central power. These different attitudes all help to explain why many people said in surveys that they opposed increased central control over local government.

The third reason why many local government reforms lacked support was that they were presented, especially in the later 1980s, as a way of curbing 'problem' councils. Reform did not seem relevant therefore to many people as a way of improving the unproblematic council in their area.

But if the public did not approve of the revolution in government that was inaugurated in the 1980s, the political class took a different view. Kenneth Baker, then Education Minister, talked confidently about the 'tremendous consensus we have got to be moving down this road [of local government reform]'.[97] Asked why Labour had major gains in 'notorious' Haringey in the 1990 local elections, Baker registered bafflement. 'Possibly in Haringey', he suggested, 'they are more insulated to the extravagances of Labour authorities than elsewhere'.[98] The government's advocacy of local government reform was regularly echoed by a supportive press. This extended beyond partisan Conservative newspapers to include some distinguished liberal voices. For example Alan Watkins wrote of Margaret Thatcher: 'She has removed two fears, even hatreds, from the lives of working people: of trade unions and of Labour local authorities'.[99]

Sustaining this illusion of public approval for local government reform was a cumulative crisis of opposition. The defence of the GLC had brought into a being in 1983–5 a formidable political alliance in defence of local democracy, extending from liberal Conservatives such as Edward Heath and Conservative constitutionalists like Geoffrey Rippon, through to the mainstream of the Labour and Liberal Parties, and extending to the radical left, represented by Tony Benn and Ken Livingstone. This coalition fell apart in 1985–6. It became politically difficult for Conservatives to rally to the cause of local democracy when it was embodied by the pariahs of mid-1980s politics, the 'loony left' in London and the Trotskyist Militants in Liverpool. It also became inexpedient for Labour to make too much fuss about creeping centralisation when this invited media identification with 'indefensible'

zealots. The late 1980s and early 1990s campaign against the poll tax provided an opportunity to recreate a political coalition in defence of local democracy. However, a tactical decision was taken by Neil Kinnock to concentrate almost exclusively on the regressive nature of the poll tax. Emphasising that it also weakened local democracy was not thought to be an argument that resonated with the public.[100]

Local councils were forced to depend on their resources in defending local democracy. However, local authorities split along party lines, and failed to present a common front. The municipal left itself split over rate-capping, and failed to adopt a coherent strategy of opposition. In radical areas, they had significant support in principle. For example, 36 per cent of Islington residents wanted in 1985 their council to refuse to set a lower rate 'even if this means breaking the law' and a further 37 per cent wanted the council to resign in protest and call a special local election, while only 21 per cent wanted the council to set a lower rate demanded by the government.[101] In neighbouring Southwark, 56 per cent wanted their council to break the law over rate-capping.[102] However, left-wing councils in the 1980s did not have a mass labour movement to call upon, unlike the organisers of Poplarism in the 1920s.[103] They also lacked significant support in parliament and the media. There was really not very much that they could do to arrest the increasing centralisation of government.

In short, the right-wing press played a significant part in the 1980s erosion of local government autonomy and responsibilities. The press did not win public support for these changes. But it played a cheerleading role, encouraging government ministers to think that they had public support. The press also weakened cross-party resistance to the erosion of local government, and made the Labour opposition wary of doing anything that associated it with political 'zealots'. Once again, the press mattered principally because it influenced the political elite rather than the general public.

Generational Change

The leader of the new urban left, Ken Livingstone, was elected to parliament in 1987. He became an isolated and marginalised figure in the Commons. Unrepentant and unreconstructed, refusing to sing from the New Labour hymn sheet, he slipped into the shadows of an out-of-favour backbencher's existence. However, he was given the

opportunity to return to his old stamping grounds when the government decided in 1998 to establish a directly elected London Mayor and Greater London Assembly.

The leadership of the Labour Party did everything it could to stop Livingstone from being chosen as the official candidate for Mayor. Livingstone was first subjected to a lengthy inquisition by a pre-selection panel which agonised over whether to exclude him from the shortlist. Reluctantly, his name was allowed to go forward for election by a party electoral college. However, this college was constituted in a form that would deliver a candidate approved by the leadership. Votes were weighted strongly in favour of MPs and against individual party members, while unions were not required to ballot their members as they had been in the election of Labour Party leader in 1994. In the event, Livingstone won 60 per cent of party members' votes and won in those unions that balloted their members – and still lost to the approved candidate, Frank Dobson.[104]

What Tony Blair and his colleagues had not anticipated was that Livingstone would then publicly question the legitimacy of the party's rigged election, and risk political suicide by standing as an independent candidate (with the inevitable consequence of being expelled from the Labour Party). Throughout the twentieth century, there were numerous attempts by independent candidates to challenge the party system, the overwhelming majority of which failed ignominiously.[105] This seemed to suggest that only political parties had the organisation, resources, command of public loyalties and privileged media access needed to mobilise large numbers of people to the polls. Yet, Livingstone gambled against the odds, and stood as an independent in the 2000 London mayoral election. He led on the first count, and won outright on the second with 58 per cent of the vote. The Conservative candidate came second, and the Labour candidate a very poor third.

Livingstone's victory in 2000 was not just the triumph of a charismatic celebrity in a new kind of election. Livingstone had been the public face of the new urban left during the 1980s, and remained an unapologetic exponent of its politics. The fact that he could beat the party system by creating and mobilising a progressive cross-party coalition[106] indicated that something had changed. Quietly and unobtrusively, the 'loony left' agenda of the 1980s was beginning to become the acceptable politics of the 2000s.

The urban left had argued in the 1980s that an abstract commitment to

equal opportunities was not enough, and that ethnic monitoring of employees, targets for increased ethnic minority recruitment, and training courses were needed to overcome the effects of racial discrimination and disadvantage.[107] Although this position had been denounced in the 1980s as 'inverted racism', it had become almost conventional two decades later. For example, the Metropolitan Police, troubled by how unrepresentative it was of multiethnic London and disconcerted by the damning criticisms of police failings in the Macpherson Inquiry Report, established in 1999 targets for increasing recruitment of Black and Asian officers.[108] The fire, immigration, probation and prison services followed suit the same year.[109] In 2000, the BBC's new Director General, Greg Dyke, called the corporation 'hideously white' (a remark that would have led to his stigmatisation as 'loony' in the 1980s) and introduced targets for ethnic minority recruitment. These were met both at a senior management level, and in the corporation as a whole, three years later.[110] Large numbers of commercial organisations, with a social responsibility orientation, also adopted 'positive action' policies on race. For example, the great majority of premiership and first division football clubs in the early 2000s ethnically monitored their staff, sought to recruit from minority communities, and opposed with growing success racism in football.[111] In 2004, the Football Association decided to 'fast-track' ethnic minorities on its decision-making bodies at both national and local level.[112]

Gender was another area where the 'loony left' agenda made advances. The urban left in the 1980s incorporated more women at the heart of policy making, became more oriented towards the concerns of women in terms of public policy, and sought to retain, and promote to senior positions, more women in council jobs. This approach became almost conventional in the subsequent period. In the tradition of left-wing councils' 'women's committees', the Labour Party introduced women-only shortlists for the selection of parliamentary candidates in some constituencies after 1992. This caused the number of women MPs to *double* to 120 (out of a total of 659 MPs) in the 1987 general election.[113] The women-oriented approach of the urban left in the 1980s had made childcare and nursery education a local spending priority. This became a national priority with an enormous expansion of nursery provision in the 1990s and early 2000s. The women-friendly employment policies of some left-wing councils in the 1980s – such as crèches, flexible working hours, job-share posts, in-service training, multiple

points of entry, new routes for career progression – are now common practice in numerous organisations from the National Health Service to the Halifax Building Society.

The urban left sought to end discrimination against gays and lesbians, and lessen hostility towards them. This got short shrift during the AIDS terror of the mid-1980s when there was fear of contagion through non-sexual means, and gays were blamed for visiting a plague upon an 'innocent' population. But the urban left's active stance against homophobia and discrimination subsequently became less controversial, and was embodied in a spate of new legislation in the early twenty-first century. In 2000, the age of consent for gay sex was lowered to sixteen, in line with the heterosexual age, while the ban on lesbians and gay men in the armed forces was lifted. In 2002, equal rights were granted to lesbian and gay couples applying for child adoption, something that would have been utterly inconceivable twenty years earlier. In 2003, 'section 28' (see the discussion in Chapter 7) was repealed, and discrimination at work on grounds of sexual orientation was made illegal.

All these changes came about as a consequence of a shift of underlying social attitudes. Hostility towards sexual minorities declined markedly. Thus, in 1985, 70 per cent said that homosexuality was always or mostly wrong. This had dropped to 47 per cent by 2001.[114] Although there were indications of a modest increase of racism after 2001 in response to growing public controversy over asylum seekers, the trend – sustained for over a decade – was for overtly racist attitudes to decline markedly.[115] In 1987 39 per cent said that they were prejudiced against people of other races, compared with a much lower 25 per cent in 2001.[116] The position of women in society also changed significantly during the last two decades. Between 1989 and 2002, the proportion of women with a child under school age staying at home fell from 62 per cent to 48 per cent.[117] Criticism of mothers with young children going out to work also declined. 'The last few decades of the twentieth century', conclude the authors of a major longitudinal study, 'saw a fundamental shift in gender role attitudes'.[118] During the same period, media representations of women also became less negative.[119] The drive to accommodate and progress women in the workplace, and to respond to domestic concerns, was a response to wider changes in society.

Another trend, which the new urban left anticipated, was the greening of politics. From the early 1990s onwards, there was increased

awareness of the human causes of global climate change, and of its devastating consequences. Environmental concerns were also reinforced in London by the capital's growing transport crisis. Public transport deteriorated, while congestion on London's roads grew steadily worse. Ken Livingstone's GLC administration had won plaudits for reversing the declining use of public transport by subsidising fares during the early 1980s. Transport was again Livingstone's flagship policy as Mayor. By introducing a controversial congestion charge in central London, Livingstone reduced traffic jams. This was accompanied by improved bus services, and increased investment in London's tubes and trains. The success of Livingstone's transport policy – made more prominent by the ferocity of press attacks on it – won him political support. When it became increasingly clear that Livingstone would be re-elected as Mayor, Labour warmly embraced him as Labour's official candidate. Livingstone was duly re-elected in 2004, gaining 55 per cent of the vote.

The main impetus for change in the politics of race, gender, sexuality and the environment came from a new generation that came of age during the 1960s. This new generation first placed its feet on the lowest rung of political power by taking control of local town halls, and inaugurating policies that were denounced at the time as lunatic. However, twenty years later this same generation was running many of Britain's leading public and private institutions. People like Jack Straw in the Home Office ordering targets for ethnic recruitment, Greg Dyke doing the same thing in the BBC, Lord Stephenson at Pearson and Halifax promoting the careers of talented members of ethnic minorities and women (including Marjorie Scardino, the first chief executive of a FTSE 100 company) were in their late fifties. Although not especially left-wing, they were the products of sixties' rethinking about race, gender and sexuality and were unobtrusively advancing a 'loony left' agenda.

This draws attention to a curious feature of contemporary British politics. It is a commonplace to say that the left was defeated and marginalised in the post-cold-war period of the 1990s. New Labour perpetuated the pro-market policies inaugurated by the new right, while class inequalities increased during Blair's premiership.[120] But while the left was defeated in the economic sphere, it was much more successful in the social sphere. This was because in Britain – unlike America – progressives were winning major battles in an unacknowledged culture war.

Notes

1. J. Curran, *Media and Power* (London: Routledge, 2002).
2. This reassessment is particularly well illuminated by the work of Shanto Iyengar. See S. Iyengar and D. Kinder, *News That Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); S. Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); S. Iyengar, 'Media effects: paradigms for the analysis of local television news', in S. Chambers and A. Costain (eds), *Deliberation, Democracy and the Media* (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).
3. For a good overview of this tradition, see J. Tulloch, *Watching Television Audiences* (London: Arnold, 2000).
4. Belief in the brainwashing power of the media is based partly on irrational fears and discontents. See M. Barker and J. Petley, *Ill Effects*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2001) and L. Blackman and V. Walkerdine, *Mass Hysteria* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001).
5. K. Young and P. Garside, *Metropolitan London* (London: Edward Arnold, 1982).
6. K. Young, 'The conservative strategy for London, 1880–1975', *London Journal*, 1 (1975); K. Young and J. Kramer, *Strategy and Conflict in Metropolitan Housing* (London: Heinemann, 1978).
7. A. Forester, S. Lansley and R. Pauley, *Beyond Our Ken* (London: Fourth Estate, 1985); K. Young, 'Metropolis, R.I.P.?', *Political Quarterly*, Jan–March, 1986; B. Pimlott and N. Rao, *Governing London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
8. Young and Garside, *Metropolitan London* (1982).
9. B. O'Leary, 'Why was the GLC abolished?', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* (1987); B. O'Leary, 'British farce, French drama and tales of two cities: reorganizations of Paris and London governments 1957–86', *Public Administration* 65, (1987).
10. The significance of this issue is played down by Brendan O'Leary, in his two insightful essays cited in note 9, on the grounds that the GLC's abolition was unnecessary as a financial control in the context of rate capping. However, what he fails to appreciate is that the government was not sure that rate capping would work back in 1983.
11. Department of the Environment, *Streamlining the Cities* (London: HMSO, 1983), p. 4.
12. Interview with Lord Jenkin (Patrick Jenkin) by the author.
13. Ibid.
14. Part 3 of this book.
15. See Chapter 7.
16. Conservative Research Department, 'Red-print for Ruin: The Labour Left in Local Government' (London: Conservative Party, 1986); 'Labour in Power: Profiles of Municipal Militancy' (London: Conservative Party, 1986); 'Labour in Power: *More* Profiles of Municipal Militancy' (London: Conservative Party, 1986).
17. *The Times*, 18 November 1986.
18. BBC TV, *Six O'Clock News*, 27 February 1987.
19. Deirdre Wood differed from the new urban left by being steeped in trade union