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Labour can still win



Martin Linton

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Martin Linton is a political writer on the *Guardian* and author of Fabian Tract 503 *The Swedish road to socialism*. He was Deputy Editor of *Labour Weekly* 1971-79.

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Introduction: Labour's lost voters

It is a paradox that the Labour Party won the highest vote in its history in an election that it lost. The election of October 1951 resulted in the defeat of Clement Attlee's post-war Labour Government and the return of the Conservatives under Winston Churchill. Yet when the final results came in and the votes were counted it became clear that Labour had exceeded its vote in the landslide victory in 1945 and its subsequent victory in 1950. It had also won nearly a quarter of a million more votes than the Conservatives.

The 'popular vote' was an almost unknown concept in those days and in its election commentary *The Times Guide* did not even see fit to mention the anomaly that the Opposition had won more votes than the Government. The parties did not in any case stand in every seat. The Conservatives still had local agreements with the Liberals which meant they did not have candidates in a few seats, one in Bolton, one in Huddersfield and three in Wales, while four Ulster Unionists, who were then in the Conservative Party, were elected unopposed.

But in retrospect one of the most interesting things about the 1951 election was that Labour won 13,948,385 votes, not only because it was more than the Conservatives' total of 13,724,418 but because it was, and remains today, the highest vote ever won by any party in a general election. It is all the more remarkable for the fact that the electorate has grown considerably over the last decades and the voting age has been reduced from 21 to 18, so that the total number of people eligible to vote has risen by a quarter. Yet even Harold Wilson in his landslide of 1966, even Mrs Thatcher in her 'landslide' victory of 1987 did not match Attlee's record.

It is a sobering exercise to ask how many votes Labour would have to win now to do as well as it did in 1951. When

due allowance is made for the extension of the vote in 1968 and for the growth of the electorate over four decades, the answer is that Labour would now need to win 17,431,296 votes. At the last election it won 10,029,270.

To put it at its bluntest, Labour has 'lost' over 7.4 million votes.

But the purpose of this pamphlet is not to drive Labour supporters to despair by bombarding them with gloomy statistics. Quite the contrary: it is an attempt to put the decline in Labour's vote into proportion and into context. The Labour Party faces a momentous task in the next few years. It would be difficult to exaggerate the size of it. But the Party can become too depressed by a faulty analysis of the decline in its vote. Depression can turn to despair and despair to defeatism.

The argument advanced in these pages is that a substantial proportion of the decline in the Party's vote is readily explainable by factors that have nothing to do with the political failings of the Labour Party but have more to do with the electoral system and the voters' response to it. It is impossible to be precise, but they account for at least a half and maybe as much as two-thirds of that 7.4 million.

This is not an attempt to draw any solace from the election statistics. It still leaves the Party with a task that will

require all its energies till the end of the century. But there is an important difference between a task that is impossible and one that is merely very difficult. The task that faces the Labour Party is in the second category.

Labour's defeat in 1959, a third successive defeat like 1987, prompted a book called *Must Labour Lose?* A later defeat prompted an even more pessimistic pamphlet called *Can Labour*

Win? This is an attempt to answer both questions. Yes, Labour can still win. It will be very difficult. But there is no irreversible shift, no inevitable sociological swing, no erosion of its electorate, no seismic change in political geography, no unbridgeable gap that makes it impossible for Labour to win. What it needs above all is the belief that it can do it.

1. The apocalyptic theory

It is commonly said that Labour has been in decline electorally since 1951. This chapter reviews the evidence and shows that the decline is not all that it seems. Labour's electoral misfortunes are much more recent and therefore less intractable.

The apocalyptic theory of Labour's decline is based on the fact that Labour's percentage share of the vote has been falling almost continuously since 1951 and has dropped at almost every one of the last ten elections. This is not quite as true as it might appear at first glance as Labour's share did increase in four of those elections: only marginally in 1964 and October 1974, but significantly in 1966 and the most recent election.

It is certainly true, however, that Labour's vote has fallen dramatically since 1951. If one takes Labour's share of the total electorate, rather than its share of the actual votes cast, it has fallen at eight of the last ten elections. As Table 1 shows, it fell in 1955, 1959, 1964, 1970, February 1974, October 1974, 1979 and 1983, rising only in 1966 and 1987.

The proponents of this theory argue that Labour's vote is on a long-term downward trend, that 1966 and 1987 are just blips on a graph that shows Labour's share of the popular vote declining steadily from 1951, when it

was nearly half—48.8 per cent—to 1983 when it was scarcely more than a quarter—27.6 per cent. The more extreme proponents of the theory draw the line further to 1997 when, at the present rate of decline, the Party will drop off the bottom of the graph.

This theory is heard in various guises and seems to appeal equally to the left and the right of the Party. The right likes it because it seems to imply that the Party has declined ever since the great days of Clement Attlee and that the solution is therefore to return to the 'traditional' Labour Party of the forties and early fifties. But the left uses the same argument to show that the decline in the Party's fortunes can be traced back to the mid-fifties, long before the left won its ascendancy, and it cannot therefore be blamed on them.

As a result both sides now talk about 1951 as though it was the Golden Year in the Party's history.

Indeed, 1951 still has a great appeal to the whole Party because it was an era when Labour's self-image as the Party of the majority, of the masses, of the

workers, of the people, was as close as it has even been to the truth. It was also the high-water mark of the two-party system. The two main parties, Labour and Conservative, took 96.8 per cent of the vote compared with only 73 per cent at the 1987 election. The idea of a system with only two 'real' parties appeals especially to Marxists because it fits in better with their view of elections as a shadow of the class struggle between capital and labour, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. For them the presence of the Liberals has always spoil the symbolic symmetry of a two-party struggle.

But the apocalyptic theory is full of flaws. It treats the 1966 election as an aberration—yet what sense does it make to construct a theory that ignores Labour's biggest election victory in the last 40 years? The theory also starts, for no very good reason, in 1951. That is to ignore the Labour victories of 1945 and 1950. It is easy to forget that Labour has only won two elections in its entire history—in 1945 and 1966—with a parliamentary majority of more than ten, usually considered the minimum 'working' majority to allow a government to rule effectively for a full five-year term, and it makes little sense to exclude both these historic Labour victories from the theory.

Aberration

Indeed, the starting point seems to have been chosen to lend undue weight to the theory. But if any election can be dismissed as an aberration or an electoral hiccup, one could make a better case for 1951. As we have seen the election results were full of paradoxes. Labour won the highest number of votes in its history and still lost. Equally, the Conservatives had one of the highest votes in their history, higher than Mrs Thatcher's first two victories, yet they had a majority of only 17.

But the reason for this is plain enough in the figures. Both the Labour and the Conservative votes were artificially

inflated by the failure of the Liberals to put up candidates. The Liberals, having emptied their coffers to fight the 1950 election, were too poor to fight a snap election the following year. The deposit of £150 was a princely sum in those days, worth more than today's £1,000, and the Liberal Party could not afford to pay. It was left to the local Liberal Associations to stump up the deposit if they could. The result was that more than four out of five Liberal candidates stood down and the total number of Liberal candidates fell from 475 to 109. The Liberal share of the vote fell, roughly in proportion, from 9.1 to 2.5 per cent.

It was a matter of simple arithmetic that the Labour and Conservative shares of the vote had to rise by as much as the Liberal vote fell. The Liberal vote fell by 6.6 per cent, the Conservative share rose by 4.5 per cent and the Labour share rose by 2.7 per cent. But that did not mean that there had been a permanent shift in people's loyalties towards the major parties or away from the Liberals. In most constituencies people simply did not have the choice of voting Liberal in 1951.

The same was true in 1955 when the Liberals decided it would be a waste of money to raise their tally of candidates back to the 1950 level. In the event they fielded one more candidate—up from 109 to 110—and their share of the vote went up from 2.5 to 2.7 per cent. In 1959, as Table 1 shows, they increased their number of candidates to 216 and their vote to 6 per cent. In 1964 they went up to 365 candidates and 11 per cent of the vote.

Anyone with an arithmetical turn of mind will have already spotted the fact that there seems to have been a very close relationship between the Liberal share of the vote and the number of Liberal candidates. Their share of the vote slumped in 1951 and rose again in 1959 and 1964, but it did little more than follow the number of candidates. The average vote per Liberal candidate turns out to be remarkably stable: 15 per cent in 1951 and 1955, 17 per cent

Table 1: Labour's declining share of the vote

	Parties' shares of the popular vote			Liberal candidates	Lib vote per cand. %	Adjusted share if Liberal in every seat			Lab share of total electorate %
	Lab %	Con %	Lib %			Lab %	Con %	Lib %	
1945	47.8	39.8	9.0	306	18.6	46	37	17	36.1
1950	46.1	43.5	9.1	475	11.8	45	43	12	39.9
1951	48.8	48.0	2.5	109	14.7	43	43	13	40.3
1955	46.4	49.7	2.7	110	15.1	41	44	13	35.6
1959	43.8	49.4	5.9	216	16.9	39	45	15	34.5
1964	44.1	43.4	11.2	365	18.5	41	40	17	34.0
1966	47.9	41.9	8.5	311	16.1	45	39	15	36.3
1970	43.0	46.4	7.5	332	13.5	41	44	13	31.0
1974F	37.1	37.9	19.3	517	23.6	36	36	22	29.2
1974O	39.2	35.8	18.3	619	18.9	39	36	18	28.6
1979	36.9	43.9	13.8	576	14.9	36	43	15	28.0
1983	27.6	42.4	25.4	633	26.0	28	42	25	20.0
1987	30.8	42.3	22.6	633	23.0	31	42	23	23.2

All figures relate to United Kingdom.

in 1959, 18 per cent in 1964 and then falling back to 16 and 14 per cent in the next two elections.

Some people have argued that this apparent stability in the Liberal vote is the chance result of two opposite tendencies—in their worse years they concentrated on their better seats, but in their better years they fought more difficult seats, so the average per seat remained about the same. Undoubtedly there was a tendency for the Liberals to stand in their stronger seats, but it does not seem to have happened in any systematic way.

In 1951 the Liberals failed to put up candidates in two of their best seats where they had won more than 25 per cent of the vote in the previous election, Torrington and Kinross, and they failed to stand in seven seats where they had had more than 20 per cent, Berwick, Caernarvon, Inverness, Tavistock, Truro, Wellingborough and Wells. On the other hand they put up a candidate in Fulham West, one of their worst seats where they had won only 4.9 per cent of the vote. Apart from the seats they already held or the seats where they came a close second, it seems to have been largely a matter of whether the local Liberal Association could stump up the

deposit and that was often a matter of chance.

The stability of the Liberal vote was not just an arithmetical coincidence. It can be seen clearly in many constituencies where the Liberals stopped fielding candidates in the early fifties and then started again. In Hitchin, for instance, the Liberals stood in 1950, did not stand in 1951 and 1955 and stood again in 1959. But the Liberal vote had not disappeared or even decreased. As Table 2 shows, it remained almost exactly where it was: 13.1 per cent in 1950, 13.2 per cent in 1959. In Leominster the Liberals stood in 1950, did not stand in 1951 and 1955 and stood again in 1959. But the Liberal vote had actually increased from 18.1 per cent to 21.6 per cent.

There were constituencies where the Liberal vote declined in the fifties, but the general tendency was for the Liberal vote to pick up very close to where it

Table 2: Liberal share of the poll in Hitchin and Leominster (%)

	1950	1951	1955	1959
Hitchin	13.1	—	—	13.2
Leominster	18.1	—	—	21.6

left off, as though there was a level of latent Liberal support in the seat that was realised as soon as there was a candidate. Liberal candidates often claim credit for building up their vote in a constituency through constant activity and publicity and that is undoubtedly true at the higher levels of support that are needed to win a seat, but at these lower levels it did not seem to make much difference. Even though the Liberals failed to put up a candidate in two or three elections in a row, their vote was still there, almost unchanged, when they stood again.

Liberal hard core

This does not mean, however, that there was a hard core of faithful Liberal voters who voted Liberal whenever they got the chance. All the polling evidence shows that Liberal voters are not the same people from one election to another. There is a small hard core, but a very high proportion of people who vote Liberal in one election did not do so at the last. There may, however, be a roughly constant minimum proportion of any constituency's voters who will vote for a Liberal candidate, if there is one, even though they are not the same people from one election to the next.

The lesson of this is that the Liberals' share of the national vote is a misleading figure in all the elections where the Liberals did not field candidates in every seat. It understates their potential level of support. To that extent it distorts and inflates the Conservative and Labour shares of the vote. It would be far more relevant to know what proportion of people would have voted Conservative or Labour if there had been a Liberal candidate in every seat as there is now.

This cannot be calculated with any degree of accuracy, but it can be estimated crudely by assuming that there is a Liberal candidate in every seat and that he or she receives the average Liberal vote. The shares of the vote in past elections can then be 'adjusted' in

line with this assumption that the Liberals stand in every seat, as they are in the last columns of Table 1. This may overstate Liberal support a little, but it comes much closer to giving the 'real' level of support for parties than do the shares of the popular vote.

In the 1950s, very few politicians or commentators attached any importance to shares of the national vote, least of all the Liberals, as it considerably understated their support. Now shares of the vote are often discussed as though they were the real result of an election, most of all by the Liberals to underscore the unfairness of the first-past-the-post system. Indeed, the Liberals, or Alliance, or Democrats now insist on fighting every seat precisely because they want to maximise their share of the national vote. But the fallacy is to go back to the fifties and treat the parties' share of the vote, without making any adjustment, as the 'real' result of those elections.

The adjusted figures in Table 1 make it clear that there was no real downward trend in the Labour vote at least between 1951 and 1970. Many of the variations in the Labour vote were simply a mirror reflection of the changes in the number of Liberal candidates. This was why Labour's share of the total electorate was actually slightly lower in 1964 than it had been in 1959, even though Labour lost in 1959 and won in 1964. But it would be perverse to believe that Labour had in any sense done 'worse' in the victory of 1964 than it did in the defeat of 1959.

In the 1970s there was clearly a sharp decline. In the 1974 elections Labour's vote fell below 40 per cent for the first time since the war. But so did the Conservative vote. In fact, the Conservative vote fell even more steeply from 46.4 to 35.8 per cent between 1970 and 1974. But the Conservatives did not regard that as an irreversible trend. They went ahead and won the next three elections. There was no more reason for Labour to regard the decline in its vote as an irreversible trend. Indeed there was less, as the Labour Party won both the

elections of 1974.

During 1976 and 1977 Labour and the Tories were level-pegging in the polls and it was not till 1978 that they began to fall behind. Labour's share of the vote in the 1979 election was 36.9 per cent but not long after the election it was again riding high in the polls. As late as March 1980 Labour was at 49.5 per cent in the Gallup poll and it confirmed the truth of the poll by coming within 400 votes of taking Southend East in a by-election that month.

None of this is intended to deny the

fact that Labour's vote has fallen dramatically or to belittle the size of the task that still faces the Labour Party. It is just to demonstrate that it has not been a gradual decline over 30 years. It has been a sharp fall which has taken place almost entirely within the present decade. Indeed, Southend East was the turning point and gives a measure of the decline that has taken place. The voters who nearly elected a Labour MP in 1980 now give their Tory MP a majority of 13,847 over the SDP. Labour is in third place.

2. The sociological theory

The decline of Labour's traditional social base is often said to be a cause of its electoral failure. This argument has been advanced before (in the 1950s), and is hard to square with the success of socialist parties in other advanced industrial countries. This chapter looks at an alternative approach: Labour's social base is always changing—and should be.

If there is not a long-term political decline in Labour's vote, there are many who argue that there are sociological trends which make it more difficult for Labour to win in every successive election. Every Labour stronghold is losing population, the inner cities, the North, the Clyde, the mining industry, the heavy engineering industries, the public sector, the trade unions, whereas every Conservative stronghold is growing, the South, the rural areas, the service sector, the City.

Indeed the working class itself is declining and the middle class is growing. Mark Abrams, Richard Rose and Rita Hinden first drew attention to this in *Must Labour Lose?* In the final chapter Dr Hinden wrote:

"Manual workers are gradually moving over into the white-collar category, which does not identify itself with the

unskilled or semi-skilled labourers; and many, particularly among the young, are now crossing the class frontiers into the middle class. The ethos of class solidarity is beginning to crumble in the face of the new fluidity in our society, the new opportunities for advancement through individual effort. The socialist idealists from other sections of the population are no longer drawn to the support of 'the workers' as they were when the workers were downtrodden and despised.

"Can there be any hope for the Labour Party under these circumstances? Must it suffer the tragedy of witnessing the accomplishment of so many of the things it is working for—the improvement of the lot of the working classes, the establishment of the welfare state, the success of economic planning in overcoming crises—and then

be declared as obsolete? For the tide of history, which socialists were one convinced was working in their favour, now seems to be turned against them" (Penguin, 1960).

Dr Hinden's fears proved to be unfounded. Labour won four of the next five elections. Many of the young people who had "crossed the frontier" into the middle classes continued to vote Labour. But now Labour has again lost three successive elections and the fears that Rita Hinden expressed are coming back to the surface. Many commentators have pointed to the continuing erosion of Labour's electoral base in the working class, particularly the skilled working class, in the 1987 election. Indeed in 1983 Ivor Crewe pointed out in his election analysis in the *Guardian* that: "The continuing abandonment of the Labour Party by manual workers makes its claims to be the Party of the working class look increasingly threadbare. True, the Labour vote remains largely working class; but the working class has ceased to be largely Labour".

In 1987 the Conservatives won an even larger share of the working-class vote and this was a vital part of Mrs Thatcher's victory. As Professor Crewe pointed out in his analysis of that election: "The Conservatives' vote only held steady because they made further inroads into the working class. At 36 per cent its share of the manual workers' vote was the largest for any post-war election, including its victory years in the 1950s when the national Conservative vote was much higher".

Labour increased its support by six percentage points among the semi- and unskilled manual workers, he says, "but it failed spectacularly in the other half of the working class, the foremen, the supervisors, the craft and high-tech workers. Here there was a further swing of 2.5 per cent to the Conservatives since 1983". Although Labour was ahead among the working class as a whole (Lab 42, Con 36 per cent), it was behind the Tories among the southern working class (Con 46, Lab 28), the home-owning working class (Con 44,

Lab 32), the skilled working class (Con 43, Lab 34).

The main problem is not that the working class itself is declining, but that Labour's share of the working class is declining. This stems from Mrs Thatcher's use of "popular capitalism" to appeal to the skilled working-class voter and Labour's failure to project a "popular socialism" that appealed to the same group of voters, the better-paid, skilled, southern, home-owning working classes. Neil Kinnock identified this problem even before he was elected leader when he said in a speech in Wandsworth that the Party must appeal "to the home owners as well as the homeless, the stable family as well as the single parent, the employed as well as the unemployed, the majority as well as the minority". Bryan Gould has taken up the same theme since the 1987 election.

It is true that the size of the working class itself is declining, but there is nothing new in that. The number of manual workers has been falling for as long as anyone can remember, both in this country and in other European countries, but it has not been fatal to socialist parties in those countries and it need not be fatal to Labour. Like all parties, Labour is constantly losing voters for reasons that are beyond its control. Sometimes it has lost entire groups of voters and the constituencies that go with them.

Agricultural seats

In 1945 Labour won dozens of agricultural seats. It won Harborough in Leicestershire by 204 votes, Sudbury in Suffolk by 247, Stroud in Gloucestershire by 949, Taunton in Somerset by 2,118 and five of the six seats in rural Norfolk. Their successor seats are now Conservative by such huge majorities, Harborough by 18,810, Stroud by 12,375, Taunton by 10,380, with Labour invariably in third place that it is difficult to believe they were ever represented by Labour in Westminster.

Though there have been boundary changes, they cannot account for more than a fraction of the change.

In 1966 Labour held most of the seats on the Celtic fringe, from Falmouth in Cornwall, to the entire west coast of Wales, Pembroke, Cardigan, Merioneth, Caernarvon, Anglesey, even Conway, to the tip of Scotland, the Western Isles and Caithness & Sutherland. Today only two of these ten seats are Labour.

On the other hand Labour has gained many seats in the inner cities and holds many seats now that it failed to win even in the landslides of 1945 and 1966. Liverpool West Derby, for instance, and Liverpool East Toxteth were Tory seats in 1945, yet today they are among the safest Labour seats in the country. In West Derby, Labour now has a majority of 20,496 and in Liverpool Riverside, which includes the old East Toxteth seat, it has a majority of 20,689. In Glasgow, Labour won every seat for the first time in the 1987 election, but in 1945 the Tories held five seats in Glasgow including Glasgow Central and Glasgow Pollok which are now rock-solid Labour seats with majorities of 17,253 and 17,983.

Thus it is true that sociological change has had a very profound effect. If you look at a constituency map of 1945, it looks quite different from today. It was possible then to trace a line from London to Liverpool through Labour-held territory and it would go through some of the most unexpected places, Chelms-

ford (held in 1945 by the Commonwealth Party—closely identified with Labour), Maldon, Colchester, Sudbury, Cambridgeshire, Bedford, Wellingborough, Peterborough, Harborough, Bosworth, Loughborough and West Derbyshire, before going through Yorkshire into Lancashire. But once you got to Liverpool you ran into the Tory seats in that city, West Derby, East Toxteth and Wavertree (see Table 3—page 10).

So Labour has lost some groups of voters and it has gained others. It is true that it has lost far more than it has gained, but the answer to that is not necessarily to concentrate on regaining what has been lost. If the Party stands still, appealing only to its 'traditional' supporters, it is doomed to die. It needs to be constantly adjusting to change around it. It may need to compensate for a loss of support in one area by gaining support in another.

The Labour Party has already survived many changes in the pattern of its support. It can do so again. It does not depend on the survival of shipbuilding or mining or manufacturing industry or even, in the long run, of manual work. As long as society has a better-off half and a worse-off half, the Labour Party will be needed to represent the worse-off half.

It is in any case becoming a party of ideas more than of interest groups and as long as the electorate has a 'left' half and a 'right' half, the Labour Party will be needed to represent the 'left' half.

3. The tactical theory

One of the most profound changes in the pattern of Labour's support has come about for reasons that are, for want of a better word, tactical. In unwinnable seats, Labour supporters switch their votes to the Liberals once they believe that Labour cannot win the seat. Conversely, in safe Labour seats, Labour supporters are less likely to turn out to add to the massive majority. The result is to artificially deflate the national Labour vote.

In the forties and fifties, people appeared to vote for the party of their choice with almost no regard to the candidate's chance of success. If they were Labour, they voted Labour, and that was that. There were only a handful of constituencies where there were clear signs of what one would now call tactical voting.

Today that situation has been transformed. It may be true that relatively few people change their vote for purely tactical reasons between one election and the next, but there are many more who have been influenced by tactical factors in the broader sense that how they vote, or whether they vote, has been influenced not just by their political preference but by the candidate's chance of success in that constituency.

There are many politicians who still seek to deny, if not the existence, at least the extent of tactical voting in the belief that if they were to acknowledge it publicly they would encourage it. They may be right. Party politicians have to support all the candidates put up by their own party and to accept the argument for tactical voting, even passively, may be to harm the chances of some of those candidates. But even they tacitly accept the logic of tactical resourcing.

Evidence

The best evidence comes not from the

opinion polls but from election results themselves. If one compares the decline in Labour's share of the vote since 1951 in three different types of seat—safe, marginal and unwinnable—it is clear that Labour's vote has fallen furthest in the seats where it had no chance of winning and many Labour supporters have either switched to the Liberals or stopped voting altogether (see Table 4).

In the 12 'unwinnable' seats, the average vote for Labour candidates has fallen from 33 to 7 per cent. In other words, for every five people who voted Labour in these seats in 1951 four have now stopped doing so.

It is inherently difficult to compare results in individual constituencies over a span of more than 10 or 15 years, because the majority of seats will have been affected by boundary changes, many of them major, and all of them will have been affected by demographic changes. Even if the population has not increased or decreased, its composition may have changed. So it would be unwise to draw any conclusion from individual constituencies. But by grouping a dozen constituencies which have retained the same name and the same basic character over four decades one should iron out most of these local variations and reveal the long-term trend.

This trend is clearly much less unfavourable to Labour in the 12 marginal seats, where the average vote for Labour candidates has fallen by only eight points over the same period—from 49 to 41 per cent. For every seven

Table 3: Labour's losses and gains in different areas

A. RURAL SEATS	Labour % of vote	
	1945	1987
Norfolk North	59	20
Frome	55	10
Taunton	53	15
Norfolk South	50	13
Norfolk South West	50	21
King's Lynn	49	18
Harborough	43	13
Cambridgeshire	42	14
Stroud	41	19
Sudbury	40	19

Labour won all of these seats in 1945 and is now in third place in all of the successor seats. Frome is now part of Somerton and Frome. King's Lynn has become Norfolk North West. The old Cambridgeshire seat, which Labour won by 44 seats in 1945, is mainly in the new seat of Cambridgeshire South East. Sudbury is now in South Suffolk.

people who voted Labour in these seats in 1951, almost six are doing so today. Nearly all of these seats have been marginals over a long run of elections. This has clearly had the effect of holding the Labour vote much firmer than in other seats, first because voters have known that their vote would count and secondly because party organisation has been working hard to maintain the vote.

The trend is much worse for Labour in its supposedly safe seats. These are all seats that were among Labour's safest in 1951, with majorities of more than 24,000, but the average vote per Labour candidate has fallen by almost as much in these safe seats as it has in Labour's unwinnable seats. The main reason seems to be abstention by Labour supporters. They have not bothered to vote because Labour was 'certain' to win. The motivation to vote is much lower. So is the level of party activity in the election campaign, and often in between elections, so the vote has gradually declined, though it is worth noting that the decline has been much slower in the mining constituencies than in the Labour strongholds in the East End of London.

The average vote for a Labour can-

B. CELTIC FRINGE	Labour % of vote	
	1966	1987
Falmouth	47	21
Carmarthen	46	35
Pembrokeshire	48	31
Cardigan	37	19
Merioneth	44	17
Anglesey	55	17
Caernarvon	56	16
Conway	48	22
Western Isles	61	43
Caithness	39	15

In 1966 Labour held all ten of these seats ranging up the west coast of Britain from Land's End to John O'Groats. They are now held by four different parties. The Tories hold Falmouth, Pembroke and Conway. Plaid Cymru hold Merionydd Nant Conwy, Caernarfon and Ynys Mon (formerly Anglesey). The Liberals hold Ceredigion and the SDP hold Caithness. Labour hold Carmarthen and won Western Isles back from the SNP at the last election.

C. INNER CITY	Labour % of vote	
	1951	1987
Liverpool Garston	35	54
Liverpool Walton	46	64
Liverpool West Derby	48	65
Manchester Blackley	45	52
Stretford	42	55
Glasgow Cathcart	30	52
Glasgow Hillhead	35	43
Glasgow Pollok	45	63
Glasgow Govan	49	65
Lambeth Norwood	47	48

The Conservatives held all of these seats in 1951 and they are all Labour now. Some of the seats, such as Liverpool Garston, have been affected by boundary changes, but they all carry the same names that they had in 1951 and cover most of the same areas. Some of them are now among the safest Labour seats in the country.

didate in these constituencies has gone down from 79 to 56 per cent. For every four Labour voters in 1951, three are now voting Labour. In proportional terms that is by no means as steep a decline as in the unwinnable seats, where four out of five Labour voters have abandoned the Party. But in numerical terms Labour has lost almost as many voters in its safe seats, mainly to abstention, as it has in the unwinnable seats to the Liberal squeeze.

It is not always appreciated that each

Table 4: Labour's declining share of the vote in different types of seats

A. SAFE LABOUR	Labour % of vote		
	1951	1987	Change
West Ham South	85	44	-41
Hemsworth	83	67	-16
Poplar	82	46	-36
Easington	81	68	-13
Bolsover	80	56	-24
Bermondsey	79	40	-39
Caerphilly	77	58	-19
Ogmore	77	69	-8
Neath	77	63	-14
Stepney	77	48	-29
Pontefract	76	67	-9
Dagenham	76	44	-32
Average	79	56	-23

These are Labour's safest seats in the 1951 election which have survived through the last two boundary reviews with their names intact or, in some cases, slightly amended or extended.

constituency has a psychology of its own which is influenced by people's expectations about the result. A constituency that thinks it is marginal votes like a marginal. Support for the two leading contenders remains firm, while the third party is squeezed. But if one party wins such a large majority that supporters of the second party despair of ever winning the seat again, then the psychology changes rapidly. Support for the second party collapses and support for the third party rises rapidly.

This phenomenon can be seen very clearly in the results in the rural seats in Norfolk over the sixties and seventies (see Table 5). Norfolk was the last outpost of Labour's agricultural vote and no one could deny that the reason for Labour's decline here, as in every other rural area, was that agricultural workers were leaving the land and their homes were being bought up as holiday cottages or retirement homes by the more affluent. But if that were the only factor, one would have expected a gentle decline in all four seats at the same time. What in fact happened, as Table 5 shows, was a very jagged decline, with Labour's vote collapsing first in

B. MARGINAL	Labour % of vote		
	1951	1987	Change
York	49	41	-8
Ayr	42	39	-3
Wolverhampton NE	62	42	-20
Dulwich	46	42	-4
Wallasey	37	42	+5
Nottingham East	48	42	-6
Thurrock	66	41	-25
Ipswich	53	43	-10
Stirling	52	36	-16
Nottingham South	51	41	-10
Tynemouth	44	39	-5
Hampstead	34	38	+4
Average	49	41	-8

These are the 12 most marginal Tory seats in the 1987 election which still carry the same names as seats fought in 1951. Apart from Thurrock, which was a safe Labour seat until 1983, they have all been identified as Labour-Tory marginals over a run of elections, giving both Labour and Tory supporters a strong motivation for sticking to their parties and a strong disincentive against voting Liberal.

C. UNWINNABLE	Labour % of vote		
	1951	1987	Change
Isle of Wight	38	6	-32
Tiverton	37	6	-31
Devon North	28	6	-22
Chippenham	44	7	-37
Cheltenham	43	8	-35
Chelmsford	45	7	-38
Yeovil	41	7	-34
Richmond	32	7	-25
Fife East	29	7	-22
Leominster	33	8	-25
Newbury	40	8	-32
Chichester	30	8	-22
Average	37	7	-30

These are the 12 worst Labour seats that are still fought on roughly the same boundaries as they were in 1951 except for Cornwall North and Dorset North where Labour was already in third place in the fifties. In all the seats it has fallen from second to third place and seen its vote squeezed progressively by the Liberals.

one seat and then in another.

Labour was close to 50 per cent in all four seats in the 1959 election and all four were marginal in both in 1964 and 1966. Labour's vote began to crumble in

Table 5: Labour's declining share of the vote in four Norfolk seats (%)

	1959	1964	1966	1970	1974(F)	1979	1983
Norfolk North	Con 49 Lab 51	Con 49.9 Lab 50.1	Con 49 Lab 51	Con 55 Lab 45	Con 48 Lab 29	Con 57 Lab 29	Con 54 Lab 19
Norfolk North West	Con 52 Lab 48	Con 49.9 Lab 50.1	Con 48 Lab 52	Con 50 Lab 50	Con 42 Lab 41	Con 51 Lab 39	Con 44 Lab 19
Norfolk South	Con 54 Lab 46	Con 46 Lab 41	Con 44.7 Lab 44.5	Con 52 Lab 39	Con 44 Lab 30	Con 55 Lab 30	Con 54 Lab 13
Norfolk South West	Con 49.9 Lab 50.1	Con 49.5 Lab 49.2	Con 51 Lab 49	Con 57 Lab 43	Con 46 Lab 33	Con 55 Lab 31	Con 56 Lab 18

Differential rates of decline in the Labour vote cannot be explained by demographic factors alone. Labour's share remained steady in all four seats until 1966. In 1970 the Tories won majorities of 10 per cent or more over Labour in three of the seats and the Labour vote collapsed at the following election, down by a third to a quarter in each seat. But in Norfolk North West, formerly Norfolk King's Lynn, where Labour lost by only 33 votes, the Labour vote remained firm for much longer.

three of the constituencies in the 1970 election and collapsed in the February 1974 election. But in the fourth seat of Norfolk North West, formerly King's Lynn, Labour maintained its vote in both these elections, coming very close to winning the seat. It began to fall in October 1974 and by the 1979 election it had collapsed to the same level as in the other seats.

Psychology

The very marked difference in the behaviour of the Labour vote cannot be explained by demographic trends, which affected all four seats, nor by boundaries, which changed only within the Norfolk area. But there is a simple psychological theory that would fit the figures. When the Conservative and Labour votes are within 10 per cent of each other, and Labour voters believe there is still a chance of winning the seat back, the Labour vote holds firm. But if the Tories win a majority of more than 10 per cent, Labour voters lose heart and the Labour vote collapses at the following election.

In many cases the behaviour is not consciously 'tactical'. The Isle of Wight provides a good example because its boundaries clearly have not changed

and demographic change, though it has hurt Labour with some loss of manufacturing and an increase in retirement homes, is nowhere near enough to explain the drop in the Labour vote from 38 per cent to 6 per cent. There must be thousands of families on the island who used to vote Labour in the 1950s and now vote Liberal, not because their family circumstances have changed but simply because they have come to the conclusion, at some stage in the last 30 years, that Labour stands no chance of being elected in that seat.

These voters are not necessarily conscious of having taken a decision to vote 'tactically'. They may have stopped voting Labour in the 1960s. It may be their parents who stopped voting Labour. It may be what the psephologists call the "neighbourhood" effect. They stopped voting Labour because their neighbours stopped. Equally it may be an unconscious response to the fact that the Labour Party has become less active on the island and the Liberal Party more so, itself a response to the electoral facts. Indeed one could argue that the local Labour Party's decision to field a Militant candidate in 1983 who reduced the Labour vote to an all-time low of 2.4 per cent, may itself have been an expression of their frustration at facing a 'no-win' situation.

If party workers feel threatened by the tactical switchers in a hopeless seat, they feel even more threatened by the tactical abstainer in a safe seat. They will do anything to persuade them to vote. But Labour's problem has always been that it piles up huge majorities in safe seats which still only elect one MP. In 1951 Labour had majorities of more than 20,000 in 37 seats, and that was why it succeeded in winning more votes than the Tories yet lost the election.

Abstention has gradually reduced that number but there were still 18 Labour majorities of more than 20,000 at the last election. As David Butler points out in his survey of voting in 1987: "The Conservatives distribute their vote in the most efficient way of the three main parties. Labour wastes votes in superflously large margins of victory, piling up majorities in the rock-solid areas of Scotland and Wales. The 28 safest seats in Britain are now all Labour held and 22 Labour seats have majorities over 50 per cent while the highest Conservative majority is 47 per cent in Chelsea".

Tactical voting

There are three important arguments against tactical voting. The first is that it is essential to vote for the party you want, even if its local candidate has no chance of success, in order to maximise its share of the national vote. In the 1983 election the Labour Party came perilously close to dropping to third place and it was the Alliance's main aim in the campaign to come second in the popular vote, which would have enabled it to claim that it was the 'real Opposition' even with a handful of MPs. Short of victory, Labour's main aim in 1987 was to ensure that it increased its share of the popular vote.

If the shares of the popular vote have almost become the 'result' of the election, the Liberals have only themselves to blame for this. They are the Party that have turned elections into a race for shares of the vote. They will appeal for tactical votes from Labour supporters

before an election, but after the election they will claim them as Liberal votes and use them to back their argument that they are under-represented.

The more straightforward case against tactical voting is that the vote should be a statement of personal choice, not of tactics. The Liberals claim their share of the vote as a measure of their support, but in fact it no longer is. It is a measure of voters' response to the voting system and, while it is impossible to prove, it probably exaggerates Liberal support and understates Labour support.

The third case against tactical voting is that it is very difficult to know where it is going to be effective. The seats where a few tactical votes are likely to change the result is a small and constantly moving target and one would need accurate and up-to-date election forecasts to have any reasonable chance of success.

The chance of an individual tactical vote determining the outcome of an election must be less than one in a billion, but where a lot of people vote tactically the chances are much greater. Indeed the majority of existing Democrat MPs have been elected in place of Conservatives with tactical votes from former Labour supporters.

In these seats the logic of the tactical voter is unanswerable. A single MP elected by tactical voters can quite conceivably decide the outcome of an election. Indeed it could be argued that it happened in the Isle of Wight in the February 1974 election when, thanks to a substantial tactical switch by former Labour supporters, the Liberals jumped from third place to first to take a once-solid Conservative seat. The result gave the Tories 297 seats, Labour 301, the Liberals 14 and the Unionists 11. Ted Heath spent a weekend in Downing Street trying to form a coalition but he could not reach the magic 317. The reason was that Labour with its 301, the Liberals with 14, Gerry Fitt of the SDLP in Belfast and Eddie Milne, who won Blyth as Independent Labour, had exactly 317 and were able to block him. Without that extra vote from the Isle of

Wight the Labour Government might never have been formed.

Party activists may disapprove of people who vote tactically or do not vote at all because they live in a safe seat, but the principle is little different from what the activists themselves are doing when, at the beginning of an election campaign, they abandon safe and hopeless seats and concentrate their efforts on the marginals. It would be better, perhaps, to regard it as a sign of increased sophistication among the electorate, an adjustment to the realities of the voting system. People have 'wisened up' to the voting system. They are be-

ing entirely logical. If we do not approve, it is the voting system we do not approve of, not the voters.

In any case the change is irreversible. Once Labour voters have learnt to vote tactically, they cannot unlearn it. And once they start to vote tactically in a particular seat, it becomes self-reinforcing. The Labour vote goes down so there is even less point in voting Labour. The Liberal vote goes up so there is more chance of the Liberal unseating the Tory. In the end tactical considerations become so embedded in the voters' minds that they are hardly even aware of them.

4. Where the voters went

Labour has lost votes because of tactical voting, because of abstention, because of the greater number of Liberal candidates—as have the Conservatives. But Labour has lost many more votes than can be explained by these factors. There are many political factors as well. This chapter attempts to quantify each factor and assess the number of votes which Labour needs to win back if it is to form a government.

The introduction said that Labour's vote of 13,948,000 in the 1951 election ought now to have grown to 17.4 million to keep pace with the growth of the electorate but has in fact shrunk to 10 million, so Labour has 'lost' some 7.4 million votes. Now that we have looked at some of the electoral reasons for the fall in Labour's share of the vote, we can make at least a rough assessment of how many of those 7.4 million lost votes can be accounted for in this way.

Tactical voters

The concept of tactical voting is too vague to measure. Opinion polls can and do ask people whether they would be prepared to vote tactically and this pro-

duces a response that is often over 20 per cent, but this does not measure the extent to which people actually do vote tactically.

Even if it did, it would only measure new tactical voting since the last election. It is almost impossible to measure the 'old' tactical voting that continues from election to election because the tactical motive has so often been mingled into or rationalised into other motives. "Labour's got no chance, so I'm voting Liberal" soon turns into "there's a nice Liberal candidate and Labour's got no chance, has it?" and in the end it can become difficult to tell whether they are tactical or real Liberal voters.

But there is an important distinction to be drawn between people who stopped voting Labour for political

reasons, because their views changed, or their view of the Labour Party changed, and those who stopped voting Labour for electoral reasons, because they did not believe Labour could win in their constituency. The only chance of quantifying this second group, the 'motivational' switchers, is from the election results themselves.

In the Isle of Wight, for instance, there were 20,712 voters in 1951 and only 4,626 at the last election. Out of all the voters on the island nearly a third—32 per cent—have switched from Labour to another party. Out of the Labour voters of 1951 more than five sixths—85 per cent—have switched. There is no doubt that many of these people switched for tactical reasons. But how many?

One can make some broad deductions from the figures in Table 4 (page 11). In the unwinnable seats Labour's share of the total has dropped by 30 per cent (from 37 to 7 per cent) but in the marginals it has fallen by only 8 per cent (from 49 to 41 per cent). This 8 per cent who stopped voting Labour in marginal seats did so, one must assume, for purely political reasons. But there is no reason why the purely political swing against Labour should be any higher in safe or unwinnable seats. To the extent that the swing is higher in those seats, it must be for other reasons. The swing in the unwinnable seats is 22 per cent higher and one can take that to be the tactical squeeze on Labour.

These 12 are the seats where the tactical squeeze will be strongest, but it will exist in all the seats where the Liberals have pushed Labour from second to third place. In 1951 Labour was in third place in only five seats and now it is third in 247, so it will have been squeezed to some extent in 242 seats. If one assumes that the squeeze is 22 per cent at one extreme and 0 per cent at the other, then one can say as a rough guide that Labour will have lost 11 per cent of the vote on average in 242 seats, which is 1.5 million votes.

Similarly Labour's vote has fallen by 20 per cent in safe seats compared with 8 per cent in marginals, a difference of

12 per cent, and the explanation is likely to lie in the lack of motivation for voters and parties. They will say "why should I bother to vote if Labour is going to win anyway?" or "Labour doesn't need my vote so why shouldn't I give it to X?" or "we never saw anyone from the Labour Party during the campaign".

If instead of taking 12 safe seats, one took Labour's 100 biggest majorities and assumed that Labour had suffered an extra loss of votes of 12 per cent at the top of the list down to nil at the bottom, then the 'safe seat' factor will have cost Labour around 350,000 votes since 1951, most of them to abstention.

Indeed, abstention has eroded Labour's vote not only in safe seats but in nearly all seats. Election turnout reached its post-war peak at the 1950 election and was 82.5 per cent in 1951 but fell below 80 per cent at the following election and has remained there ever since. At the last election it was 75.3 per cent. That in itself accounts for a substantial proportion of Labour's lost votes. If the turnout was still as high now as it was in 1951, and each party benefited equally, Labour have nearly a million—943,000—additional votes.

The Liberal influence

But the biggest single change since 1951 is that the Liberals put up only 109 candidates in that election and now they put up candidates in all 633 seats in England, Scotland and Wales. That alone accounts for about 1.8 million lost votes in today's terms to which one must add the 1.5 million lost tactical votes, the 943,000 lost to abstention and the 350,000 lost in safe seats, though one has to allow for considerable overlap between the two.

Thus out of the 7.4 million lost votes something like 4,350,000 can be attributed to the growth in the number of candidates, in tactical voting, in abstention, which are not political causes in the true sense but derive from the electoral system and the way that the voters and the parties have responded to it.

But if they have no political causes, it is also true that they have few political effects. People started voting tactically in unwinnable seats and abstaining in safe seats precisely because voting Labour had no effect. It did not help to elect any more Labour MPs. So when they stopped voting Labour, it reduced Labour's share of the popular vote, but it did not reduce its share of MPs. The same is true of the rise in the number of Liberal candidates and the decline in voting turnout. These trends have taken votes from both Conservative and Labour and there is no reason to believe that one was hit harder than the other.

The best evidence of this, which is often overlooked, is that the Conservatives have also suffered a considerable decline in their share of the vote since 1951. In that election they won 13,724,418 votes which, even though it was a very narrow victory, remains one of their highest votes. Mrs Thatcher failed to reach it in 1979 and 1983 and only just passed it in 1987 with a vote of 13,763,134.

Mrs Thatcher can hardly boast of her success since, allowing for the growth in the electorate, the Tory vote now 'ought' to be 17.2 million to match their vote in 1951 and they have therefore 'lost' 3.4 million votes. Indeed they have probably lost just as many votes as Labour through the higher number of tactical voters, abstainers and candidates, but this has been partially obscured by votes they have gained for political reasons. This can be seen if one asks how many votes Mrs Thatcher would have needed to win the same majority of 17 seats in Parliament that Churchill won in 1951. The answer is that she would have needed 12.9 million votes, where Churchill's vote in terms of today's electorate would have been

17.2 million. The gap is 4.3 million —almost the same as the figure of 4,350,000 we arrived at in the case of Labour.

The bottom line, then, is that out of Labour's 7.4 million lost voters, over 4 million have deserted the Party for reasons which have nothing to do with its policies or actions but have to do with the electoral system and their attitude to it. Yet the Party has allowed the loss of these voters to undermine its self-confidence and its belief in its own moral authority. The Party longs to return to the simplicity of the two-party system when there was a straight choice between Labour and Tory without the complication of a third party, when Labour commanded the support of nearly half the electorate and, even in opposition, could justly claim to speak for the great majority of working people.

But nothing can bring back the political simplicities of 1951 and it is as well to remember that Labour lost the election of that year and the size of its popular vote made no difference. Equally, the loss of 4 million voters for tactical and other reasons makes no tangible difference to the Party now. None of them were votes that helped to elect Labour MPs. They were votes that used to save Labour's deposit in unwinnable seats and pile up huge wasted majorities in safe seats.

To this extent the fall in Labour's share of the vote is something that should not be allowed to depress or demoralise. There is quite enough to worry about in the remaining 3 million votes which the Party has lost for purely political reasons. They are the votes that Labour needs to win back to regain power.

5. An alternative voting system

Tactical voting is an imperfect weapon in the hands of the electorate and the governments it produces lack moral authority. Some alternative voting system would be preferable to the lottery of the present system—provided it was the right system.

So the loss of 4 million voters has made no tangible difference to the Labour Party in the short term, at least to the number of MPs elected. Labour should not worry about them unduly. It can win without them. But nevertheless there are reasons why it should be worried in the longer term.

First, it is now possible to win an election with less than 40 per cent of the vote. Indeed, Labour won in October 1974 with just 39.2 per cent and it could have won an overall majority at the last election with just 37 per cent. If the shares of the vote had been Labour 37, Alliance 31, Conservative 30, then, on the normal forecasting basis, Labour would have won 326 seats, an outright majority, against 223 for the Conservatives and 76 for the Alliance.

But how much moral authority would a Labour government have with little more than a third of the votes? Many people question the moral authority of a Conservative government which won the support of only 42 per cent of the voters and indeed less than a third of the electorate.

There is no doubt that Mrs Thatcher's Government, especially in its early days, suffered from a feeling that she had no popular mandate for what she was doing and the chasm of distrust between politicians and voters grew even wider. That distrust, and the apathy and abstention that it breeds, may do more damage to the Labour Party in the longer run.

Secondly, there is always a danger that tactical voting will end up disorienting the voters and seats that ought to be won by Labour will be trapped into a false identity. Tactical voting can on-

ly be successful in a constituency as long as the electors have a clear idea of what kind of seat they are living in, whether it is a Tory seat where the Liberal stands an outside chance or a Labour seat where a strong Liberal vote could let a Tory in.

People have to know not only which way to jump, but which way everybody else is jumping, as that will determine which way they should jump. There needs to be a communal awareness, a strong sense of identity, a good bush telegraph, almost a group psychology.

The trouble is that seats are not static. They can be redrawn by the Boundary Commissioners or they can undergo demographic change. Sometimes a seat where Labour stands no chance will be turned into a good prospect by the addition of a couple of Labour wards, but by then it may be trapped into a Tory-Liberal psychology and Labour may find it difficult to persuade the voters that it is really a Tory-Labour marginal.

With the Liberals in second place in 247 seats there is an obvious danger that new seats that Labour should be picking up, for instance in the suburbs as 'yuppies' move into the inner city or in the newly industrialised areas in the South, will never be unlocked from this Tory-Liberal mentality.

Thirdly, it is not only the romantics of the labour movement who deeply regret the fact that tactical voting is killing the Labour tradition, the Labour-voting culture, that once existed all across the country, even in the most Tory areas and in the depths of the countryside. After Labour had lost most of its agricultural seats in the 1950s there remained a Labour tradition in the countryside.

There might be a Labour hall in a village, a parish councillor who was Labour. In the small towns there would be a Labour area and some of the small urban districts were Labour controlled, even in Tory areas.

There might be no chance of a Labour MP, but the habit of voting Labour continued, Labour councillors and Labour councils were still elected and people still had contact with the Labour Party as a system of local representation and local government, rather than just as a local debating party.

A good deal of that still remains. In many parts of the country the same people will vote Labour at district and county elections but Liberal at general elections, with a strong grasp of the chances of each candidate at each level of government.

Pockets of Labour voters may be big enough to be a majority in district council and county council wards but not in constituencies. But the danger is that the Liberals will eat into these votes from above, first at parliamentary, then at county and then at district level. Once they have won a few tactical votes from Labour they may have destroyed Labour's chances and use that to reinforce their tactical argument.

People who live in Labour-held seats do not realise that this process has been going on for decades and may end in the complete obliteration of the Labour vote in areas that are not either safe Labour or marginal seats. That is not only a tragedy in itself but carries the danger that the Labour Party will cease to think as a national party and begin to think in sectional, regional terms.

It is alright for Labour voters living in Labour seats, which includes most Labour MPs. But most people live in safe seats where there is no chance of affecting the outcome and more and more Labour supporters live in seats where they are in a constant dilemma between heart and head over how to cast their vote.

Status quo

It is probably true that Labour stands a better chance of winning an overall majority under the present voting system than under any alternative voting system but the Party should ask itself three questions before it commits itself any further to the defence of the electoral status quo.

Is it right? Is it right that voters should be forcibly kept in the straitjacket of a voting system that only works well with two major parties, when it is so clear that people want to be able to choose between three or four. For most of this century there has been a substantial vote for third party candidates, where they stand, even though most of those votes are wasted. Not since 1900 has there been a real two-party election.

Is it wise? Is it wise to wait for the election in which Labour wins a jackpot on the fruit machines if the price is that the Conservatives may win the jackpot three, four or five times? Would one Labour overall majority make up for three Tory governments? When does the time come to cut one's losses and try another machine?

What if the Labour Party wins the chance of forming a minority government with Democrat support? Would it simply refuse to consider any changes in the voting system? Would it have no proposal to put forward? What if the Democrats threatened to force an election when Labour was at rock bottom in the polls? Might not Labour be forced to accept the Democrats' version of proportional representation as the price of its survival?

The Democrats support one particular type of voting system, the Single Transferable Vote, and it is the system most likely to lead to the permanent participation of a centre party in a never-ending series of centre-right or centre-left governments. It is a system designed to keep them in office just as surely as the present system keeps them out of office.

For this very reason it cannot be said to increase voters' choice. They will have a wider range of parties to choose

from, but their vote will have very little influence on the most important choice of all—the choice of government. In all probability that will be determined by negotiations between the parties after polling day.

But the main reason why people rebel against the present voting system and vote tactically is because they do not just want to decide which party does well. They want to decide what government is formed. Ironically that is the very choice that the Single Transferable Vote would almost certainly deny them.

The alternative vote is the one system that allows people to express not only their 'ideal' choice among all the parties but also their 'realistic' choice among the parties likely to form a government, and it retains the single-member constituency which is the most valued part of the present electoral system. People would vote for the candidates in order of preference, numbering them 1, 2 and 3 on the ballot paper. If their first choice failed to be elected, their support would go to their next choice until one candidate won 50 per cent of the votes in the constituency.

In those seats where Labour is now in a poor third place and many Labour supporters switch their vote to the Democrat in order to try to defeat the Conservative, these voters would be able to vote both Labour as their first choice, to register their support for the Party, and Democrat as a second choice, like their tactical vote, in the hope of influencing the outcome in that constituency.

The system does not guarantee that MPs will be elected in strict proportion to the voters' first choices, but it could be combined with an element of proportional representation to make sure that the composition of the Parliament reflects the voters' first-choice preferences, by 'topping up' with additional non-constituency members taken from party lists.

That would mean that Labour supporters in areas where Labour has no chance of success would be able to influence the national outcome through their first-choice vote, which would help to elect an additional Labour member, or influence the election in their own constituency by giving their second-choice vote to a Democrat or other candidate rather than a Conservative.

This is obviously not going to help Labour to win the next election. Labour first has to defeat the Conservatives before it has a chance of changing the voting system. But the most important task for the next Labour government will be to take the opportunity—maybe its last opportunity—to lay the foundations for its future success by reform of the voting system.

And its best chance of winning that opportunity may well be if it recognises the frustration and anger of the voters with the voting system which have been expressed so far in abstention and in tactical voting but could ultimately be turned against Labour if a reforming party does not take its opportunity to reform the voting system.

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Labour can still win

In the 1951 general election, Labour won over 13 million votes, the largest number of votes ever won before or since by any party. When allowance is made for the extension of the franchise in 1968 and the growth of the electorate, Labour would have to attract the support of over 17 million voters to achieve a comparable result now. At the last election, it received just over 10 million votes.

Some commentators have suggested that the loss of 7 million votes represents a terminal decline, that Labour can never win power again. Martin Linton shows in this pamphlet that the decline is not as clear-cut as it is portrayed, and is explainable by factors that have more to do with the electoral system and the voters' response to it than with the political failings of the Labour Party. In particular, much of the loss is attributable to the increased number of Liberal candidates since 1951.

Another factor in the decline of Labour's vote has been the increasing incidence of 'tactical voting'. Labour's vote has fallen furthest in the seats where it has no chance of winning, as many Labour supporters have either switched their votes to the party most likely to defeat the Conservatives or have stopped voting altogether. In its 'safe' seats, Labour's vote has fallen by almost as much as in the unwinnable ones because Labour is certain to win.

Of the 7.4 million votes Labour has 'lost' since 1951, Martin Linton estimates that over 4 million can be explained by the above factors. Therefore, the task of winning the next election is not the insuperable hurdle it seems—provided Labour can get its political appeal right.

But the Party should accept that abstentions and tactical voting are evidence of a growing frustration and anger at the electoral system. Reform of the electoral system should be considered by Labour if only because failure to do so could result in it being forced to accept the much flawed system of the Single Transferable Vote as the price of forming a government with Democrat support. Instead, Martin Linton puts forward his own favoured option of the 'alternative vote'.

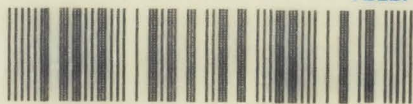
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