CAMDEN LABOUR BRIEFING

APRIL 1987

TOM DEVINE

Tom's death is a shock and a tragic loss to everyone who knew him and worked with him. A man of unlimited energy and enormous warmth, he will be sorely missed. His commitment to socialism and the rights of working people was unrivalled, and as the Councillor for Somers Town, he won the support and affection of everyone who came into contact with him. A radical in both word and deed, Tom will best be remembered as a man of principle. We send our deepest sympathy to his wife and children. He will never be replaced, but the ideas which informed his life will remain eternal.

THE LABOUR GROUP

THE FIRST THREE HUNDRED DAYS

It is almost a year since the local government elections and the changeover in the leadership on the Labour Group which followed those elections.

It would be wrong to describe the last twelve months as an unmitigated disaster, but from the outset the Labour Group has been riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies.

In May of last year, a joint meeting of the Labour Group and the Local Government Committee was held to determine the leadership of the Group and the key positions on the Council.

At a meeting of the Labour Group, which was held after these elections, many of the decisions were overturned. A narrow majority in the Labour Group - one vote in some instances - quite deliberately went against the mandate on the Party.

Many of the troubles which have plagued the Labour leadership since last May are directly attributable to the cynical way in which the Group carved up the various positions and Committees, and quite consciously excluded the Party from the democratic process.

In practice, this has meant that the political authority of the leadership has been beholden to the Right for its legitimacy.

However, since last May, the Right have been operating as an independent unit within the Party, accepting neither the democracy of the Party nor the authority of the Group. Given their dependence on the Right, the leadership have been unable to exert any control over the mavericks who have been attempting to undermine the Party's agreed policies over the last twelve months.

It is therefore crucial that the leadership, this time round, are prepared to accept the twin principles of democracy and accountability. Not democracy when it suits them, but democracy in the broadest possible sense.

It is proposed that this year there should be a joint meeting between the Labour Group and the Local Government Committee. This meeting will form an electoral college, with each constituent part having 50% of the vote. We call on the present leadership to support the conference in the party, and honour its' decisions in the subsequnt AGM of the Labour Group.

It is only in this way that the authority of the leadership, the cohesion of the Group, and the full involvement of the Party and the wider Labour Movement can be assured.

In the run up to a General Election we need a united and positive Party, working together with agreed policies and within acceptable principles.

The principles of democracy and accountability are paramount.

The election of Group Officers and Committee positions must involve as broad a cross-section as possible of the Party. The elections must be open and accountable.

The Labour Group which endorses the decisions of the joint meeting must be similarily open and subject to public srutiny. The secret ballot - by which last year's decision was overturned - must be rejected in its entirety. The Party has a right to know how their Councillors are voting, especially on an issue which will determine the future of local government in Camden.

Steve Bevington, St. Pancras
Graham Shurety, Gospel Oak

THE WRECKING CREW

Labour Briefing, both nationally and locally, has always encouraged both discussion and debate within the Labour Movement. Indeed, Briefing was actually created as a necessary forum for such expression - bringing together the various groups and tendencies on the Left of the Party in order to establish a broad framework of consensus around socialist principles and practice.

However, as members of the Labour Party, we have always been aware of our responsibility to the Party, and even where there has been intense disagreement with the Right of our Party, we have attempted to conduct the debate in a comradely and reasonable manner. We believe that it is possible to resolve political differences in a way which is both responsible and democratic.

Increasingly, the Right in Camden have had no such qualms.

Since May 1986, the Right in Camden have effectively become a law unto themselves, not only operating as an organised caucus on the Labour Group and conducting themselves in a way which is highly irresponsible, but also acting on principles which are fundementally anti-democratic and unsocialist.

I am not referring to the series of broadsheets, produced and distributed by the Right, using the logo of Camden Briefing and attempting to smear individual supporters of Briefing. I can live with that. Such attacks are neither important nor worthy of response.

However, I am concerned with the way in which a small group of Right wing Councillors have been systematically undermining the agreed policies and priorities of the Party in Camden.

The Manifesto committed us to growth and this year's Borough Conference fully endorsed this committment. The Manifesto also committed us to working with both the Trade Unions and community groups, again, a policy overwhelmingly endorsed by Borough Conference and a large majority of the Labour Group.

The Right have embarked upon a programmed campaign, via the local media, of deliberately undermining these policies.

In the last two months, 'leaked' articles by Councillors Hulme, Griffiths, Shaw and Latham, have appeared in the local newspapers. These articles have not only attacked the Left, they have attacked the entire basis of the Party's agreed policies in Camden.

I am not objecting to the right of people to disagree with policies, but I am objecting to the way in which these disagreements have been orchestrated - via a Tory media and with the obvious connivance of Tory editors.

In addition to press campaigns and these selective leaks, the Right have also been actively engaged in a campaign to break the links which exist between the Party and the Trade Unions.

They have attempted to discipline Trade Unionists for taking part in an official picket - using the Camden Ratepayers Association and the Social Democrats as witnesses - they have attacked the Unions for defending the rights of their members, and they have effectively ruptured the links which existed between the Party and community organisations by their bizarre support for the Council's involvement in the totally discredited Police Consultative Committee.

In instances too numerous to fully credi the Right have voted against both Party and Labour Group policy on Council Committees, not only undermining those policies, but actually supporting Alliance and Tory members of those Committees.

The final insult, to both the Party and the wider movement, has been their private meeting with the District Auditor - a Tory Official - aimed at discrediting the entire financial strategy agreed by the Party and supported by a large majority of the Labour Group.

These attacks, and the way in which they are being conducted, are doing irreperable damage to the Party in Camden.

The local media are using the Right just as the Right are using them. Not to open up debate, but to open splits where none exist and to undermine policies which have been arrived at democratically and with the full involvement of the Party.

In effect, Hulme, Smyth, Denny, Griffith Shaw, Latham, et al, are acting as a wrecking crew, an Alliance caucus in everything but name. They are damaging not only the Party and our electoral chances, they are also tearing apart our links with both the Unions and the wider community.

Angela Birtill
Councillor, Kilburn Ward

INTERNATIONAL SHELTER WEEK: March 29 - Apr
Meeting: Future of Council Housing
7 pm 31 March, The Town Hall
Meeting: Private Tenants Campaign
8 pm 2 April, Winchester Project
Swiss Cottage NW3

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NEXT MEETING: Wednesday 29 April 8.00 p.m.
Venue to be announced