LONDON LABOUR BRIEFING 40p
No 54 NOVEMBER 1985

WE WILL DEFEND OUR COMMUNITIES!

BY BERNIE GRANT (LEADER, HARINGEY COUNCIL)

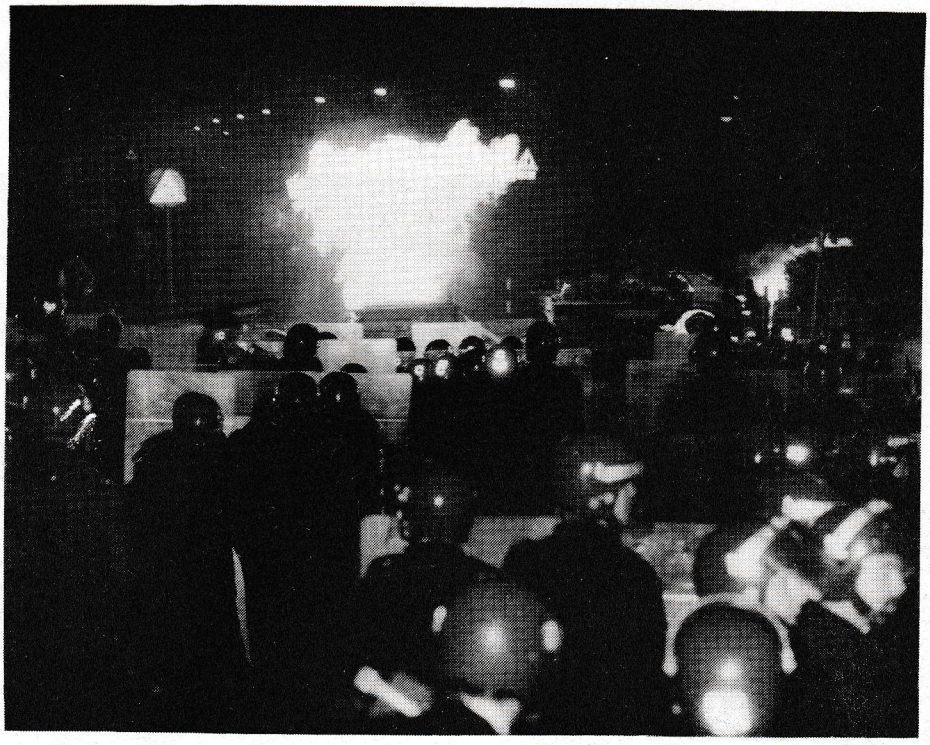
The events at Tottenham are a direct result of the feeling of hopelessness felt by local people, especially the youth on the estates. They face unemployment, bad housing and lack of opportunity and though we as a Council have tried to create more jobs here and there, the problems are much too great for us.

After Handsworth, there was a deterioration in relations between the police and black youth throughout Haringey. Black youth were hauled off the streets by the police, beaten up and told, "that's for what happened in Brixton". The police were stopping cars with black occupants and searching them. There used to be a rapport between the Broadwater Farm Youth Association and the police. But weeks before the Tottenham events, the police broke off contact.

Outsmarted

The police are clearly embarrassed by the fact that ordinary black youth outsmarted and outmanoeuvred them in Tottenham. And they have now gone over the top, over-reacting in a racist way. The day after the Tottenham events, at least one black youth was beaten up and told 'that's for the dead policeman'.

The allegations of outside infiltrators are, of course, utter nonsense and fail to recognise the real problems and grievances felt by our local people. Newman cut his teeth in Northern Ireland and so his threats to use plastic bullets and CS gas are no surprise. I totally oppose and condemn this police provocation.



JP pictures ltd.

The government must accept the blame for what has happened. And the labour movement – both in the unions and constituency parties – must stand four square with those youth, especially black youth, who are at the sharp edge of the class struggle.

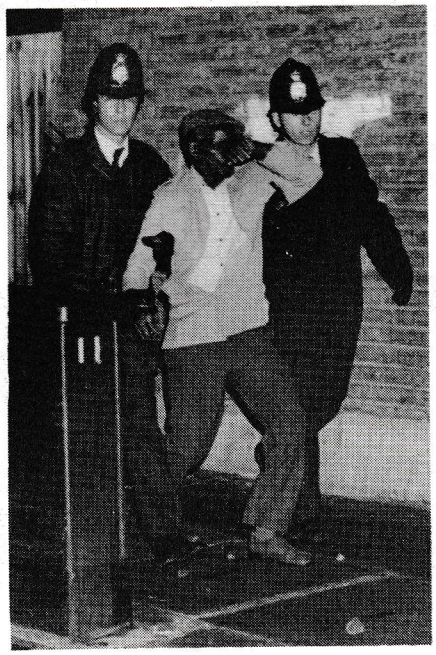
And the labour movement must condemn police provocation. Just as the government used the police against the miners, today they seek to use the police to smash resistance in the inner cities. They must not be allowed to succeed.

LABOUR – TAKE THE POWER!

DEFEND BERNIE GRANT

Haringey Briefing fully supports Council leader Bernie Grant in his principled stand over the disturbances on Tottenham's Broadwater Farm Estate. From the beginning he has been clear in his condemnation of police harassment and brutality which provoked black and white youth to defend themselves on the night of Sunday 6th. For this stand he has been pilloried not just by the racist and reactionary government and media, but also by the Labour Party leadership.

Despite the evidence showing that police activity on the Farm has been stepped up in recent weeks and that in the wake of Brixton police harassment of black youth has increased, Roy Hattersley has been quick to distance the party leadership from any criticism of the Met police at all. Not content with condemning miners' "violence" or undermining the fights of Liverpool and Lambeth Councls, the party leadership now feels strong enough to attack any Labour Council taking a stand on the issues of police violence, racism and accountability. Furthermore the attacks on Bernie Grant are already leading demands for him to be removed as Tottenham's PPC – a witchhunt which must be resisted.



John Richards

Diverting attention

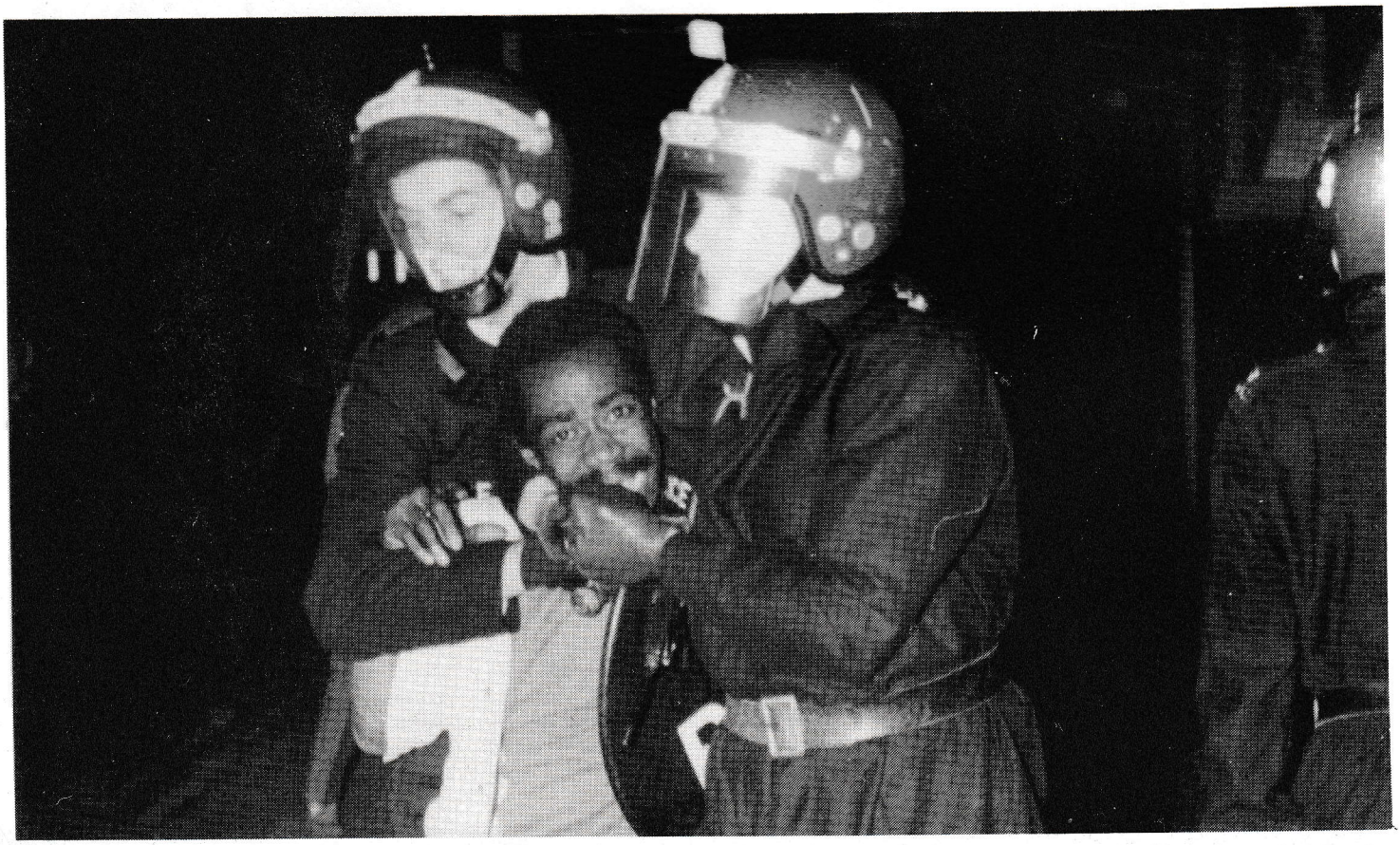
We should understand that by concentrating on the so-called "criminality" of the youths, the government are diverting attention not just from the fundamental social and economic problems of the inner cities but also from the fact that the police have deliberately engineered this confrontation. By heightening tension on the streets, Sir Kenneth Newman has made it publicly and politically acceptable for plastic bullets and CS gas to be used against any future demonstrations or gatherings. Already too the Tories have announced new legislation against "disorderly conduct". At the same time the ritualistic attacks on outside agitators, Trotskyites, anarchists et al, completely unsubstantiated by any evidence, are deliberately made to turn the political atmosphere against any dissidence or socialist activity.

Racism

But perhaps the ugliest part of the media coverage is its racism. Through this, white and black working class are being set against each other; in Haringey a disturbing result of this is a demonstration by Council manual workers against Bernie Grant's stand; and the people behind this demonstration are also using local anti-traveller and anti-gay feelings to feed opposition to the Council's position. This divide and rule policy of the government and its agencies must be resisted if we are to prevent a vicious reactionary backlash.

In view of the present situation we urge all comrades to send messages of solidarity to Bernie Grant and the Labour Group. We in turn need to build support within the Party for the stand taken to ensure that the less principled members of the Labour Group do not give a repeat performance of the ratecapping fiasco and undermine the present position. Above all we must all publicise and explain the real reasons for the disturbances and answer the media's racist lies.

Haringey Briefing Group



LAMBETH — WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?

"The one that got away" was how the *Guardian* reported Neil Kinnock's reaction during Annual Conference to the NEC's backing for Composite 32 on Local Government, which was seconded by Kathy Connelly from Vauxhall, a surcharged Lambeth councillor.

Lambeth's emergency resolution was manoeuvred off the agenda, and Liverpool cornered into withdrawing their composite. However, Composite 32 and the NEC statement on local government were passed unanimously, and in so doing Conference committed itself to pledging full support for the councillors of Lambeth and Liverpool and doing "all we can" to finance the legal costs of the appeals against the District Auditor. Continuing non-compliance with the ratecapping laws was supported and the next Labour Government is "committed" to compensating fully those councillors surcharged or disqualified from office, to repealing the Rates Act and restoring the stolen Rate Support Grant. The composite also pointed out that Labour cuts hurt just as much as Tory ones — the dented shield approach was rejected!

Obviously, for Neil Kinnock and the new right, all this is just another conference resolution to be ignored. The fight to save jobs and services — whether in the burning inner cities or in the mining villages — is a blot they wish to expunge from the view of those upwardly-mobile voters in the shires who might find it all rather distasteful. In Lambeth we are well aware that if the Militant's inept tactics in Liverpool hadn't left them open to attack from all sides, then our councillors would have been the target for Kinnock's vitriolic attack, instead of Liverpool. Kinnock wasn't just attacking Liverpool's tactics — he was attacking anyone prepared to fight against this government — and that's why Lambeth's delegates joined the walkout which accompanied Eric Heffer from the hall.

It is up to those of us on the left to ensure this resolution isn't ignored. Much of it calls for action *now*. Of particular importance is the need to raise funds to finance the appeals by the surcharged councillors — we must demand the NEC does this more wholeheartedly than they have done so far, or did for the miners. The composite also calls for the National Local Government Conference to be recalled within three months — not because we actually expect it to be the forum for determining the "precise and united tactics for non-compliance in 1986/7" called for in the composite, but because we need to use every forum, including the formal structures of the Party, to rally support and unite with those who *are* prepared to refuse to comply with legislation aimed at destroying jobs, services and local democracy. What will be interesting for the cynics amongst us to watch will be whether the conference even happens!

Joan Twelves
Vauxhall CLP and Regional Executive

Lambeth councillors have now lodged their appeals against the District Auditor's sentence that they are guilty of losses of £126,947 and therefore liable to surcharge, bankruptcy and disqualification from office. Although we can't be sure, we expect the court case to begin in December. The London Labour Parties have an obligation to Lambeth to ensure that there is a massive demonstration of support at the courts in recognition that they alone have stuck to London policy.

Before then there will be a week of activity in Lambeth, starting with a major rally with Tony Benn organised by the local Parties on Monday 14th October, and a day of action called by the Joint Unions on Wednesday 16th October. On Sunday 20th October, the London Labour Party will be coming to Lambeth, to the Brixton Rec, for its special conference, which is meant to be determining the policy and tactics for fighting to defend jobs and services next year.

The policy statement being put to this conference should please Neil Kinnock — we are to *publicise* the job losses caused by abolition (nothing about trying to save them); we are to ask MPs to block the privatisation legislation (nothing about what we do when they fail to make a dent in the Tories' massive inbuilt majority); and — having already accepted these cuts — we are to draw up "no cuts" budgets. The only whisper of *how* we do all this is at the very end — we prepare for action, including industrial action! Great, but mobilising action requires policies around which to mobilise, and all attempts at the Regional Executive to put some bite, some tactics, into this statement were defeated. The section on ratecapping *could* be interpreted as deficit budgetting, but an attempt to make this explicit was defeated, so obviously it doesn't mean that after all. The policy statement doesn't even reaffirm London's policy of non-compliance with the Rates Act, nor does it call for solidarity and support for the Lambeth councillors *despite* the conference being held in the heart of Brixton — in fact in a building now owned by the GLC which Lambeth won't be able to afford to keep open afer next April. And, of course, following the Regional Executive's speedy capitulation in July to the "realities" of abolition, it doesn't reaffirm the London AGM's policy of not participating in the bodies established to oversee the winding up of the GLC and the consequential destruction of jobs and services.

We are currently drawing up manifestoes and selecting candidates for next May's elections. We need to win these elections — and win them well. We have to determine our policies for these elections, not just the slogans to go on the posters, and how we are going to carry them out and stick to our promises. The choice is clear: we capitulate to Tory cuts and Tory laws — or we support the Lambeth councillors and fight back. Which side are you on?



Press Association

London Labour Party comes to Brixton.
Will it confront the real issues. Above, cars ablaze in Brixton, 28th September

FOR A SOCIALIST ILEA

As selections begin for ILEA Labour Candidates for the direct elections, the Left in the Inner London CLPs needs to organise to ensure the selection of socialists from the panel in safe and winnable seats. London Labour Briefing can act as the focus for ensuring the selection of comrades who would move the new ILEA Labour Group further to the Left and thus closer to the mainstream of the membership at Union Branch and CLP level.

There is a groundswell of opinion amongst party members that ILEA's Labour Group is too remote, and that its workings remain trammelled within the County Hall bureaucracy. I also often hear the complaint that the populist appeal to the middle-class parent-cum-ratepayer needs to be supplanted by a politics which begins with the needs and aspirations of the London working class.

From the outset of the campaign the prospect of Labour not achieving a majority needs to be examined. Social and Economic changes in many places in inner London have altered the character of many traditionally working class areas. Finsbury, Fulham and Bow are examples of this.



Keith Hawkins

Draft Manifesto: no specific initiatives directed towards working class students

Complacency

In some of these places Labour inactivity at grass roots and community level, combined with an inexplicable complacency, has further contributed to the erosion of Labour's electoral base.

Should Labour fail to return ILEA members from Eltham, Bermondsey, Holborn/St Pancras, Poplar, Islington South our majority begins to be in question. These are by no means the only places where we are potentially vulnerable to either a Tory or Alliance challenge.

Those who will criticise me for raising this issue in this way need to examine the way the ILEA elections are being prepared for in their own CLPs. In many places I visit many Labour Party members don't yet know that the elections are taking place!!

Draft Manifesto

The Draft Manifesto which has been circulated to CLPs is in many respects offensive. Its drafting occurred before Abolition, before Ratecapping and before the historic sell-out by Livingstone and his soft-left friends currently clustering round Tribune.

The Draft refers to disabled post 16 year olds as "children". Elsewhere we read that the issue of Tertiary Colleges is to be blurred and fudged. Little mention is made of specific initiatives directed towards Working Class students and parents. Far more seriously is the way in which the Draft Manifesto reproduces a deficit model of the London working class, which is routinely characterised as depressed, poor, needy, suffering, alien, disadvantaged, under-achieving etc. By implication the working class is without an inherent vitality. This view is made clear when on the first page the presence of many languages amongst the student body is referred to as a "problem" for the Authority!!

Fabianism

This sort of Fabianism has to be opposed by all firm socialists in the CLPs and Unions. We should attend the Conference that has been called for mid November at County Hall to discuss the Draft Manifesto and demand that it is scrubbed.

We must insist and ensure that a totally new Manifesto is produced which begins from the assumption that the greatest strength ILEA has is derived from the working class experience of the bulk of its students and employees.

We must not allow specious arguments from regional officials, such as that there is no time, or "that the Manifesto has to be prepared BEFORE candidates are selected", to prevent us getting a new non-racist manifesto.

Undemocratic structure

It is already clear that the Regional Executive have been bounced into agreeing a totally undemocratic structure for this important Manifesto Conference. The proposed small and narrow delegation is in my view consciously designed to restrict critical participation thus maximising the influence of the current ILEA Labour Group over the contents of the manifesto.

After the years in which we fought for control by the rank and file over the contents of the Manifesto the Left ought not to allow this one to slip the net of broad critical involvement in its composition.

Comrades can turn up on the day. London SEA might, I hear, be holding a fringe meeting to organise opposition to the process of merely amending the existing document.

The election of two members for each constituency offers each CLP the opportunity to put some recently affirmed principles into practice. Each pair of candidates should include at least one woman candidate and at least one Black candidate.

The Manifesto Labour fights the election with must be unequivocally supportive of the fight teachers are undertaking for a decent living wage. For this to be credible the document needs to be framed in a spirit of militant confrontation against the Tories at local, regional and national level.

The document should make specific pledges that total numbers of jobs in ILEA will be protected and that no worker will be compulsorily moved to the detriment of themselves and the institution in which they work.

Let's work now for a socialist ILEA in May 1986.

Steven Cowan
(Hammersmith CLP)

DEFEND OUR PUBLIC SERVICES!

Recent uprisings in Brixton and Tottenham have shown that inner city communities can no longer pay the price of Tory privatisation and destruction of services.

It is no coincidence that both areas are in deprived areas where democratically elected Labour councils have been prevented from providing the necessary services to combat homelessness, unemployment and the lack of training opportunities by rate-capping, cutbacks in capital finance and now a privatisation bonanza for its business friends.

Not a viable alternative

In these circumstances the Draft Statement that will be presented to the Special London Labour Party Conference on Local Government on October 20th does not present a viable alternative to Tory policies.

In the section on Abolition, paragraph (iii) concedes defeat before the struggle by saying that "losses in jobs and services should be publicised to Londoners so clearly establishing the government's real intentions in respect of abolition" if efforts to take over GLC services are not successful.

Where is the clear commitment to refuse to take on GLC services without adequate Central Government funding? For if Labour councils fudge the issue and try and prop up services for the elderly, handicapped and under fives they will be forced to run services that will be unprofessional, unsatisfactory and ultimately endanger the very groups we are supposed to provide for.

Privatisation

Similarly the section on privatisation does not present the positive values of public service – accountability to the consumer, good pay and conditions for the workers and an acknowledgement of the need to value meeting the needs of the community, not the stock market.

It acknowledges the importance of a campaign against privatisation but makes no real commitment to this fight and so leaves huge areas of opportunity for councils to renege on their own commitment to good public service.

Just as nationally the Party has now fudged the issue of providing public housing as a priority, there is a danger local councils will not campaign boldly on the efficiency and desirability of public service, but try and win tenders on an individual basis.

It seems it is now fashionable to fight in kid gloves. Standing up to be counted on rate capping in Lambeth and Liverpool angers the new leadership figures. Councils are advised instead to do what they can, to muddle through.

In the face of a Tory government absolutely clear about its objectives – the dismantling of public services, the forcing down of wage levels, the stifling of any opposition, such as in the GLC – such a policy means that we are constantly reacting to Tory dictat and ultimately lose sight of our socialist objectives and more significantly lose the confidence of our communities.

Nadine Finch,
Member of the Greater London Labour Party Executive (in a personal capacity)



ISLINGTON: hot air and warm fudge

A conference was held by the North Islington Labour Party in mid-September to discuss the 1986 Rate Capping campaign. Despite numerous calls from the floor for tactics of clarity and honesty, even the conference was muddled and confused with progressive discussion and debate being swamped by councillors' defensiveness and the use of meaningless phrases like "creative accounting". Many of the calls for honesty in the campaign came from people who stand a good chance of being Islington councillors in 1986 – they see that the sort of socialism acceptable in the community is about debate, discussion and collective decision making based on the best information available. Yet there is a good chance – if this conference is anything to go by – that they will inherit a campaign designed by councillors who will then stand down, a campaign of hot air and warm fudge. I think there are several campaign arguments that need to be worked through.

Much has been made of the need for all dissenting boroughs to "stand and fall together", while talking about their "legitimately different tactics". Is this a realistic or useful strategy? Is it realistic to expect councils to organise and communicate effectively across country? It's difficult enough for them to do it internally! Local people will support their council if they believe it to be fighting for ***their*** interests, and media pictures showing council leaders slugging it out nationally don't persuade the locals that this is what they are doing. So, the campaign must strike a proper balance between national unity and local action.

Trade union action is often pitted against community needs as a short-term campaign tactic. But who really gains? The community loses out because they are deprived of their services or access to shiny new neighbourhood officies, voluntary services are also hit with the result that their Labour councillor backers lose credibility. Trade union action has to be seen in the context of the community – the council employs thousands of workers many of whom live outside Islington, but the council serves tens of thousands who do live within Islington – it is their support which must be fostered and maintained first and foremost.

So how to learn from '85, overwhelm today's cynicism, and win community support? This campaign should be more than balloons and slogans, it should be more than tatty signs on lamp posts that go yellow with age. The best campaign involves the people who are at the heart of the issue itself. Neighbourhood offices should be seen as the campaign centres. We need a campaign out in the community not behind oak, brass and marble. Through public meetings in and around these offices people can come to know how council money is spent, how it is divided across wards, what services are priorities. For this education process to work the facts must be straight, the budgets clear, and the jobs and services well presented.

The more people feel their views are involved in council decisions, the more they'll feel like they own them, and the more they'll feel like defending them. But people won't buy what they don't believe and they will be suspicious of fudge because it smells of fear and poor management. Openness and clarity shows confidence and strength. We don't want "creative fudge". We want a community campaign – by the people and for them.

Joel Cayford

BRIEFING

GUIDE TO RATECAPPING — YEAR TWO



Tim Rigby

On July 25th, the government announced the twelve authorities to be included in next year's ratecapping hitlist. Ten authorities stay there for the second year. Four including Sheffield and the token Tory authority, Portsmouth, are removed. Liverpool and Newcastle appear on the list for the first time. In addition the government has limited the precepts of twenty post-abolition authorities, including the ILEA.

Decisions now need to be made on the best strategy to protect jobs and services and to finance expansion to meet unmet needs. The ratecapped authorities had until 15th October to apply for redetermination. Last year they refused to do so, because of the strings attached. This year the rules have been relaxed and ten authorities have made a joint approach to Kenneth Baker. Local parties need to determine their manifesto strategies before selecting candidates for the May 1986 borough elections.

It is not the purpose of this piece to dwell upon the failings of the last year. Last year's Briefing Guide highlighted some of the practical problems of the 'refusal to fix a rate' strategy. Those difficulties were not resolved, and the ratecapped authorities never agreed whether their strategy was one of refusal or deferral of the decision to fix a rate. The government could gloat as one by one, Labour Councils fixed rates amidst growing acrimony. To date the government has failed in the objective of securing cuts in jobs and services.

Kenneth Baker faces problems. On 4th October, the Court of Appeal ruled in an action brought by Bradford and Nottinghamshire, that the calculations for 1984/5 block grant penalties were illegal. He had illegally differentiated between authorities on the basis of their past spending records. An appeal may be permitted to the House of Lords. If the decision stands, most of the rate-capped authorities penalised last year in their award of block grant will be able to claim a financial windfall. Until the legal position is clarified (the appeal took seven months to be heard), Baker faces a situation of total uncertainty.

District auditor in difficulties

There are also signs that the District Auditor may be in difficulties in his actions against Liverpool and Lambeth. The losses currently certified against them relate to loss of housing benefit subsidies and loss on interest on Crown rates. Camden recently threatened to bring a test case claiming that the cancellation of the housing benefits payments was unlawful. The DHSS have accepted this and have now made up the loss. This decision should destroy half the District Auditor's case, and severely discredit the remaining half. It is thought that the Audit Commission have not welcomed the manner in which they have been forced to intervene in the political battle between Central and local government, and that a loss in the courts would be seen as an appropriate rebuff to the government.

The final element of uncertainty is that of Liverpool. It is impossible to predict how events will evolve there. Were Liverpool to be bankrupted, the shivers would affect all local and central government finance. Liverpool's lone stand together with their brand of politics, creates the risk that they will be isolated by the Labour leadership, and picked off by the government.

The Option of Compliance.

The preferred option of the national Labour leadership is clearly one of compliance in such a way as to minimise cuts in jobs and services. The government in many ways have precluded this option. Ratecap limits have remained almost constant in cash terms for a second year. Cuts of 16.2% are being demanded of Camden in real terms from its 1984/5 budget. In the world of practical politics, cuts of this order could not be achieved in one year without resort to creative accountancy or other such measures.

Deficit Budgeting.

The rate-capped authorities have yet to resolve whether deficit budgetting is a policy of fudge and survival or one of illegality and confrontation. Most rate-capped authorities finally fixed rates with a deficit of expenditure exceeding income. It is probable that all, save for non-ratecapped Liverpool, will survive the year with legal budgets. A combination of creative accountancy and GLC stress borough funding have enabled them to bridge the gap between income and expenditure.

A Deficit Budget for Survival.

Camden next year faces a deficit of £30.5 million between its base budget of £147.9m and its ratecapped limit of £117.4m. These figures ignore the uncertainties of the transfer of GLC functions, or any element of growth to meet 1986 manifesto commitments. The gap is at first sight insurmountable, even with some token relaxation on redetermination.

The last year has demonstrated that local government finance is an imprecise science. Concepts of creative accountancy have been developed. Some measures have been applied. Others remain to be considered. The short term advantages, however, increasingly generate problems for the future.

It would not be impossible for ratecapped authorities to fudge through the next year, or even to a general election in 1987, without cuts in jobs and services. The strategy carries the risk of moving into illegality, but the borderline would be difficult to define. The deficit budget, coupled with a clause calling for further consideration of measures to bridge the deficit, would minimise the risk that the legality of the rate would be challenged.

A Deficit Budget for Confrontation.

It is generally accepted that whatever merits the option of refusing to fix a rate, such an option is no longer a realistic one next year in view of the debacle of the past year. Deficit budgetting is therefore seen as the policy of confrontation. As mentioned last year, such an option is very similar to that of refusal to fix a rate. A rate fixed on the basis of a clearly stated deficit budget would be an illegal rate. An authority is under a duty to fix a rate sufficient to finance planned expenditure. On the basis of recent experience, a ratepayer could seek an injunction preventing such an illegal motion from being tabled. Officers could refuse to implement such an illegal decision, themselves being liable to surcharge. The rate would be open to challenge in the courts. Individual ratepayers could simply not pay on the basis that the rate demand was unlawful.

These scenarios are mentioned merely to indicate that the confrontation would be likely to arise at the height of the 1986 borough elections. This year's experience does not indicate that unity could be maintained. This strategy would inevitably result in surcharge and disqualification.

This option cannot be contemplated without resolving how staff would react when faced with dismissal or redundancy notices as the confrontation escalated. There is little reason to expect any industrial action apart from token days of action which merely disrupt the services to be protected and ease the Council's financial position.

Abrogation of Power.

Options of majority opposition or mass resignations have been discussed. They have been rejected on the grounds that the party should remain in power to minimise cuts in jobs and services.

There is an argument that there is no purpose in remaining in power if the government's ratecapping measures make it impossible to implement the policies on which the Council was elected. Remaining in power has split councillor from councillor, councillor from party member and council from their unions. These have deflected any sustained campaign against the government.

The logic of this argument is that the rate-capped authorities should not contest the 1986 elections and urge a boycott by electors on the ground that local democracy is dead. A grass-roots campaign with tenants, unions and community groups could then be waged against the discredited Council.

The objection to such an option remains that an Alliance or Tory Council would carry out greater cuts than even a Labour one complying with the legislation. Equally any other option resulting in disqualification would enable the opposition parties on the Council to process cuts while byelections were organised.

The likely strategy.

Ratecapped authorities still seem to be recovering from the bloodbaths of earlier this year. They seem to be avoiding firm decisions for the year ahead. The likely option is that of deficit budgeting with the choice between the formula for survival and that for confrontation. The decision to apply for redetermination indicates a preference for survival. As the 1986 borough elections loom, the message is likely to echo that service delivery is as important as the financial niceties of ratecapping. How good are the services that the ratecapped authorities are seeking to maintain?

Robert Latham,
(Camden Councillor)

STOP PRESS

Since this article was written, it is apparent that Kenneth Baker is reneging on the assurances given by Patrick Jenkin on redetermination. The risks of applying for redetermination seem the same as last year and it is now probable that no authority will make a formal application, though a number of authorities are making informal approaches.

RL

REDETERMINATION? NO DETERMINATION!

Kevin Veness,
(Association of London LGCs)

By the time this issue of Briefing hits the streets, the time limit as originally fixed by the government for application to the Secretary of State for the Environment for redetermination of the expenditure levels (under the 1984 Rates Act) for rate-capped authorites will have passed, as the original date was October 15.

It is still the policy of the Greater London Labour Party that Councils should not go for derogation (i.e. seek redetermination). However it now seems likely that most rate-capped London Labour councils will go their own way, on the grounds of protecting their own positions – at the expense of unity on this issue.

Last year there was common agreement that derogation was not acceptable and this position was held by all the London rate-capped authorites, as well as others such as Sheffield. Already this year Newcastle have stated their clear intention to see Kenneth Baker and by now we should know which London Councils have opted to do so.

It is now impossible to see how some council leaders can still argue that there is no chance that expenditure levels will be reduced by opening their books to Baker. He has quite clearly stated (October 3rd) when referring to only reducing levels if a substantial amount of padding was revealed in the budget, that "By padding I was referring, as my predecessor did last year, to allocations within the budget in which it appears possible to make reductions, for example *where budgeted provision seems unrealistically high*". (i.e. wherever Baker cares to choose!). And added to that, there is no chance of redetermination on a particular aspect of expenditure, as some council leaders have argued, as Baker has stated (October 3rd again) that "I need to look at the overall financial position of an authority – as indeed the authority itself will have done in deciding whether or not to apply".

The real question is that if authorites are prepared to make their own decisions about derogation then how are we to produce a unified strategy for 1986 – and where does that leave those parties in Boroughs expecting to take control in 1986?

London Letters

WORDS, WORDS AND MORE WORDS

Dear Briefing,

Richard Cotton's attack on Piers Corbyn in October Briefing, provides a prime example of the 'vocabulary of deceit', which Piers was criticising in the September issue.

In lieu of a reasoned argument for the shelving of political differences in order to unite and win the next election, Cotton weaves a tapestry of undefined images, depicting the working classes as a monolithic, voting mass who are being driven away from Labour by the activities of a few out-of-touch, middle-class sociologists who come from red-brick universities to impose their wild ideas on the party.

Chains of loose concepts link 'us' to 'the working classes', 'practical socialism', unity and victory, while 'they' are associated with middle-classness, factionalism, sociological theory and electoral defeat. These groupings of ideas are then held together by inaccurate assertions, such as that 'they were largely responsible for the loss of the last election and for Labour's decline in Bermondsey, and that only 'practical socialism', whatever that may mean, can save the working-classes from suffering another term of Thatcherism.

The notion that real political differences can be shelved in order to put together a glossy manifesto and convince the electorate that Labour can govern is one which will be put over with increasing force as we near the next election. The secret of success would seem to be an ability to appear firm, decisive and committed while actually promising nothing and avoiding controversy – an exercise in outdoing the SDP in blandness.

To deny political conflict in this way is to deny that there are real divisions between cultures, races, sexes and classes – the Labour party cannot reflect the needs of the oppressed without giving expression to these differences. It is insulting to assume that 'working-class people' (however Cotton defines them) are going to be conned into voting Labour by an image-building exercise. Livingstone, whom he so admires, did not become influential by avoiding controversy, and was viciously attacked by many within the party in very similar vein to that of Cotton's attack on Piers Corbyn.

In this light, Cotton's 'practical socialism' begins to show its true meaning – pure pragmatism and opportunism; a cover under which careerist politicians and trade-union bureaucrats can follow Kinnock to victory while making no real commitment to defending the interests of women, ethnic minorities, the low-paid, the peace movement, or even the trade unions.

Yours,

Jan Wallcraft
(Hornsey and Wood Green CLP)

Briefing on the wrong side

SHOULDN'T Martin McGrath have signed himself with his proper political credentials – LCC activist – when replying to our criticism of Briefing's role in the political collapse of the local government left? (letters, October).

Then I suppose it's easier for an LCCer to defend Briefing's record than to defend the record of the LCC!

McGrath's 'defence' of Briefing takes the form of a tiresomely 'clever' exercise in high-school logic-chopping which excuses everything and everyone involved in the fiasco by reducing the political questions to an undifferentiated sludge. For McGrath, with his cliche about no-one having a monopoly on truth, there are no lessons to be learned, no responsibilities to lay at anyone's door – except SO's. Since we were right, we are responsible – if anyone is – and he refuses to include us in his general amnesty. Since we are unforgiving, we alone shall be refused absolution.

The left in local government has suffered a series of defeats, betrayals and fiascos. Serious people would try to assess the reasons why in the hope that they might learn to know and do better next time. So we have to examine the stages of the development of the local government left from at least the late '70s to the recent collapses; to review the basic decisions on policy and orientation at the key turning points; to trace backwards the steps that led the local government left to ignominious collapse; to review the disputes within the left and see if they tell us anything; and finally to assess the groups, subdivisions, and individuals on the left in so far as they had anything to say on local government.

We criticised the statement by Briefing's editors in response to Livingstone's betrayal because it didn't do any of that. Yet, as our article outlined in some detail, the Briefing editors had gone along with Livingstone at many of the crucial turning points, failing to criticise or differentiate or to draw any of the long-obvious conclusions until Livingstone was ready to kick dust in their faces.

The Guardian correspondent John Carvel noted: "On or about January 12 1982, Livingstone's GLC went legit". Livingstone maintained a left-wing profile by means also described by Carvel: "His ploy was to put forward an outrageous proposition, knowing full well it would not be accepted – not really believing it himself... He was more or less saying: for heaven's sake don't vote for this. And of course it would be defeated".

Carvel is just an honest journalist. Socialists with the responsibility to know what's going in the world that we are trying to learn how to change should be able to see at least as clearly. Yet Briefing went along with Livingstone.

More basic, however, is the fact that in 1979-80 the then broad left split into two clear tendencies on local government policy: Briefing emerged as the organ of one side of that divide, Socialist Organiser the other.

We argued that the choice was between an orientation towards confrontation with the Tories, using local government as a base for mobilisation, or business-as-usual Labour local government with left frills. To pass on Tory cuts obliquely, through rate rises, was, we argued, the radical opposite of a fighting policy.

Briefing defended rate rises, as a method of redistributing income or at least as a means to gain time.

The majority of the left in local government went along with Briefing. We predicted this would lead to fiascos; and so it did.

And yet we failed to avert that outcome. McGrath is quite right that this is a grievous fault. Being right is not enough: it is necessary to control events, i.e. to convince enough people of your ideas.

Why didn't we? No doubt we had faults and failings. Fundamentally, however, we were up against the apparatus controlled by demagogues on the make like Livingstone and others. We were a comparatively small tendency advocating a harder option than the satisfying delusion of taking and exercising local 'power', backed both by the apparatus men and women and by others such as Briefing.

Our weaknesses were grievous, but less grievous than being on the wrong side of the argument, as Briefing was. Groups like the LCC are in a different league altogether.

John O'Mahony

MARCH AGAINST RACISM

Support the Asian Community
Saturday 19th October, 11am
Assemble by Coronation Gardens, Buckingham Rd, E10
(Leyton tube)
RALLY with speakers
Organised by Community Action Against Racism, c/o TURC, 26 St James Street, London E17. Tel: 520 4333

LONDON LABOUR BRIEFING

Reporting London's news
— and making it!

Annual subscription
£6

LABOUR – TAKE THE POWER!

SUBSCRIPTIONS

NAME . . . . . .

ADDRESS . . . . . .

Please send to Central Books Ltd., 14, Leathermarket, London SE1. (Cheques payable to "Central Books Ltd").

Lesbian & Gay Young Socialists
39, Chippenham Road, London W9 2AH
01-286 4823

Next London Editorial Board:
Tuesday 26th November
at 6.30pm at County Hall.

Typeset by Bread N Roses [TU] and by Lithoprint [TU]. Printed by Wernham Printers Ltd [TU]
Published by Labour Briefing, 162 Millfields Road, London E5.