

The 'Kinnock Moment' Myth

In the run-up to party conference, Labour right-wingers are salivating at the prospect of another public war on the Left – but Neil Kinnock's actual record as leader demonstrates why that is a dead end.



Kinnock's 1985 conference speech is remembered for on an extended verbal assault on Liverpool city council. (Credit: Getty Images)

As this year's Labour Party conference draws nearer, observers on both the socialist left and the Blairite right of the party are wondering with some anxiety what Keir Starmer's conference speech will have in store. One fears and the other hopes that—with Starmer's warm words about party unity during the last leadership contest now a distant memory—this could be his 'Kinnock moment'. It is even being [referenced enthusiastically](#) in all-staff meetings. And, of course, there is never any shortage of encouragement in this direction from the press, always eager to stamp out any lingering embers of socialism in Labour.

What they mean by this is a modern-day equivalent of Neil Kinnock's [speech](#) to the 1985 conference in Bournemouth, the centrepiece of which was an extended verbal assault on his own movement, calculated to win the favour of the media. The [peroration](#) of Kinnock's speech, and the only part anyone really remembers, was devoted to an attack on Militant—a favourite punching bag of the press at the time—a few months after the Labour council in Liverpool, on which Militant had a major influence, had passed an illegal budget.

Kinnock, like Starmer nearly four decades later, had been elected party leader in 1983 soon after a traumatic election defeat. Again like Starmer, Kinnock won the leadership promising party unity—he formed half of the so-called 'dream ticket', alongside deputy leader Roy Hattersley, then the

intellectual doyen of the right. As a protégé of Michael Foot and heir apparent to Bevanism, Kinnock still had a reputation as a man of the left, even if he had pointedly refused to back Tony Benn's deputy leadership challenge to Denis Healey in 1981.

As Leo Panitch and Colin Leys recount in their history of Labour's new left, [Searching for Socialism](#), the left was already divided and demoralised even before the 1983 election and the subsequent leadership contest. A section of the Tribune Group, including Kinnock, had abstained in the contest between Benn and Healey, ensuring a very narrow victory for the latter. This contest proved to be the high watermark for Bennism, which went into decline thereafter; by the following year, the right had regained control of the National Executive.

But with intellectual ballast provided by *Marxism Today*, a realignment was underway with some erstwhile Bennites gravitating towards the soft left. Despite Kinnock's earlier refusal to support Benn, his signature policy positions—including his avowed support for unilateral nuclear disarmament—appeared to make him an acceptable compromise candidate. As Panitch and Leys put it: 'He offered "unity plus", the "plus" being a youthful leader offering a modernised party apparatus better able to campaign for left policies.'

At a time when a deeply reactionary and intensely ideological Tory government was laying waste to the welfare state and waging all-out war on the trade union movement, this seemed to most like a good compromise to make in return for turfing Thatcher out posthaste. But far from providing left-wing policies with more energetic and youthful advocacy, and a more professional party machine, the hallmark of Kinnock's leadership would be increasingly acidic attacks on his own side intended to curry favour with the press.

Kinnock's aversion to movement politics—including both the new social movements of the time and the more militant incarnations of trade unionism—saw him turn his face against the Labour left's experiments in municipal socialism, and not just that of Militant in Liverpool. Kinnock's advisers privately fretted about the Labour-run Greater London Council's overt sympathy for the burgeoning LGBT rights movement; in an internal memo, Patricia Hewitt complained that 'the gays and lesbians issue is costing us dear among the pensioners'.

Eventually, Margaret Thatcher would herself rid Kinnock of the turbulent Labour GLC by abolishing it—amid great controversy and some disquiet even among the Tory ranks—in 1986. That came after Kinnock had vacillated over the [miners' strike of 1984-85](#), which became the decisive industrial battle of the post-war era in Britain. While Kinnock was himself a coalfield MP in Islwyn, the strike threatened to derail his modernisation project and, sensing discomfort, the Tories relentlessly badgered him to disown the NUM leadership.

Kinnock found excuses to keep the miners at arm's length: in particular, those instances of picket-line violence which occurred. [Addressing](#) the 1984 Labour conference in Blackpool, he made a point of distancing himself from the miners, claiming to 'abominate' violence 'without fear or favour'. But the violence of a minority of pickets paled in comparison to that inflicted on miners by Thatcher's militarised and nakedly thuggish police. Even now, the current Tory government still refuses to grant a public inquiry into the police riot [at Orgreave](#).

In [the view](#) of Peter Mandelson—Labour's director of communications in 1985—Kinnock's Bournemouth speech 'forced the public to take a second look and revise their opinion of him'. If it did, they soon decided they didn't much like what they saw: in the 1987 general election, despite much self-congratulation in Labour's ranks about supposedly 'winning the campaign', the party made only minor headway in terms of parliamentary seats – coming away with only an extra twenty seats compared to the dire showing of four years earlier.

Even more disappointing was the 1992 general election, a Tory win against the odds. Thatcher had

been driven out of office and replaced by John Major in 1990, with the Tories tearing themselves apart over Europe and having overreached with the poll tax, which a mass non-payment campaign forced them to abandon. Though long since shorn of its Benn-era policy radicalism, and with its left wing marginalised, Labour still proved unable to capitalise on the Tories' woes, compelling Kinnock to resign after nearly nine years.

Even the defeat of the poll tax had little to do with the Labour leadership. Kinnock had opposed the poll tax but ordered Labour councils to collect it; as Simon Hannah discusses in [his history](#) of the campaign, some of those councils prosecuted non-payers with considerable alacrity, imprisoning many. It was therefore left, ironically, to Kinnock's sworn adversaries in Militant—along with other Trotskyist and anarchist groups, plus some left-led CLPs—to fill the vacuum of providing opposition.

But regardless of his electoral failures, Kinnock is celebrated by the Labour right today for having paved the way for New Labour by reducing the Labour left to an impotent rump. (It conveniently forgets that, after initially supporting Blair, Kinnock became a persistent, if ineffectual critic of New Labour, and famously celebrated Ed Miliband's leadership win in 2010 by saying 'we've got our party back'.) In the Labour right's mind, this is still the model to follow: first, there's a Kinnock to clear out the 'Trots', then eventually there's a Blair.

The tragedy of Neil Kinnock's leadership, however, is that attacking his own side is the only thing anyone now celebrates him for. Even the bulk of Kinnock's Bournemouth speech comprised a lengthy indictment of Thatcherism, but few remember that. And as Thatcher ripped like a hurricane through the labour movement's hard-won post-war gains—the welfare state, near-full employment, and trade union rights—Kinnock chose to lay into those within his own ranks desperately trying to mount some sort of defence.

After eighteen months of Starmer, a similar pattern is again apparent. Once more, we find ourselves up against a revanchist, right-wing Tory government deeply hostile to any opposition and contemptuous of civil liberties. Already, it has rammed the [Spy Cops Bill](#) through—Starmer, to his eternal shame, ordered his MPs to [abstain](#) on it—and next month, is set to deprive six million Universal Credit claimants of [more than £1,000 a year](#) by revoking the miserly £20 weekly 'uplift' introduced at the start of the pandemic.

But it's hard to detect any real indignation about this from the Labour frontbench. Instead, the priority has been giving the left in general, and Jeremy Corbyn in particular, a public kicking. Recently, Young Labour has been subjected to a barrage of smears and snide insinuations, culminating in a [shambolic attempt](#) to investigate its chair, Jess Barnard. So desperate were party bureaucrats to find an excuse to discipline Barnard, they didn't bother to establish whether their charges made any sense, and were forced to [back down](#).

Those who urge Starmer to emulate Kinnock are—and the cynics among them know this—likely writing off his chances of ever becoming prime minister. Rather, they want to use him as a cudgel against the left, making it effectively impossible for any grassroots Corbyn-style insurgency to gain ground within the Labour Party ever again. If that means the next few years are taken up with internecine warfare above all else, so be it. But far from being a prisoner of the right, Starmer has shown himself to be more than willing to do their bidding.

Stuart Hall had it right nearly four decades ago: 'The right of the labour movement, to be honest, has no ideas of any compelling quality, except the instinct for short-term political survival... The only "struggle" it engages in with any trace of conviction is the one against the left.' Remarkably, even Neil Kinnock himself recently [suggested](#) Labour might be better off devoting more energy to opposing the Tories than to purging its own ranks. But on the evidence so far, only an incurable optimist would expect Starmer to take heed.