CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Modern, Revisionist Labour Party

HUGH GAITSKELL'S LEGACY

By the close of 1962 Gaitskell's ascendancy in the Party was complete. His personal victory over unilateralism at the 1961 Annual Conference had established him as a national leader endowed with the politically attractive qualities of courage and determination. His failure to change the Party's constitutional commitment to public ownership was either unknown or largely forgotten in the public mind and the Party as a whole was becoming increasingly identified with his particular brand of reformist, liberal social democracy.

The price of Gaitskell's victory was costly, however. A deep residue of bitterness remained against his policies and his particular style of Leadership. The Left remained suspicious of the new revisionist Labour Party that was emerging and were never totally reconciled to it; although the Common Market debate that raged during the summer and autumn of 1962 served partially to alleviate much of this distrust. Gaitskell's anti-Market speech at the Annual Conference at Brighton in 1962, his last major address, caused consternation among his supporters but was praised by the Left of the Party. The Brighton address, in one fell swoop, mended many of the Leader's broken fences with the Left. This was the first time in his career that Hugh Gaitskell had sided with the Left on a major policy issue and it also established him, in their eyes, as something more than a tool of a handful of revisionist intellectuals. The reaction to the speech by his revisionist friends,
particularly Roy Jenkins and William Rodgers, reinforced the impression that a real break was imminent.

The Common Market issue, therefore, restored a good deal of the unity that had been shattered in the 1960–1 period. This new-found unity, together with Gaitskell’s increased stature as an alternative Prime Minister, heightened Labour’s popularity in the country. But his popularity was more a result of the Conservative Government’s inadequacy than of changes in Labour’s internal politics. The economic crisis of the summer of 1961 and the restrictive measures taken to cope with it began the long process of Conservative decline and punctured the myth of invulnerability surrounding Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. The drastic reorganisation of the Cabinet undertaken by Macmillan in July 1962 did not succeed in stopping the Conservative decline. Throughout 1962 the Conservatives suffered a disastrous series of by-election defeats and their Gallup Poll ratings, together with those of the Prime Minister, fell to an all-time low. It seemed almost inevitable that Labour would form the next Government and that Hugh Gaitskell would, at last, become Prime Minister of England.

Hugh Gaitskell died on 18 January 1963. In a sense, his death ended an era in British Labour politics. Together with Aneurin Bevan, who had died two and a half years earlier, he had been a prominent figure in British and European left-wing politics for almost two decades. More significantly, he had become the embodiment of an attitude and a philosophy. He had succeeded in merging political power and high principle in a way rarely seen in British politics and had inspired intense loyalty among his followers because of it. His name has been given to a school of political thinkers and to a group of political practitioners.

‘The Gaitskellites’ did not cease as an entity with his death and ‘Gaitskellism’ will continue to have a place while social democracy remains a force in political life. In immediate terms, perhaps, his greatest achievement was to prepare Labour for government and to give it clear and definite leadership during the long years in opposition. Gaitskell’s actual skill as a party politician remains arguable and his ability as a national leader was never tested, yet his Leadership