Labour’s turning point

Paradoxically the 1987 defeat strengthened Neil Kinnock’s position and enabled him to pursue major policy changes. He was far from alone in advocating reform. Shadow Cabinet colleagues like Gerald Kaufman argued the party’s own manifesto had undermined the campaign effort and that Peter Mandelson had merely provided Labour with ‘a whole new style and façade... but, of course it was a facade. You can’t sell something that people don’t want however well you package it’. The Campaigns Director agreed, concluding ‘the product kept seeping through’.¹ According to a more detached account Labour did not ‘market’ itself in 1987 but sought to build a campaign around the ‘peculiar narratives of deprivation and poverty and the moral worth of British socialism’.² Far from undermining the Kinnock leadership, the defeat served to reinforced the party hierarchy’s determination to pursue further reforms. In overseeing the resulting Policy Review, the chosen vehicle for change, Mandelson would become one of the most influential non-elected politicians in Labour history.

The electoral imperative

Following the election, Kinnock launched the Policy Review. The idea had originated from party Director of Research Geoff Bish but it was leadership ally Tom Sawyer who advanced the project as chair of the National Executive Committee (NEC) Home Policy sub-committee. He commissioned a report from Adam Sharples, a researcher with his union NUPE. They concluded that to be successful, a review needed to consider every policy’s electoral relevance to the ‘needs and concerns of groups of voters’.³ Opinion research would be essential to this
process. The report also suggested greater attention be given to target-
ing voters, future social trends, the ‘communications’ imperative’ and the experiences of social democratic parties abroad. The paper gained a sympathetic hearing from an NEC already sympathetic towards plans to ‘woo the affluent worker’. Some were concerned by the proposals and a candid admission by Campaigns Co-ordinator Bryan Gould in which he said: ‘What we ought to be doing is looking at where policies ought to come from, what the demand is, what interests we ought to be serving. In that way we can make sure that the policy includes its popular appeal from the market’. Deputy leader Roy Hattersley castigated such ‘electoralism’ as the ‘SDP approach’ to politics:

> What we do, we send out a lot of marketing men into the country, just as the Democrats in America did 20 years ago, and say, ‘what are the policies people want and then when we find out what they’ll vote for, we’ll write it into our manifesto’ – that is not the sort of politics I want to be involved in.\(^5\)

The NEC placated Hattersley by allowing him to draft a new statement of Labour’s ‘Aims and Values’. But, by comparison with what critics dismissed as his ‘visionary utterance’, polling commissioned for the Review had considerably more influence.\(^6\) From the outset considerable resources were invested in conducting public opinion research. The initial results, contained in a briefing entitled ‘Labour and Britain in the 1990s’, were presented at a joint meeting of Shadow Cabinet and National Executive members held in the T&GWU’s Transport House headquarters on November 20\(^{th}\) 1987. Kinnock’s intention was for the gathering to focus on the declining level of public support for Labour and its policies. In marked contrast with the early 1980s, feedback from voters in the form of research would now become integral to the party decision-making process. Gould, who was centrally involved in the proceedings, commented that this was a ‘defining moment in Labour’s history’.\(^7\)

Peter Mandelson co-ordinated the ‘Labour and Britain in the 1990s’ programme with the help of academics, market researchers and Shadow Communications Agency (SCA) co-ordinators Gould and Deborah Mattinson and several of those involved spoke at the special November meeting. Psephologist Roger Jowell suggested that though the public had not embraced Thatcherite values, many voters were, to use the increasingly commonplace term, aspirational people particu-