IT IS SAFE TO PREDICT THAT THE LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE WILL END WITH PLEDGES OF UNITY TO FIGHT THE TORIES EVERYWHERE EVEN ON TO THE BEACHES. BUT BEHIND THIS ROUTINE RHETORIC LIES HIDDEN THE INABILITY OF THE PARTY'S LEADERSHIP TO MOUNT A CONCIENTOUS OPPOSITION TO THE THATCHER GOVERNMENT.

Over the Falklands/Malvinas, the party's opposition was 'more of the same but with a liberal smile'. On the economy, their reflection-as-miracle solution shows that no lessons have been learnt from the economic disasters under Wilson and Callaghan (who is now trying to win a pension from the trade unions by encouraging them to 'deny the law'). Over Lebanon and Ireland, a ghastly silence hovers over Walworth Road. No doubt conference will pass resolutions wishing love and peace to Palestine and Israel. Catholic and Protestant but these hypocritical calls for togetherness in fact do nothing to disturb the status quo — nor are they meant to.

Although it can make no political capital out of the issue, the leadership is quite pleased to have the conference dominated by the registration of Militant and other political tendencies: at least this debate hides the bankruptcy of the party on other issues. Obviously, Big Flame supports the right of Militant to remain in the Labour Party — though we have no enthusiasm for the content and form of their politics. But we regret how this issue continues to dominate Labour Party politics. This domination makes clear the inability of the libertarian left inside the party to determine or even influence what are its political priorities. The left can gain control of many more CLPs without being able to affect the political direction of the party.

The right wing and centre of the Labour Party and the trade union bureaucracy know that their power to influence political policy has been reduced as a result of thenext elections. A Labour defeat will mean either the vindication of Thatcherism or a coalition government committed to proportional representation. This Labour-TUC alliance has fought dirty in the past and the acquiescence of some party members and dissident CLPs is something which can do even before the first round of cocktails at Brighton or Blackpool. The compromise between the unions and the party will be stitched up yet again: a compromise between the two masters that no other than all the others so many favour that they can't be resisted.

The choice offered the left in the party (with or without Benn who may, yet again decide to defect and join 'his own men') is to pass on or refuse the offer. As preparations are made for the heroic tilt at the Iron lady (sic), those who joined the Labour Party in the belief that it would lead the nationalisation of Britain will be left with a past and maybe a future — but no present. Their attempt to come together to join this social-democratic tx resembles that of a mature parent to a wayward child who refused to grow up. Our answer to them is that it's never too late for a second childhood.