

Press Marries Laborites To Wilson

LONDON -- How long can Harold Wilson hang on? The prevailing belief is that if he wishes to stay on as prime minister, the Labor Party has little real choice except to support him—at least for a while. Some unhappy Labor members of parliament compare their leader to the little man in the poem who really isn't there but still won't go away. Indeed -- paradoxically -- the more unpopular his government becomes, the more difficult it is to talk credibly of changing leaders.

This is not as odd as it may seem. If the anti-Labor swing in last week's local election were repeated in a general election, the party would shrink to a derisive 78-seats out of 630 in the House of Commons. Only three cabinet members could survive a 20 per cent swing against Labor; Education Minister Edward Short, Power Minister Ray Gunter and Economics Minister Peter Shore.

It would thus be an act of collective suicide for disident Laborites to provoke a crisis that would split the party and force an election. Providing he maintains a majority in parliament, Wilson still has three years before he must call an election. Every indication is that the prime minister wants to run the course.

FURTHERMORE, the press campaign against Wilson has helped more than hurt him in parliament, where even Tories are concerned about the way Cecil King used his mass-selling Daily Mirror to try to unmake a prime minister. King's attack revived memories of his imperious uncle Lord Northcliffe, who once also tried to govern Britain from Fleet Street. In the 1930s, Stanley Baldwin said of the press lords: "They seek power without responsibility, the harlot's prerogative through the ages." The remark was frequently quoted over the weekend.

A special further count against King is the belief that he acted mischievously and des-

tructively in asserting that Britain faced its greatest financial crisis in history, while simultaneously resigning as director of the Bank of England. Resentment over press dictation is likely to help the prime minister over some rough bumps this week, the roughest being a threatened party revolt over his government's incomes restraint policy.

A senior backbencher, 63-year-old Emanuel Shawell, said last week he would rather bring the government down rather than see it break with the unions and its working-class supporters. The government may not fall, but it may well barely scrape by in the vote on its all-important incomes policy.

But this is a familiar tactical problem for Wilson, and in the months ahead he faces the more fundamental problem of winning the confidence of his badly-shaken supporters.

Barring surprises, the outlook is that Wilson will continue for the near future to preside over cabinet colleagues whom he largely mistrusts and over a country that demonstrably doesn't trust him. It is for Britain an unusual and unhappy situation. The voters and parliament make—but neither can easily unmake—a British prime minister.



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