

Limehouse Declaration

Issued by Shirley Williams, David Owen, Bill Rodgers and Roy Jenkins to the Press Association on 25th January 1981

The calamitous outcome of the Labour Party Wembley conference demands a new start in British politics. A handful of trade union leaders can now dictate the choice of a future Prime Minister.

The conference disaster is the culmination of a long process by which the Labour Party has moved steadily away from its roots in the people of this country and its commitment to parliamentary government.

We propose to set up a Council for Social Democracy. Our intention is to rally all those who are committed to the values, principles and policies of social democracy.

We seek to reverse Britain's economic decline. We want to create an open, classless and more equal society, one which rejects ugly prejudices based upon sex, race or religion.

A first list of those who have agreed to support the council will be announced at an early date.

Some of them have been actively and continuously engaged in Labour politics. A few were so engaged in the past, but have ceased to be so recently. Others have been mainly active in spheres outside party politics.

We do not believe the fight for the ideals we share and for the recovery of our country should be limited only to politicians. It will need the support of men and women in all parts of our society.

The council will represent a coming together of several streams: politicians who recognise that the drift towards extremism in the Labour Party is not compatible with the democratic traditions of the party they joined and those from outside politics who believe that the country cannot be saved without changing the sterile and rigid framework into which the British political system has increasingly fallen in the last two decades.

We do not believe in the politics of an inert centre merely representing the lowest common denominator between two extremes.

We want more, not less, radical change in our society, but with a greater stability of direction.

Our economy needs a healthy public sector and a healthy private sector without frequent frontier changes.

We want to eliminate poverty and promote greater equality without stifling enterprise or imposing bureaucracy from the centre. We need the innovating strength of a competitive economy with a fair distribution of rewards.

We favour competitive public enterprise, co-operative ventures and profit sharing.

There must be more decentralisation of decision making in industry and government, together with an effective and practical system of democracy at work.

The quality of our public and community services must be improved and they must be made more responsive to people's needs. We do not accept that mass unemployment is inevitable. A number of countries, mainly those with social democratic governments, have managed to combine high employment with low inflation.

Britain needs to recover its self-confidence and be outward-looking, rather than isolationist, xenophobic or neutralist.

We want Britain to play a full and constructive role within the framework of the European Community, Nato, the United Nations and the Commonwealth.

It is only within such a multi-lateral framework that we can hope to negotiate international agreements covering arms control and disarmament and to grapple effectively with the poverty of the Third World.

We recognise that for those people who have given much of their lives to the Labour Party, the choice that lies ahead will be deeply painful. But we believe that the need for a realignment of British politics must now be faced.