

4 STL 02 Oct 94 Focus: Blair's future: The man who saw changes coming - Dean Godson on the death of MARK ABRAMS, a pioneer who spotted the end of the cloth cap era (462)

By DEAN GODSON

ASSIDUOUS readers of obituaries may have spotted the death last week of **MARK ABRAMS**, a pioneer of market research in Britain. But few will have noted the coincidence of his death with Tony Blair's economic relaunch of the Labour Party - so continuing a process begun by **ABRAMS**, and others, more than 30 years ago.

For it was **ABRAMS** who provided the statistical validation for the contention that Labour had no future as a class-based party and that it would have to take account of the new-found affluence of many of its traditional supporters if it was to survive.

In 1960, along with Richard Rose, (later a leading academic) and Rita Hinden (editor of the pro-Gaitskellite journal *Socialist Commentary*) **ABRAMS** co-authored *Must Labour Lose?* As in 1992, Labour had just suffered a fourth, and unexpected, electoral setback. Its cloth cap image, combined with its identification with nationalisation, had cost it dear in the 1959 General Election.

Some of the party's younger 'revisionists', most notably Anthony Crosland - then as much a hate figure for the Left as Peter Mandelson is today - had questioned the traditional role of Labour in a society in which mass poverty had been alleviated.

Douglas Jay, another intimate of Gaitskell, wanted to scrap Clause Four of Labour's constitution, committing it to public ownership, to attenuate the trade union link and even to change the party's name. Another friend of Gaitskell, Woodrow Wyatt, advocated an electoral pact with the Liberals. But it was **ABRAMS** and his co-authors who popularised the sociological data which proved that Labour had to change. **ABRAMS** contended that the numbers of working class people were declining and that the values of those left behind were also changing.

Blue collar jobs were disappearing, home ownership was spreading and - the 1960 survey portrayed a better educated population anxious to pursue individual fulfilment and opportunity.

In the end, Gaitskell lost his fight to drop Clause Four. But the work of **ABRAMS** and his colleagues did for a while help to eradicate Labour's backward-looking image thus securing victory in 1964. Gone were such *Daily Mirror* slogans as 'Ask Your Dad' - a reference to inter-war unemployment. Instead, the party won on the hyperactive slogan 'Let's Go With Labour'. In fact working class support remained the basis of Labour's victory and it went on to win four of the next five General Elections. In spotting some of these trends towards 'embourgeoisification', **Abrams's** analysis might have been even more applicable to the era of Mr Blair than it was to that of Harold Wilson.