

LABOUR IN



CRISIS

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CHAPTER ONE

The Conservative Culture and the Left in Britain Today

There can be few people in Britain today who are not to some extent fearful of the future. Not that we are all **consciously** or **continuously** concerned with what is happening either to us or around us. For the most part care and interest ebb and flow with the stimulus of some occasional direct experience, or perhaps even as a result of some significant media influence. Otherwise most people live on the periphery of politics, collecting only vague general impressions of what is going on, and why.

For the least fortunate — the poor and economically insecure, the unemployed and those on short time, the low paid, the pensioners, the chronically sick and the disabled, and those who are clearly discriminated against (and what a substantial proportion of the population these groups represent today), for all these people, the anxiety must be more acute and more constant. But even their plight does not automatically engender a sustained political concern. Nor does it guarantee a well-informed opinion. For they, too, tend to develop mainly **general impressions** which are the basis of whatever political motivation they may have.

So the primary and abiding concern of most people is not with the stuff of politics; with the organisation and administration of the political and economic institutions of society. Unexceptionally, what most people seem to want is a reasonable standard of living, security, and freedom from the threat of unemployment — or rather freedom from the threat of any serious downturn in their income as a result of unemployment, ill-health, old age or whatever. They want the provision of facilities for the welfare and development of themselves and their families. They want freedom from oppression, from molestation and violence both as individuals and as a community, and for that matter, as a nation. They want entertainment and the pleasurable things in life. Indeed, it is **precisely** these very reasonable desires that are played upon by those who wish to promote support for, or hostility towards political and economic ideas, groups, organisations, institutions and other nation states.

However, it is not merely people's desires, nor even the perceived gap between what is and what might be, but also, and most importantly, the assumed causes of these discrepancies which constitute the key factors

in political attitude. These, therefore, are of the utmost concern, both to those who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, and to those of us who are seeking to change it. Of course, the outlook, attitudes and perceptions of people will vary with such things as education, lifestyle, individual and collective experience, media influence, political ideas and the quality of leadership associated with the dissemination of ideas. But in a long established and relatively stable society, with a deep-rooted and well served conservatism, the ideas and values veined throughout the working class are likely to reflect the common conservative culture of that society.

From this standpoint we can see how the very reasonable concerns of working people can stimulate very unreasonable attitudes. Working class alarm at the apparent increase in violence, worry about the economy, fear of unemployment, concern over such things as the shortage of decent housing or the inadequacies of the Health Service can, and frequently do, encourage a willingness to look for scapegoats, to listen to simplistic argument and explanations and accept anti-social solutions. In this way racialism, a general "hanging and flogging" approach to crime and its prevention, and even a working class anti-trade unionism are fostered, especially in the absence of any strong, publicly-aired alternative explanations and credible prescriptions from the left.

It is essential that democratic socialists intent on creating a movement towards a new social order start by recognising this problem. They must also acknowledge that working class conservatism and the prevalence of anti-socialist attitudes and ideas are not mere media creations. True, we have had a bad press; but the working class has also been given bad examples and suffered bad experiences. Keynesian state intervention; rate and taxation levels which have been costly to the working class without making substantial inroads into real wealth; capitalist state control and Morrisonian and inefficient nationalisation; centralised, bureaucratic, remote and inadequate welfare services, all of which are, rightly or wrongly, associated with the Labour Party and consequently with socialism, have, in the context of Britain, arguably done more harm than good to the socialist cause. Even the co-operative movement, as it has operated within the context of our market economy, has failed to encourage support for the collectivist, co-operative outlook. Meanwhile the disastrous political and economic example of the so-called Soviet Socialist Republic has engendered enough concern, fear and hostility to convince many people that they want no truck with communism or anything that appears to incline in a similar direction.

If we add to this the failures of Labour Governments, and the sectionalised self-interest of the trade unions (which presents a paradox which can all too easily be exploited to our disadvantage), and underline all that with a crucial lack of effective socialist leadership, then it is just possible to begin to understand something of the scale of the problem

with which we, as democratic socialists, are confronted.

In fact, there is little or no support for traditional socialism among the working class, and even that residual idealism about the welfare state, which came originally from a wide spectrum of society, has been undermined by the cost, inefficiency, injustice and bureaucratic remoteness of state provision. This, allied to what is seen as the excessive growth of trade union power among certain sections of the working class, has clearly helped to produce the seed corn of SDP support.

It is against this background that changes on the electoral scene are taking place; in particular the emergence of the Social Democratic Party and the correspondingly poor showing of the Labour Party (even prior to the Falklands Crisis) in mid-term of a Conservative Government. The seriousness of the electoral threat from the SDP-Liberal Alliance is uncertain, particularly at this time and with so many imponderables and as of now, we can perhaps do no better than to plan for the worst, while working and hoping to avoid a disaster. What we should not do, however, is underestimate the current attractions of such '**moderate conservatism**' even amongst Labour voters. We should not dismiss this support for centre politics as some very temporary aberration on the part of a large section of the community. For it is not this. It is the expression, temporary or otherwise, of a very real and more permanent underlying phenomena that has its roots in the continuing conservative culture of our society.

It is perhaps ironic that, for the time being, this "conservatism" seems also to be bolstered by a popular desire for some kind of national unity, collective identity and co-operation. It most clearly embodies a degree of hostility to some sectionalised interest groups and the class based ideological politics of the left which appear only to offer the unattractive prospect of increased conflict, which may in turn further threaten economic prosperity. And yet, as we know, the Alliance leans towards the politics that sustain the very system that maintains class and ensures the continuation of conflict, while Margaret Thatcher conducts class warfare relentlessly.

Political optimism of the left

It is obvious that socialists cannot and should not capitulate to popular conservatism. But such a conservatism does suggest a certain caution and raises serious doubts about the political optimism, and some of the actions and publicly declared attitudes which flow from that political optimism, of some on the left.

It should, for instance, lead us to be heavily critical of left wing public pronouncements which can find little or no concordance amongst the working class and which are unnecessarily inflammatory. Take, for

example, the statement made by the controversial parliamentary candidate and Militant member, Pat Wall, just prior to the Hillhead by-election. In the circumstances, to say, as he did, that in the event of a socialist Labour Government there is the possibility of "civil war and terrible death and destruction and bloodshed" could only be construed as politically juvenile and electorally suicidal. Unfortunately, Pat Wall would most likely disagree — not only with this comment on his remarks, but more importantly with our notion of working class conservatism and the lack of immediate potential support for socialist policies and such ultra-left pronouncements which this implies.

Even more unfortunate, and certainly more significant, has been the response of much of the rest of the Labour left, which does after all politically and numerically dwarf the Militant tendency. All too often this left appears confused and inconsistent in its approach to the working class. Sometimes the conservatism is acknowledged, but frequently only by implication; sometimes it is ignored; and often it is simply denied. It is almost as if the left believe that the clear acknowledgement of a working class conservatism challenges the very notion of class politics; or otherwise denies the necessity for, or the hope of eventual mass support for socialism, which, of course, it does not. It merely lays bare the essential distinction between long term potential and existing condition. Nevertheless, the very suggestion that working people may harbour reactionary ideas and attitudes can provoke extreme hostility from certain sections on the left of the labour movement. Such views, they seem to suggest, are tantamount to political treachery; at the very least they betray a lack of confidence in working people. They underestimate, so we are told, the intrinsic political good sense of the working class!

Unfortunately, the result of denying working class conservatism, or underestimating its significance, strength and depth, is to produce a flawed perspective. This is most evident in the case of Militant and some other Trotskyist groups which ally a crude conflict theory of social change with unreal assumptions about the immediate political potential of the working class.

A good example of this is to be found in a resolution adopted by the Campaign for Democracy in the Labour Movement (CDLM) (not to be confused with the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy — CLPD). The CDLM was originally a front organisation for the Workers Socialist League (WSL) whose members later joined the Socialist Organiser Alliance inside the Labour Party. At a meeting in July 1980 it was, they said, their "considered opinion" that: —

"During the steel strike a powerful movement developed for a general strike to bring the Thatcher government down ... But the TUC remained fundamentally opposed to it ... The TUC leaders recognised that the steel workers had developed quickly beyond

their leaders. United strike action by BSC, BL and dock workers would have posed immediately the need for united forms and organs of struggle between these sections, and opened directly the perspective of the united struggle of the whole working class, through action committees and Councils of Action — behind a policy of bringing down the government. In these conditions broad layers of workers could have moved in a revolutionary direction.

"This would spell danger not only for Thatcher but for the bureaucrats whose privileged positions rest on the continued existence and equilibrium of capitalism.

"This is the material reason why these leaders deliberately confine the working class to protest politics. Even when their protest actions confirm the willingness of the working class to fight."

Here substantial sections of the working class were seen as being on the verge of revolutionary development — light years away from where we locate them.

It can, of course, be argued that this is not a fair example of the policies of the Labour left and that such a statement is typical only of the "insurrectionary" left which wishes to transform the Labour Party into a revolutionary vanguard pursuing a form of politics that presupposes an eventual uprising and seizure of power. For the most part, it will be maintained, the broader left **would not** endorse such a crass statement.

However, whilst this may be true, in practice the views of alternative Labour lefts have not always been clearly distinguishable from the general outlook of such tendencies as the "Weasels" (WSL) and "Militant". Indeed, there has been a failure to clarify the essential difference between a number of political perspectives. Instead, popular differentiation of groups has all too frequently been made on the basis of a general impression of some unimportant organisational factor, rather than on political outlook.

This helps those who deliberately seek to lump the left together for their own political advantage. It further encourages the tendency of some Party members, and trade union delegates, to become engaged in technicalities about the legitimacy of organised groups within the Labour Party, rather than the correctness of their particular ideas, perspective and tactics. In the subsequent confusion surrounding left tendencies the tolerant, but quite resolute, traditional socialist left, which seeks to establish a democratic socialist Labour Party, is often not distinguished from the less tolerant left, which threatens to polarise, purge and split the Party. This undifferentiated left is thus linked, en bloc, in people's minds with anti-parliamentary and insurrectionist politics, and then subjected to a blanket attack from the right. This is made easier, not simply because the left frequently make common cause, as they should,

but more fundamentally because very many of them do tend to share certain key assumptions, the most important of which frequently relate to crude notions about the working class.

In general much of the Labour left hold views which, if not explicitly, are implicitly over-optimistic about the more immediate potential of the working class. This is evident in the frequently expressed belief that a transformed leadership and uncompromising socialist policies are the best guarantee of a Labour victory at the next general election. It is also to some extent confirmed by the hostile reaction to anyone doubting the political benefit to be gained from extending the political influence of the trade union rank and file within the Labour Party.

This misplaced optimism is not always part of a thoroughgoing and consciously held perspective. In fact there are those on the left who genuinely appear to have no consciously worked out perspective whatsoever and who do **not** even see the need for one. For them the prevailing left policies, opinions or campaigns provide the sole guidelines for determining action and alliances; and when these become ill-defined, so do they.

Established conventional conservative and "liberal" reforming attitudes have long existed to provide a "common sense" guide for those on the right of politics. They, in short, can readily embrace pragmatism; the mere fact of being part of a society provides rough and ready notions on how to proceed. Not so the socialist, for whom socialist alternative political perspective is essential. Unfortunately, something close to a **left wing pragmatism** seems to pervade the Labour Party. It courts confusion and inconsistency and provides little or no guidance for socialist action. In such circumstances individual political identity on the left is all too often thought to be sufficiently maintained by the attitude one adopts towards particular organisations and campaigns and the acknowledged heroes and villains of the movement. This encourages an uneducated, individualistic, idiosyncratic and undisciplined approach to politics alternating with something akin to a crude herd instinct.

Of course, the situation is not always so simple or so clear cut as this thumbnail sketch might suggest. But in the absence of a consciously held perspective, or any explicit attempt to develop one, socialist politics can all too easily degenerate into "common sense" at one level and a simple "them" and "us" conflict at another. Too often political activity takes on the form of an elementary punch up; good intentions and gut reactions pass muster for strategy and tactics. Once the good, the bad and the ugly have been identified it becomes a simple matter of wading in and slugging it out with whoever is thought to be the enemy. In this political brawl the goodies are judged to be honest and well intentioned and to know what is right. The baddies, on the other hand, are judged to be dishonest, ill-intentioned and frequently contemptible, for although

they may know what is right and fair, and what should be done, they are apparently determined not to do it. It is here, on this political battlefield, that the pragmatic left join forces with the Trotskyites. On this political plain the mark of the "good" is that he or she joins in the "punch up", never falters in following the bandwagon; never shows the weakness of recognising any substance or merit in any of the arguments of the enemy; and seldom questions if this really is the best way to advance.

We in the ILP are concerned to stand apart from this, to develop a strategic perspective that transcends this approach. We are highly critical of those who cannot, or will not, recognise working class conservatism. We maintain that a romantic view of the working class, together with a somewhat simplistic notion of the process of politicisation make for an unrealistic assessment of the likely popular support for socialist politics. This then leads to further serious political error. Appeals to the working class and demands for "rank and file" control become the simplistic touchstone of the left; for in this rarified political world the workers can always be relied upon. Given a socialist lead, the workers will follow it. Offered socialist policies, the workers will vote for them. They will displace the right wing bureaucrats in the unions, rid the Labour Party of its revisionist leaders, and move in a revolutionary direction.

Sadly, this is not a gross caricature, somewhat overdrawn though it may be. It is the metaphysical essence of the dogmatic, the bigoted and the artless left, which unfortunately forms a significant part of the left of the Labour Party.

It is this left that sustains the belief that the intrinsic class consciousness of the workers can quickly be unlocked by a combination of policy and leadership. It encourages the idea that free collective bargaining and wage militancy are unproblematic for the socialist, representing as they do a "healthy progressive reaction" of the working class. It underpins the belief that a Labour Party presenting socialist policies could obtain a landslide victory at the next election. It provides the rationale for the "no cuts, no rate increase" campaign in response to the Tory attack on Local Government finance, anticipating a quick, positive reaction from the people. It idealises and transforms the immediate potential of the trade union movement, conjuring up a powerful rank and file socialist force to be deployed within the Labour Party, thus bolstering the "block vote" and justifying the campaign for a Labour Party Electoral College in which the major share of the votes goes to the trade unions. In these and so many other ways it encourages us in the wrong direction.

Arguments for democracy

Those who doubt this need only to reflect on some recent developments. When, at the end of the deliberations of the Labour