

## The Alternatives: Co-existence or the Surgeon's Knife

For the time being, Labour in decline has become an explosive mix. Whole sections of both left and right have gone beyond reasonable political criticism and contest, and have embroiled themselves in a vicious circle of public denunciation and abuse culminating, as we have seen, in Callaghan's advocacy of "surgery" and the NEC decision to purge the party of certain left groups. In this political vendetta one outraged outburst fuels another and the treaty of "Bishop Stortford" sits awkwardly in the middle.

It would be transparently foolish now to deny that the Labour Party, threatened as it is from outside by working class support for a now radical Tory Party and the SDP/Liberal Alliance, torn internally by savage conflict and, dare we say it, weakly led in the House of Commons, is in very serious difficulty. One of the overworked words in British politics is 'crisis'. Yet there is possibly no other word that can better describe the condition of the Labour Party in 1983, when the very existence of the party as we know it may be under threat.

We must, however, reiterate the point that it would be quite wrong to assume that the crisis is solely the result of recent development. The more immediate threat to the party does, of course, arise out of its general electoral decline since 1951, but the SDP, which now poses a certain potential threat, has existed in embryo within the most influential sections of the Labour Party throughout the whole of that period. The present predicament of the party **may** have been precipitated by recent events but it is more truly the historic outgrowth of the entire post-war period and beyond. If the party is to survive and prosper, it must now come to terms with its more deep rooted problems as well as tackling the emergent crisis; for the two are inextricably linked. In this respect bans, proscriptions and expulsion are no answer and outlawing Militant, if it is not a smoke screen or a prelude to something more, is a near irrelevance.

At this level there can be periodic short term victories interspersed with temporary periods of stalemate. But if each section and incompatible opinion insist on being the dominant and effective authority within the Labour Party regardless of any violation of democratic principle and oblivious to the consequences for the party, there can be no lasting solution. There can be no lasting solution, that is, until one section, one body of opinion, has succeeded in subjugating

or expelling all serious and potentially threatening opposition; until efficient and effective surgery has been carried out.

We can, of course, aspire to a united, purposeful political party with effective leadership. We can even dream of a democratic socialist Labour Party. First, however we have to determine if we can or can't live together. If we can't, then Callaghan has got it right. But whether it be the scalpel or the butcher's cleaver the surgery is likely to cause considerable damage and even perhaps tear the heart of democratic socialism out of the Labour Party. The only alternative to that has got to be some form of politically honest co-existence. It is ridiculous to pretend that we are, or have all been, moving towards the same destination. We and the revisionists and the insurrectionary left should be honest enough to make that quite clear. In fact this pamphlet, in part, represents an initial step in that direction.

Having established this, it is then necessary to reject the suggestion that this is something new and therefore intolerable within the Labour Party. These differences between revisionism and traditional democratic socialism have existed for some considerable time, and there is no way in which the arguments of either can be defined as illegitimate. We have to totally reject the claims of Callaghan and others who argue that the principles upon which right wing revisionists stand have always and undisputedly underpinned the democratic socialism of the Labour Party. We who do not accept the mixed economy, lay claim to being a major part of the traditional democratic socialist wing of the party and would suggest that the evidence points to revisionism being the usurper. Whilst we accept that there have long been disputes in the Labour Party concerning the achievement of socialism, for the most part the majority of individual party members have not disputed the ultimate goal, or the importance of 'Clause IV' in relation to that goal. And yet that is what the revisionists most clearly do.

We, however, have never said that **their** activity is illegitimate or unacceptable inside the Labour Party. We are even now merely arguing for the long overdue recognition that the party consists of revisionists (those who, with Callaghan, wish to retain private enterprise and the mixed economy) and, amongst others, traditional socialists who wish to move to a democratic collectivist co-operative society. No matter what labels we give to them, or in what proportions we think they are distributed within the party, the indisputable fact is that there are now, and have long been, at least these two irreconcilable elements within the Labour Party. And we must all come to terms with the basic problems this creates.

That being so, and rejecting surgery, we have to try to agree on some constitutional arrangements that will facilitate the co-existence of opposed and hostile opinion within the party. We have to develop democratic means for conducting debates, containing the conflict and

determining which policies and what personnel will at any one time be predominant. No side can expect to get away with a party structure that is rigged to the disadvantage of others, which is much what would result from right wing proposals of the kind put forward by Sid Weighell and the NUR to the 1982 Party Conference. Delivering the Labour Party into the hands of the Trade Unions and the Parliamentary Party (which certain people on the right of the party would like to see) would not only be the cause of renewed turmoil but would, if it remained unchanged, destroy the basis for an individual campaigning membership.

Obviously we must acknowledge that the present constitutional arrangements are by no means perfect and must be improved. The change, however must be in a reasonable democratic socialist direction and not away from it.

In the meantime we must broadly accept the decisions that are the product of the currently existing constitutional arrangement. A genuine acceptance of this position requires more than a technical adherence to it. It means that there must be an honest acknowledgement of the existence of a basic conflict, together with a declared belief in, and support for, democratic rights. These must be upheld as healthy, democratic institutions which we have not only a right, but a duty, to regularly utilise. This is absolutely fundamental

In essence, what we are saying is that no one individual or group has cause to cry foul or seek to create a rumpus as the "Solidarity" group did when those it politically disagreed with sought to gain influence through the due democratic processes of the party during the 1981 Deputy Leadership election.

The ILP might have preferred to avoid the possible damaging effects of that campaign, but what happened in 1981 when the right wing manufactured exaggerated hysteria around the election, cannot be tolerated in any democratic party. The groundless charges of totalitarian attitudes and the attempts at character assassination made by the right, together with the shrill campaigning style of the Benn supporters, 'hit list' and all, made it impossible to treat the elections as a normal event. As a result there may have been a case for saying that there should be a moratorium on such elections until after the General Election, if only to take the heat out of the situation. But this must not be seen as a precedent. Such elections should, in normal times, take place as a matter of course within the party, and without the cries of treachery that accompanied the last one.

There is no doubt that the media and our political opponents in the SDP and elsewhere will always seek to suggest that such elections are a sign of something morbid. But too many within the party have contributed to that unacceptable notion and they must be told, in no uncertain terms, that once the party has come through the next General Election, such leadership contests must be viewed as reasonable and necessary

democratic happenings within a healthy political body.

### **The foundations of co-existence**

In fact, if we are to co-exist in the Labour Party, it can only be on this kind of foundation. We may debate, we may vehemently disagree, but we must generally use and encourage others to use and defer to democratic procedure. We cannot go outside or seek to negate it each time it threatens to operate against our political interests. If we do continue to do that, then not only will it help destroy the Labour Party, but it will also betray a kind of democracy that does not auger well for any future society which we are seeking to build.

That being so, it was no more edifying to see the way in which the Transport and General Workers Union organised its conference votes in the Deputy Leadership election of 1981, than to watch Michael Foot, Denis Healey, Neil Kinnock and the majority of the NEC originally rejecting the democratically chosen Peter Tatchell, prospective Parliamentary candidate for Bermondsey. In each case those involved might have acted strictly to the letter of the law, but the necessary spirit of democracy was not in evidence in either of the decisions.

In "Socialism with a Human Face" Denis Healey argued that: — "When democracy and socialism conflict, you accept the verdict of democracy." Very well then, on this occasion, let us all put our political practice where Denis Healey's mouth is.

Certainly, if we cannot guarantee that the democratic process shall function, that the will of the majority prevail; and if we cannot, at the same time, provide a reasonable justice and hope for minority opinion, then there can be no political co-existence. And worse, if we cannot learn to live with the ebb and flow of power and influence without it encouraging us to destabilise the party; if we cannot tolerate the success and the growth of influence of opponents, then the Labour Party cannot survive in its present form.

What is more it does not deserve to survive. If the price for the continued and effective existence of the Labour Party is that 'we' or 'they' seek to expel, or silence, or declare illegitimate other 'socialist' tendencies, and for no other reason than that we are opposed to their kind of socialist opinion, then quite literally the price for the survival of the party is too high.

In previous left-right battles it has traditionally been the left which has buckled and it is no secret that there are widening divisions between the 'softs' and the 'hards' on the left about how to proceed. In fact, neither's approach is adequate; for one surrenders too much to the right and secures nothing in return, whereas the other slogs on regardless, seemingly blind to the effects on the working class and paying scant regard to the threat to the party.

We wish to avoid both of these positions, if it is at all possible. We are desperately anxious to act as a reasonable democratic left. But we also wish to make it quite clear that whilst we do not seek to silence others, **we are not prepared to be silenced**. And that should be fully understood by all who might be inclined to blackmail us into submission. As far as we are concerned, it must be established that the practice of manoeuvring the left into a position where the legitimate pursuit of their objectives appears to be designed to have a wrecking effect will, in future, put the party's prospects at risk. We will not continually back pedal when our opponents threaten the party with electoral defeat. Co-existence, we must reiterate, can only be on the basis of fair and acceptable procedures which no-one should seek to frustrate. Nothing less will be acceptable from here on. That means that we have to negotiate a formula for co-existence that enables organisations and individuals to work within the Labour Party, within a democratic framework which is as near neutral as it can be.

Hattersley has said that he wants to avoid winners and losers. He wants "less conflict within the party, not a constitution in which it is recognised, formalised and encouraged." That statement may either be naive or ominous, but in either case it is unrealistic, sterile and unhealthy. We need to promote the public view that a clash of ideas represents an opportunity and not a disaster; that differences of opinion are a sign of a healthy dynamic institution, and that formalised democratic arrangements are necessary to the well being of the Labour Party. Discussing constitutional issues is not, therefore, to be likened to some medieval discourse about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. It is part of the life blood of the party.

Having regard to these demands, and bearing in mind our opposition to the pragmatic and revisionist right and to the 'headbanging' left, it might be thought that the ILP is very much alone inside the Labour Party. There is certainly a measure of truth in that. However, whilst we have no wish to make the claim that the 'real' Labour Party membership is in agreement with us, we do believe that the kind of socialist perspective and approach that is suggested, if only in outline here, can, if it gets a hearing, unite a majority of members around its traditional democratic socialist position. Indeed, as we have already suggested, we believe that beneath the disputes about the ways and means and the speed at which we can progress, and buried beneath a concern for electoral success, there is already a traditional democratic socialist bedrock that could be the basis of greater unity and socialist advance.

The right wing revisionists claim the support of party loyalists often on the basis of electoral expediency. The loyalty and caution and conservative attitude that emanates from a substantial section of party membership is usually enough to encourage many on the left to take up a hostile attitude to such comrades. Thereafter, there is a rapid

degeneration into 'punch up' politics, the logic of which leads towards Callaghan's simple solution. In the meantime, the unreasonableness of some on the left present our political enemies and the media with all that they need to undertake the most professional 'carve up'. Their aim is to portray the left as fanatical and extreme. **Our aim is to occupy the most reasonable ground on the left of the party and to encourage the centre and the centre left to join us** so that together we can establish the Labour Party as an organic link between socialism and the mass movement of the working class.

### **Socialist vision**

In re-establishing Labour's grass roots we have to begin to generate an accountable socialist leadership. Together, and in harmony with the party, we have to take the socialist message back to the working class. To do so involves reversing a long term trend in the other direction, our legacy from the Labour right.

Winning back will not be easy, and the difficulties of operating in a conservative political culture cannot be underestimated. Lefts in a hurry are mistaken in thinking it can be achieved almost overnight. Their optimism flies in the face of experience and ignores realities, such as the very simple fact that possibly more than half of trade unionists don't agree with their unions even affiliating to the Labour Party.

Winning the confidence and trust of the working class after the present set-backs is only the beginning. That trust will have to be sustained through many difficulties and the quality of leadership on offer will have to be a good deal better than recent displays by both left and right. The prevailing social climate is always likely to make our journey an uphill one, placing great responsibilities on left leaders.

If we are concerned about recruiting to the Labour Party on any reasonable scale we cannot expect to attract only fully fledged socialists. Those who join us will be influenced by the broader environment, and consequently they will be inclined to do and say things with which we on the left disagree. But it is important that, by its behaviour, the left does not drive such recruits away, in the romantic hope that around the next corner there exists a pure socialist working class. Without doubt, the right will seek to woo them with arguments about electoral expediency, and they are unlikely to resist such advances if the left treats them with hostility, or speaks to them in unintelligible jargon, or offers only unreasonable or unattainable solutions to the problems they see all around them.

It is, therefore, essential that we produce credible policy relevant to the problems of today. Above all, however, if we are to effect a transition to the kind of socialist party that is necessary, if we are ever to effectively challenge the existing social order, we have to get beyond the point where we are producing worthwhile but largely disparate policy in

a piecemeal reformist manner.

We have, as a Labour Party, to go beyond criticism of the Tories and our other political opponents to the attack on capitalism, with all its gross deficiencies and failings. We have to develop a synoptic view. We have to expose the economic, social, political and moral inter-relatedness of the system. We have to encourage wholesale criticism that demands the transformation of capitalism. We have to fashion a clear, coherent, credible and comprehensive alternative. We have to encourage a new radical, socialist, end-oriented vision and an irrepressible new hope for a socialist future. We have, in short, to become a hegemonic force. We have to start the 'assault on heaven'.

This is not some outrageous utopian proposal; it is the essential component of a socialist party that seriously aspires to replace capitalism. It is a long neglected element, forced out by narrow expedience, committee commitments, management politics, revisionist practice and the tacit acceptance of a mixed economy, even by some left wing socialists.

Quite simply, if **Socialism** in Britain is to be reinvigorated, then many of us have to reinvest in it; the visionary revolutionary socialism that actually looks to the transformation of our society. That, basically, is what the ILP, as an organised group, is about inside the Labour Party.

“ . . . there are some of us on the left who are quite simply not prepared to deny the problem — possibly the dilemma — of the socialist who wishes to transform society, who accepts the possibility of Parliamentary means allied to extra Parliamentary activity, and who nonetheless is anxious to see the development of sound, credible, Labour Party policies helping us whenever possible towards short term electoral success and the rout of the Tories.”

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