

THE DAY THE PARTY HAD TO STOP

by Malcolm MacEwen

I began 1956, as I had begun every year since 1944, as a journalist on the *Daily Worker*. They were enjoyable and fruitful years, most of which I spent as Parliamentary Correspondent, but I also did many other **jobs**—foreign editor, reporter, feature writer, even war correspondent in Greece (but only after the war was over, as the *Daily Worker* was denied accreditation by the War Office while it lasted). For most of 1956 I was features editor, responsible among other things for the Readers' Forum. At the end of **October** I went **back** to the **House** of Commons to report the Suez debates when Peter Fryer, my successor in the press gallery, was sent to Budapest to cover the Hungarian uprising. I was a member of the editorial committee which met twice a day to discuss the content of the paper.

The British Communist Party had not the slightest inkling of the storm that was about to burst upon it. In the build-up for the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet **Union**, which opened on 14th February, our Moscow correspondent, Sam Russell, wrote a series of glowing reports which we splashed on the front page under such headlines as 'Russia's Mighty Plan', 'Russia is ready for the 21st Century', 'Up, Up, Up Goes Soviet Production'. 'The Age of Plenty **Dawns**'. On the opening day Prof. J.S. **Bernal**, one of Britain's greatest scientists, who symbolised the influence of the Party and of **Marxism** among **professionals and** intellectuals, began a series of four articles on technical education, headlined 'The Know How of a New Era: Russia is Mastering It: So Must **We**'. He was not to know that within eight weeks his most distinguished colleague, Prof. J.B.S. Haldane, for long the contributor of the *Daily Worker's* excellent science column, would quit the Party and begin the trickle of resignations by intellectuals that would become a flood. Still less was the *Daily Worker* itself to know how prophetic was its own greeting to the 20th Congress on 'one of the great days of history'. It was, indeed a historic Congress, but not for the reasons *The Worker* advanced.

It is impossible to understand the reactions of journalists like Peter Fryer, Philip Bolsover or myself to the speech delivered by Khrushchev to the secret session of the 20th Congress on 25th February, (and leaked in Bonn on 16th March) unless one appreciates how revolted we were by British politics at the time. **Bolsover** had an article in January on the

colonial repression in Cyprus, Kenya and Malaya, headlined 'An Empire Full of Gangsters', illustrated with pictures of handcuffed 'terrorists' over the question 'Bandits or Patriots?'. Peter Fryer, the Parliamentary Correspondent, whose despatches from Hungary the paper refused to publish in October-November, had an article in February exposing the hypocrisy of the Eisenhower-Eden 'Declaration of Faith' by drawing attention to the blatant racialism still being practised at that time in the Southern states of the US. When Archbishop Makarios was arrested and deported from Cyprus, I wrote an article attacking the Colonial Secretary Lennox-Boyd for declaring that Cyprus could 'never' be independent. We saw ourselves—you may think naively—as democrats, humanists, socialists, engaged in the struggle for a humane, free, socialist democracy, and to a considerable extent we still looked to the Soviet Union as a model. An immense amount of space was devoted week by week to Soviet events and Soviet policy statements. When Bulganin and Khrushchev visited Britain the *Daily Worker* led its front page with the visit on ten successive days, and it gave an immense coverage out of its limited space to the 20th Congress itself.

In fact, this uncritical adulation of the USSR had become a source of increasing irritation to several members of the editorial staff, whose confidence in the Soviet Union was being undermined by the earlier revelations of the Khrushchev regime. Having gone along with the Party 'line' on Yugoslavia, when the Yugoslav Party was expelled from the Cominform in 1948, I was profoundly shocked by the British Party's reaction to the 'rehabilitation' of **Tito** by **Bulganin** and Khrushchev in 1955. The implications of this event were profound, for the British CP had endorsed the original condemnation at hastily convened meetings, and, as a result, had expelled or driven out members who had asked for some independent evidence of the 'imperialism' of **Tito** and his Party. The British Party made no comment on the admission that it had acted on false information, and my own efforts to raise the issue in correspondence with Harry Pollitt, the General Secretary of the Party for the previous 27 years, and Emile Burns, head of propaganda, got nowhere. A letter which I sent to the Party weekly, *World News*, pointing out the implications for the trials of **Rajk** in Hungary and **Slansky** in Czechoslovakia, was not published. To this day the Party has remained silent on the implications of the Yugoslav affair for our own Party organisation.

Harry Pollitt and George Matthews, the Assistant General Secretary, went to the 20th Congress as fraternal delegates. But they were sent to speak at factory meetings on Saturday, 25th February when Khrushchev made his famous speech in a private session from which foreign delegates were excluded. They returned in total ignorance, proclaiming that the Soviet leadership had courageously laid bare the truth about the 'cult of individual', had put right the injustices, and taken the necessary steps to

prevent **any** recurrence. So far as they were concerned, 'the cult of the individual' ~~was~~ a closed chapter, and **British** Communists should concentrate their minds on the 'real **issues**'—i.e. the Soviet peace policy and five-year plan.

But, **even** on the basis of the revelations already published, many Party members were unable to stomach passing off the 'mistakes' of Stalinism as 'the cult of the individual'. Letters on Stalin flooded into the *Daily Worker*, and I had the utmost difficulty (as Features Editor) in getting them published. The Political Committee of the Party had little choice but to **allow** a discussion, but it saw the forthcoming Party Congress at the end of March as an excuse for bringing it to an end. On 12th March J.R. Campbell declared the discussion on Stalin closed, and replied to the Forum letters on the 15th in an article in which he expressed his satisfaction that most of the letters had not indulged in 'exaggerated denigration of Stalin'. Yet within two days his entire position had been undermined. On March 16th the text of the secret Khrushchev speech, exposing Stalin as a mass murderer and torturer, had been leaked in Bonn. And on the following day the Hungarian Government announced the rehabilitation of Lázsló Rajk, the former Party secretary who had been shot after a trial that Derek Kartun had reported for the *Daily Worker*. I proposed at the editorial conference that we should publish a leading article on 'judicial murder', but Walter Holmes, our veteran columnist, dismissed the idea with 'who the hell cares about **Rajk?**', and Campbell rejected my proposal.

The readers' Forum had to be re-opened nevertheless, and the flood of letters became a torrent. But the line of Pollitt and his colleagues hardly changed. Although the suppression of the Khrushchev speech showed how far removed the Soviet Union was from restoring the essential safeguards of democracy, Pollitt declared his total satisfaction with the Soviet Party's handling of these events when he spoke at the 24th Congress of our Party on 30th March. The public sessions were drab and non-controversial, and there was no real political discussion, except on the issue of conscription.'

The issue of Stalin and the 20th Congress was debated in a heated secret session in which I tried to speak, but was not called. At the end the following statement was issued:

'The private session received the report [by Pollitt] and expressed full confidence in the Soviet Union, its people and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. It expressed its conviction that the great perspectives for the advance of Communism as outlined in the whole policy of the 20th Congress would be fully realised.'

Inevitably, this bone-headed handling of the situation caused the situation inside the Party to get out of hand, particularly as still further revelations were made. Our correspondent in Warsaw, Gordon Cruickshank,

reported on 9th May the sacking of the Minister of Justice and the introduction of an Amnesty Bill in the Polish Sejm that was expected to release 30,000 prisoners from jail. The Party leadership had to move, and on 16th May the Executive Committee accepted the resignation of Pollitt on the ground of age (he was 65) and ill health, elected John Gollan as General Secretary, and issued a long statement on 'The Lessons of the 20th Congress of the **CPSU**'. This contained the apology and complete retraction on Yugoslavia it could have made 11 months earlier, and expressed 'shock at the number of those arrested in the Soviet Union', but only made a mealy-mouthed allusion to the mass murders and tortures by referring to the 'victims of deliberate provocations and fabricated evidence'. The statement offered no further probing into the experience of the Soviet Union or the People's Democracies, but it did concede the need for an investigation of the British Party's internal democracy.

'A special Commission' (it announced) 'has been established to examine the methods and the working of our Party Congress, its committees, methods of discussion and election, criticism and self-criticism, and the improvements of inner party democracy'. In fact, the Commission had not been established. Its members were not appointed until July, and it did not meet until September. By that time, the Party leadership was desperately in need of a quick report. Poland was already on the verge of eruption, following the Poznan riots in June. The world crisis over Hungary and Suez in October and November intensified the internal Party crisis, and therefore the leadership's desire to demonstrate that it had taken some effective action to meet criticism. **The** publication of *The Reasoner* by Edward Thompson and John **Saville**, and the action taken against them by the Party, had provoked a major dispute about the genuineness of 'inner-party democracy' on the established basis of 'democratic centralism'.

At the height of the Hungarian crisis, at the end of October, my own sense of personal responsibility received a savage bayonet thrust by the announcement that Edith Bone had been released from prison in Hungary. Edith Bone was not a journalist, but she had gone to Hungary with an understanding between herself and J.R. Campbell, the editor of the *Daily Worker*, that she would be our correspondent in Budapest. I did not know her, and was unaware of this arrangement. But it had been known to some other members of the staff, in particular to Allen Hutt, the Chief **Sub-Editor**, whose comment when Edith re-appeared was 'so old woman Bone's turned up again'. Allen, who was a member of the EC, was not in fact an inhumane or unsympathetic man. But like so many Communists of long-standing he felt he had to demonstrate his political virility, his machismo, by taking a hard, unyielding line. I was profoundly shocked, for it rapidly became known, and was admitted by Campbell and Pollitt at the EC, that during Edith Bone's disappearance they had several times 'inquired' about her, and had received no satisfaction whatever from the Hungarian Party,

or Rakosi, its General Secretary, The inquiries were renewed after the rehabilitation of **Rajk**, but even then, when it had become obvious that Edith Bode, whether alive or dead, must have been a victim of the secret police, the British Party remained silent and did not even inform the members of the Daily Worker staff that one of their colleagues had been left to languish in jail for years without so much as a private protest or complaint, let alone the kind of public pressure that could have secured her release. It was all very well for Pollitt to say that 'unity' must be defended at all costs, but the costs had to be borne by the Edith Bones, not by the **Pollitts** who enjoyed innumerable trips and holidays in Eastern Europe.

As a Party member of some standing (I had been a member of the Central Committee in 1941-3 and a Parliamentary candidate in 1941 and 1950) and one of the best-known critics of the leadership I was invited to an extended, emergency, private meeting of the Executive Committee on 3rd November, when the Soviet Union was intervening to overthrow the government of Imre **Nagy** in Budapest. I brought to the meeting a statement, which I had drafted, signed by 16 members of the Daily Worker editorial staff—about half the total. The signatories included John **Gritten** (today news editor of the Morning Star), Gabriel (Jimmy **Friel**, our cartoonist), **Cayton** (our successful racing tipster), **Llew** Gardner, Leon Griffiths and Sheila Lynd. In it we said:

'the imprisonment of Edith Bone in solitary confinement without **trial** for seven years, without **any** public inquiry or protest from our Party even after the exposure of the **Rajk** trial had shown that such injustices were taking place, not only exposes the character of the regime, but involves us in its crimes. It is now clear that what took place was a national uprising against an infamous police dictatorship which disgraced the good name of Communism. The danger that fascist elements will attempt to gain control in the present state of disorder cannot affect our judgment that the people of Hungary had had enough, and resorted to arms to obtain freedom. The Government had the Soviet Union were wrong to attempt to crush the uprising. No Government which has forfeited the support of its people has the right to crush the people with foreign arms.'

I also brought with me to the meeting a copy of a service message received the previous day from Gordon Cruickshank, our correspondent in Warsaw, which provided an off-the-record comment on an appeal issued by the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party:

The appeal intends to convey that the Polish Party considers that the major inflammatory factor in the Hungarian situation **was** the intervention by Soviet troops. Such an intervention in Poland, where the stage for it was all set, and where even the call was given, was stopped at the **11th** hour by the Polish Party.

Although the Party here is restrained and cautious in its public declaration, and is genuinely concerned to avoid a break with the Soviet Union, privately leading members express their point of view about the Soviet Party leadership

with considerable feeling. They clearly have little confidence in that leadership. They contend that their viewpoint is based on 10 years of almost entirely had **experiences**.

To understand Hungarian events, **they** maintain they have only to study **Soviet** methods in the Eastern democracies over the past years: their insistence that there is only **one** way to build Socialism—their **way**. Their insistence on the transference of their pattern to all departments of life, large and small; their insistence on the **organisation of** the Stalinist **type** of security police and the use of Stalin **type** methods.

The Polish and Hungarian events therefore must be seen not only as caused by economic adversity and misery but **also** as an **irruption** of accumulated resentment against what was felt to be the overbearing domination of the Soviet **leadership**—resentment which became hatred in some **cases**, and which has affected a number if not a majority of the best Socialist and Communist workers, making them a prey even to reactionary influences. Which is a tragedy indeed.'

The Debate at the EC, in which I took part, was tense, and highly emotional on both sides, but the result was never in doubt. The hard-line leadership easily carried the day, and a statement was issued which came down firmly in support of the Soviet intervention against the Nagy Government. A week later, I resigned from the Daily Worker, in protest against the suppression of Peter Fryer's cables.

It was against this background that the Commission on **Inner-Party** Democracy, which had been appointed in July, met first on September 11th, 1956. The chairman was John Mahon, the London District Secretary, a member of the Political Committee, and an inflexible Party functionary with limited imagination. The Commission consisted of nine members appointed by the EC and six by the Party regions. It was heavily overloaded with full-time salaried Party officials, of whom there were no fewer than 10, five of them members of the EC. Only one member was an industrial worker, Keven Halpin, a vehicle inspector, appointed by the EC, which also appointed two well-known critics, myself and Christopher Hill the historian (who is now the Master of **Balliol**). Of the six regional nominees, four were full-time Party functionaries, one (Joe Cheek) was a teacher, and one, Peter Cadogan from the SE Midlands, was not only a teacher but also a known critic of the Party leadership. The Party officials included Emile Burns and James Klugmann, who controlled the Party's propaganda, education and periodical services, William Lauchlan, a former industrial worker who was National Organiser, and Betty Reid, a **tough-** minded and able member of the central organisation department. She ran the Commission, and controlled its programme.

The composition of the Commission guaranteed that it would not reach any conclusions disturbing to the full-time professional leadership whose grip on the Party (as we showed in the minority report) was maintained by the self-perpetuating system of 'election'. John Mahon, the chairman, did not see his role as leading an investigation; he saw it as securing the defeat

of the 'revisionists' who were critical of democratic centralism. A Party discussion in World News was opened by Mahon with an article which prejudged all the issues that the Commission was supposed to examine. We were also denied the time to conduct any serious investigation, and the shortage of time was then given as an excuse for not conducting a serious investigation. We were informed at our first meeting on **11th** September that, although four months had passed since the decision to establish the Commission had been taken, our work had to be completed in just over two months. This deadline was extended by two weeks after the date of the special 25th Party Congress in May 1957—to which our report was to be submitted—had been announced. But this meant that, although nearly six months were allowed for publishing and debating our report, the Commission was given a totally inadequate period in which to do its job. We met for the last time on 6th December 1956.

At the outset Hill, Cadogan and myself, with the support of Kevin Halpin, the one industrial worker, objected to the composition of the Commission and, in particular, to its domination by full-time salaried Party officials and the derisory representation of the working-class membership. When Mahon had over-ruled these protests, we challenged the programme of work submitted by Betty Reid. We saw our job as **being**, in accordance with the terms of reference, 'to examine and report on problems of inner-party democracy'. This, in its turn, meant that we had not met to discuss abstract principles, but to investigate actual cases and, by examining the files and questioning the people concerned, to determine how Party democracy actually worked.

In a 4,000 word paper which I submitted at the outset I pointed out that it was clear from the 20th Congress that the textbook explanations of democratic centralism bore no relation to the actual way in which the Soviet Party or Soviet society operated. I called for a realistic examination of the workings of inner-Party democracy in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. But the majority, while claiming that Soviet democracy was now functioning admirably, could only resist this proposition by pointing to the impossibility of implementing it in the time available and in the conditions that actually existed in the Soviet **Union—i.e.** where even the text of the Khrushchev speech remained an official secret, and the Soviet Party declined to open itself for investigation.

I then asked, with the support throughout at this stage of Hill, Cadogan and Halpin, for an investigation of three specific cases in our own Party: the handling of the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform, the handling of the Party press since the 20th Congress, and the operation of the electoral system at national and district Party congresses. The majority did not deny the desirability of questioning witnesses, or at least interviewing those members who had submitted evidence and viewpoints, and said it would have been valuable to discuss 'materials issued by brother

Parties'. But they refused to call for real evidence, or to examine witnesses, or to investigate Party records, on these specific issues or, indeed, on any others. The Commission received no real *evidence* at all. The only 'evidence' we had to go on was a mass of letters and branch resolutions, and only one of these (a letter from the London District Committee) was submitted by a major Party organisation. None of the Party's leading officials or members offered evidence; nor were they asked to give it.

At the outset, the Commission seemed to divide into the ten full-time Party functionaries, briefed and instructed by the leadership in King Street, and the five rank-and file members. It would obviously have been disastrous for the leadership if, after it had packed the Commission, all five of the 'ordinary' members, including the solitary industrial worker, were to reject the line of the officials. In the event, the officials succeeded in detaching Kevin Halpin and Joe Cheek from Christopher Hill, Peter Cadogan and myself, although both attached major reservations to the majority report which they ultimately signed. There were several reasons for the officials' success in splitting the critics. Above all, they were able to apply immense moral and political pressure to both Halpin and Cheek—and to Halpin in particular—playing on the enormously strong tradition of Party loyalty at a time when the Party was under immense strain and intense attack. The remaining three of us were not only outnumbered, but we also lacked the time to **engage** in any lobbying outside the Commission. We were meeting every Friday for several hours, and on two occasions met at weekends. Christopher Hill was under great strain in his academic and extramural work, and when it came to the crunch had to leave the drafting of the minority report entirely to me. But the single decisive event in splitting the critics was the suspension of Peter Cadogan from the Party in November, for writing a letter to the *News Chronicle* criticizing the Soviet invasion of Hungary. The fact that such a letter could of itself be a formal breach of Party discipline itself shows how tightly the Party leadership controlled dangerous thoughts about the Soviet Party. But tactically, the letter was disastrous. The next meeting of the Commission was suspended because Betty Reid refused to sit down at the same table with a 'traitor'. Peter, Christopher and myself adjourned to a pub to draft a letter to John Gollan, but that occasion finally settled the division in the Commission. We three formed the minority, the remainder the majority, and we proceeded to prepare separate reports. Peter's suspension did not last long, and he signed the minority report, but he took no further part in the Commission.

The procedure the Commission adopted was to divide the job of drafting papers on seven key issues, identified by Betty Reid, among members of the Commission. The issues were democratic centralism; the conduct of Party discussion; elections of Committees and officials; branch life and relations of branches with higher bodies; methods of leadership;

Party unity and discipline, and the Party Congress. Initially, those who came to form the minority were involved in the drafting work although, so far as I can recall, my own contribution was to contribute critical papers in response to the drafts submitted by functionaries, particularly on Democratic Centralism and methods of election. Peter **Cadogan** drafted a paper with Joe Cheek on the relatively innocuous issue of branch life, Christopher Hill was teamed with James Klugmann (an intellectual official with an extra ordinary rigid mind) to draft a paper on Party discussion. **They** were only able to produce a joint draft by offering alternative passages on the key points or, in one case, by Hill inserting the word 'not' before a Klugmann verb.

Although we had before us 104 communications from individuals and branches, totalling about 40,000 words, I doubt whether they had a great deal of influence on the outcome. The ten Party functionaries, who dominated the Commission, came to it with their minds made up. Christopher Hill, in a letter apologising for his inability to attend the fifth meeting, offered some comments on the draft paper on 'methods of election':

'It seems to me unexceptionable if its premise is accepted—that basically all is well with the Party, that we need only a little oiling and **tinkering**. But can we agree on that? The really **difficult** problem, that we have run up against all the time, is that we have to recreate a democratic spirit and **method** of working, from above downwards and from below upwards, and that this cannot be done by constitutional changes. But since ours is an interim report, it is even more important for us to state facts and indicate problems than to provide solutions; we should hardly agree on solutions in the short time available anyhow.'

He went on to say that the draft did not take seriously the real objection **to** the 'panel' system of election—that it makes the leadership at EC and District Committee level self-perpetuating, adding 'the belief that a change is virtually impossible, at any level, has something to do with the sense of frustration and the rapid turnover in party membership that have been such features in the Party's recent history. We should not refuse to face this problem, since it does exercise many members of the Party'. But the functionaries were not ready to face any of these problems. Their overriding concerns were with ensuring the continuity of leadership, and what they saw as the unity of the Party. The minority did not question the desirability of either of these objectives, but approached the problem from a totally different standpoint. Here are two passages from the **Klugmann/Hill** paper on Party discussion:

'Normally, discussion should be terminated by Party **decisions** and the adoption of Party policy which is binding on all members, but **in some** cases as on problems of art and literature, there is a basis for **continued discussion** and debate without decision' (**Klugmann**).

'Our closest friends on the left in the Labour movement are those whom we encourage to fight against bans **and** proscriptions. Any suppression of discussion in the CP (or appearance of it) will alienate **those** from whom we must recruit and with whom we must work.. . There is **no reason** why on questions of principle (**i.e.** in the formation **of policy itself**) the higher organs should allocate to themselves the function of **defining** these principles, ~~or~~ why free discussion of policy by the **membership** should have any other limits than **those** needed to prevent such **discussion.. .** from disrupting the unity of the Party.' (Hill)

We tried ~~very~~ hard, initially, to reach an accommodation. The key issue was, of course, democratic centralism, on which Betty Reid had drafted the paper. The debate centred on the wording of Rule 13:

'It is the duty of **all** members of the Party organisation to **carry** out to the full the policy of the Party until the final decision is reached. If the individual member does not receive support from his Party organisation, it is his duty to accept the majority decision and carry out to the full the policy of the Party.'

The alternative wording which I suggested (and which was rejected) read:

'The Communist **Party** has only one policy, that which is adopted by National Congress, or formulated by the Executive Committee in accordance with the decisions of Congress. The effectiveness of the Party in action depends upon the self-discipline and loyalty of the membership in rapidly and fully responding to the leadership of the Executive Committee and other leading bodies.

Members who disagree with decisions by majorities or by higher Party bodies should nevertheless endeavour to the best of their ability to work for the fulfilment of these decisions in a spirit of class solidarity **and** party loyalty, and refrain from actions which would impede the fulfilment of these decisions. Such members retain all their rights of discussion and criticism under the Party rules.'

I have not made any statistical analysis of the written 'evidence', but, on re-reading it again 20 years later, I am left with the very firm impression that virtually all the submissions were intended to strengthen the Party, not to weaken it, and came from people who even at that date would rather have reformed the Party than abandon it. Some of the submissions, mainly from branches, made criticisms of a minor nature. Most of the individual submissions were more radical, and many of them presented detailed information or case histories that should have been investigated, but were not. The strength of the emotions released by the Khrushchev speech were reflected, for example, in a resolution from the **Ashton-under-Lyne** Branch which attacked the leadership for its 'blind acceptance' of the words and the crimes of Stalin, and accused it of ignoring the democratic experiences of the British working class.

Perhaps the most striking features of the contribution from the Party

intellectuals were their sense of outrage, at the crimes that had been committed in the name of Communism, and their anger at the inability of the Party leadership to perceive that its double standard (talking about democracy while practising or defending ruthless dictatorship) seemed to explain the political failure of the Party in this country. Jack Beeching, for instance, attributed the Party's weakness and isolation, and its inability to discern the reasons, to the self-perpetuation of an authoritarian leadership, and to habits of mind developed by the Party leaders during the Comintern period. This had led, he said, to the 'tragedy' of the CP—the dissipation of the enormous talents it had attracted. The South West Ham Branch observed perceptively that the main weaknesses of Communist Parties had sprung not from lack of control by leading bodies over the rank and file, but from the reverse. Some of the contributions, and some letters in the Party press, had a strong anti-intellectual flavour, but the anti-intellectuals in fact had no answers to the criticisms that the intellectuals advanced. It was obvious from the evidence that if, in the aftermath of Hungary and the 20th Congress, the Commission and the Party were to confine themselves to what Christopher Hill called 'oiling and tinkering', a large body of intellectuals would have no alternative but to leave the Party. This is what happened. The Party retained the bulk of its working class membership, and lost the bulk of its middle-class membership, and so deprived itself of the intellectuals' contribution to its own development.

Although the Commission was confined to an abstract debate about democratic centralism in the British Party, the thoughts of the minority were dominated by the irrefutable facts of the degeneration of democratic centralism in the Parties of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Politics is about power, and although the prospects of power might have seemed remote for the British Communist Party, nobody joins a political party without having the ultimate goal of achieving political power. If, as I had come to believe, the form of democratic centralism operated by Communist Parties throughout the world was largely responsible for the political and moral degeneration of those Parties that had exercised power, the seeds of a similar degeneration must be present in the British Party. It followed that, in the event of the Party ever assuming power, a similar degeneration must follow. These were issues the British CP had never faced, but it was our hope that the events of 1956 would shock the Party leadership into facing them—so making it possible, for the first time, to end the weakness and isolation of the Communist Party in Britain.

As a Party, our blindness to the harsh realities of Communist government in practice had caught us in an impossible dilemma. Our Party claimed descent from those who had struggled for working-class and democratic liberties. It identified with the radical tradition. Our **historians**—Hill, Hobsbawm, Thompson and several others—had won international

reputations in this field. Christopher Hill was the outstanding interpreter of the British revolution of the 17th Century. Yet it was now undeniable that the complete identification of the Party with the state in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe had destroyed all constitutional safeguards against the abuse of power. And while the new leaders (Khrushchev, Gomulka) had retreated from the worst excesses of the Stalin regime, there was no evidence that they wished to restore democratic rights and liberties that are fundamental both to the development of a healthy Socialist society, and to the development of Marxism. The latter requires the open confrontation of opposing tendencies. The basis of all political development is access to information and to the means of publicity, without which political argument and the resolution of differences is impossible. Mikoyan at the 20th Party Congress reproached Soviet historians for not writing Marxist analyses of Soviet history, and John Gollan has pointed out recently² that they have not done so since. But how can they, within the system which Gollan defended so staunchly in 1956?

The gulf on these issues between the majority and the minority could not be bridged. The majority were firmly stuck in the Stalinist mental mould, from which we were trying to escape. As a result, the discussion within the Commission on democratic centralism was circular, and therefore fruitless. The majority argued, as they did in their report, that the crimes and the 'mistakes' arose because Stalin had departed from the principles of democratic centralism by failing to operate a collective leadership, and failing to call the periodical meetings and Congresses at which the abuses could have been stopped, and at which elections could have been held. We argued that, in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, it must be presumed that the enormous power concentrated in the hands of a very small leadership by the rules of democratic centralism facilitated the assumption of dictatorial power. To which the majority replied that this was not democratic centralism, but an abuse of it.

The majority contended that democratic centralism was not a Russian idea imposed on the British CP by the Comintern, but arose out of the experience of the British Labour movement. They pointed to the acceptance by British trade unions of the sovereignty of elected annual conferences as policy-making bodies, the acceptance by the minority and by the lower organisations of the decisions reached between conferences by their central organs and committees. If democratic centralism could be reduced to the normal *modus operandi* of the trade unions, **however**, there would have been no differences between us. The minority fully accepted the need for minorities to accept majority decisions on practical issues, 'such as a decision to hold an election, publish a leaflet or organise or support a strike. But democratic centralism, both in theory and in practice went much further. It resolved the problem of striking a balance between centralism

and democracy by placing the major emphasis on centralism. Lenin, in his draft of the conditions of affiliation to the Third International laid the whole emphasis on the need for an 'iron discipline' in the Party, 'bordering on military discipline', to fit it for the tasks of a period of revolution, civil war and imperialist war. According to the majority report:

'Democratic centralism means:

1) The right of all members to take part in the discussion and formation of policy and the duty of all members to fight for that policy when it has been decided.

2) The right of all members to elect and to be elected to the collective leaderships of the Party at all levels, and to be represented at the National Congress, the highest authority of the Party. The duty of all members to fight for the decisions made by those leaderships, and the duty of the lower organisations to accept and to fight for the decisions of the higher organisations.

3) The right of all members to contribute to the democratic life of the Party and the duty of all members to safeguard the unity of the Party, members who disagree with a decision have the right to reserve their opinions and to express their views through the proper channels open to them as laid down in the Party rules.'

The basic issue on which the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, split from the Mensheviks, led by Martov, at the 1923 Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party was Lenin's insistence on a small but highly disciplined party of active members, as opposed to Martov's concept of a Party with loosely affiliated members rather similar in concept to the British Labour Party. Stalin unquestionably developed Lenin's concept into a highly authoritarian and centralised one, in which the popular organisations, such as trade unions, simply became the 'transmission belts' through which Party decisions were to be applied. John Gollan, in the article referred to, which is intended as a retrospective view of the 20th Congress, attributes the 'excessive centralisation' of the Party under Stalin to his conception of 'the monolithic party':

'Never, for a single moment, have the Bolsheviks conceived of the party as anything but a monolithic organisation hewed from a single block, possessing a single will and in its work uniting all shades of thought into a single current of practical activities.' (Stalin, *Works*, Vol. 6, p. 23).

This concept, which Gollan now criticizes, was, however, the concept to which the British CP, and in particular the majority on the Commission on **inner-Party** democracy, firmly adhered. The passage quoted was often used in Party education courses, and I myself accepted it when I first joined the Party as the secret of the Party's effectiveness. What I came to realise was

that, in fact, it was the secret of the Party's failure.

The majority had some difficulty in reconciling its claim that democratic centralism, as it was practised, arose out of British conditions, with the **Communist** Party's ceaseless campaign for the end of the 'bans and proscriptions' which excluded Communists from membership of the Labour Party. What was sauce for the goose was not sauce for the gander:

'The Labour Party was formed as a co-ordinating body to which many trends of Socialist and Labour opinion, right, left and centre, could affiliate... Surely an organisation to bring all trends together should allow all trends to express their views? But the Communist Party does not admit all views, it is a body of like-minded Marxists and therefore has different rules from the Labour Party.' (Majority report, p. 9).

Heresy hunting, in short, was anathema in the Labour Party, but acceptable in the Communist Party.

One can only resolve the semantic argument about the meaning of 'democratic centralism', where both sides to the argument accept the need for both democracy and central leadership, by turning to the lessons of practical experience. In practice, the insistence on lower bodies submitting to higher bodies, and minorities to majorities, the outlawing of 'factions' in which members group together to support their point of view, and the obligation to fight for majority decisions made it impossible for the membership to change the party's policies or the leadership. All change had to come from the top downwards, and this explains why, even when changes are made in Communist Parties, they tend either to be precipitate (often the result of belatedly recognising previous mistakes) or far too late, or both.

But the problem was not simply one of attempting to convert a minority into a majority; it is only in times of acute crisis that a minority even conceives of such an aim. The attitude taken by the Party leadership towards discussion had the effect, and almost certainly the intention, of requiring unanimity in thought as well as in action. John Mahon, the Commission chairman, never ceased to tell us that the only purpose of discussion was action. But action was itself interpreted narrowly. It usually meant some immediate action by the Party branch: holding a meeting, selling more *Daily Workers*, issuing a leaflet, organising a rent strike, raising more money.

Since all discussion took place on a 'political report', covering 'the situation', and had then to lead to action, no real discussion on political theory or principle was possible, except in education classes or specialist professional or cultural groups.

In the papers submitted to the Commission there were several (notably by John **Eaton**, Maurice Dobb and Ronald Meek) which argued cogently that all discussion need not lead to action, but could have other aims, such

asⁿ clarification of ideas, gaining a deeper understanding of a political problem, getting at the facts, changing policy, or even changing the leadership. It was the peculiarly limited concept of discussion leading to action (which is correct to the extent that a political party exists for action and not to provide a debating forum) that led to the peculiarly arid discussions within CP branches with which all former members of the Party must be familiar. These reached their nadir at Party Congresses, where the greater part of the Congress would be devoted to a discussion on the General Secretary's report, which itself would take some hours to deliver.

If one pillar of democratic centralism was the obligation to fight for Party decisions (coupled with restrictions on the right to discuss them), the other was the system of election at national or district Congresses of the Executive and District Committees. Under this system the Congress was presented with a list of recommended candidates. At one time, the Congress was allowed only to vote for or against the **list** as a whole. Congress would appoint a Panels Commission, which reviewed a list prepared originally by the Political Committee (or inner Party **leadership**), **and** then adopted by the Executive (or District) Committee. Delegates who wanted to change the list had to argue the case before the Panels Commission, which would require the member not only to justify any new name he wished to put forward, but also to say who should be knocked off to make room for the newcomer. Latterly, Congress delegates were presented with a complete list of candidates, and were free to vote for those who were not on the recommended list. But this made no practical difference, as the slate was invariably—and inevitably,—elected by overwhelming majorities. Professor George Thomson, who **had** been a member of the EC from **1947 to 1954** submitted evidence to us describing the way in which the recommended list was presented to the EC, so that 'discussion was difficult and amendment almost impossible'. It would have been easy for the Party organisation to have produced the information, for which the minority asked, showing how at successive Congresses the lists had been amended at each stage. This information was denied to us—presumably, because it would have shown that the list finally 'elected' hardly differed from that which Pollitt and the inner group had presented to the Political Committee in the first place.

The minority did not, however, dismiss the Panel system out of hand. We were painfully familiar with the drawbacks of 'democratic' elections, whether for elected authorities or in trade unions and political parties. The principal merit of the panel system was that it made it possible to bring onto the EC able workers from industry whose names had not been made familiar by newspaper headlines. In 1956, nine of the **42** members of the Communist Party EC were industrial workers on the shop floor or in the pit. By contrast, it is almost unknown for active industrial workers to be elected to the EC of the Labour Party, which is monopolised by professional politicians and trade union officials.

Panels Commissions did indeed have prolonged and intense discussion of candidates' merits and demerits, as I know, having once served on one. But my experience convinced me, as his experience on the EC convinced Professor Thomson, that in practice the original list, emanating from Pollitt's office, could only be influenced at the margins, if at all. This was, in all essentials, the system that had operated in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe, and it placed limitless powers in the hands of a ruling clique. It gave them virtually complete control of the selection of the EC, and through their henchmen in the Districts, of the District Committees. This, combined with the control by the Political Committee, and of the 'secretariat', its equivalent in the **districts**, enabled the full-time officials to exercise complete control over the Party organisation and the approved channels of discussion. While, therefore, the EC of the CP could boast of a relatively high proportion of industrial workers, it was dominated by a block of full-time, salaried workers who all owed their jobs to the continued approval of the leading group. In 1956 **20** of the **42** members were full-time officials, **10** of them working in the Party centre. These, with Willie Gallacher, the former MP, amounted to half the EC. None of these **20** would have been eligible for election to the Labour Party EC. One has to recognise the problem the CP faced. Having no **MPs** who are paid out of public funds, it could only sustain a corps of professional politicians by appointing them to jobs in the Party apparatus. I would certainly not take the view that this should disqualify some of the Party's ablest members from election to the EC. But the figures speak for themselves.

The majority of our Commission endorsed democratic centralism without reservations, but conceded that errors had arisen in its application. Too great an emphasis had been put on centralism, too little on democracy. But the 'serious error' it identified was 'not enough being done to bring the membership into discussion. . . and failure to take sufficient practical measures to build strong Party branches'. To ensure 'a decisive shift in the work of the Executive and the district committees to promote the further growth of Party democracy in the branches' it made a number of recommendations. These amounted, essentially to:

1. the provision of more time and space to pre-Congress discussion, with 'freedom for contending views to be expressed in both the Party branch and the press';
2. the EC 'wherever possible' to consult the membership before deciding on new policy, and to open discussion for this purpose in the Party press;
3. more space to be given for discussion in the Party press, and a theoretical journal (Marxism Today) to be published;
4. The electoral system with the recommended list to remain, but delegates to have the right to challenge the recommended list on the floor of Congress, and the number of 'full-time comrades' to be limited to less

than half the EC (**i.e.** the existing proportion).

The system remained in all essentials unaltered, and the majority re-affirmed specifically the obligation of minorities to fight for decisions and the prohibition of '**factions**'—**i.e.** organising in support of a minority view. The minority's recommendations included:

1. the right of Party members to meet with others before Congress to discuss political questions or prepare political statements, provided notice was given to the district committee;
2. recognition of the rights of individuals or groups to publish matter independently and to circulate it to branches;
3. members to be entitled to speak, if asked, at branches other than their own;
4. opposition spokesmen to be entitled to speak at Congress;
5. the recommended list to be abolished;
6. half the members of the EC to be elected in their own districts by the members who would know them.

The essence of the minority report lay, however, less in its specific recommendations (which were the product of hasty draftsmanship by myself, with little discussion) than in its broad approach to democratic centralism:

'The main question is not the name but the substance. We support the broad principles of democracy and of centralism as the basis of Party organisation, provided that there is a proper balance between the two. ••

If the leadership of the Party is honest and true to principle, if it tells the members the whole **truth**, or all that it knows, about the situation, if by its record it earns the respect, affection and loyalty of the Party membership, if it refrains from using its control of the Party machine and Press to smack down those who are seeking for information or expressing honest criticism, then in critical situations, where it has to take quick decisions and appeal for a quick response. the response will be given instantly, unanimously and enthusiastically.. • But insistence on the duty automatically to accept and fight for policies in which there is no confidence can only have bad results.'

The majority report was signed by the 10 Party officials, Joe Cheek and Kevin Halpin. Cheek added an addendum, in which he said that the majority report had not been sufficiently critical of the application of democratic centralism. He said the minority report had 'great value' and only disagreed specifically with our view. that 'the aims and ideals of Communism are in process of re-examination'. Halpin endorsed our criticisms of the composition of the Commission, and the lack of time to investigate specific cases. He accepted our view **that** the electoral system was self-perpetuating, and argued not only for a different method of election, but also for the rights of branches to carry a minority point of view for discussion to any other branch. These were substantial disagreements. Essentially, the majority report received the full backing only

of the ten **officials** on the Commission.

The minority report got short shrift at the hands of the Party. It was published with the majority report, and that in itself was a striking innovation, but only the majority report was formally discussed at the Party Congress in May 1957. Of the three signatories of the minority report only Christopher Hill was a delegate to the Congress. I was not elected as a delegate by my own branch in Hampstead, and was in any case in the process of being expelled from the Party for the sin of having participated in launching the *New Reasoner* with John Saville and Edward Thompson. Peter Cadogan had quit, along with many others. Christopher Hill spoke in defence of the minority report, but his speech was not reported in the *Daily Worker*. He resigned immediately afterwards. The majority report was presented to Congress by John Mahon, who referred to the minority report in words that would not have seemed out of place in the mouth of Vyshinsky prosecuting an anti-party group of wreckers:

'The minority report gives some lip service to democratic centralism, and then assembles a number of proposals into a sort of platform from which to wreck democratic centralism.'

As I was not present at the Congress I have no first hand impression of it. But it is clear, both from contemporary reports and from speaking to survivors, that the enormous exodus of members after Hungary, which decimated the Party's intellectual membership, had produced a strong reaction among those who remained, and particularly among the industrial working-class members. The majority report was carried, according to the official report, by a majority of more than 20 to 1, and from that moment onwards the report itself disappeared into limbo. What effect it had on the inner life of the Communist Party I cannot say. But 20 years later Party members tell me that the authoritarian control asserted by the majority report is no longer acceptable and can no longer be enforced.

John Gollan, in ~~the~~ article in *Marxism Today* already referred to, has taken the first opportunity on his retirement from the Party leadership to put to the Soviet Party some of the questions about democracy that we attempted to put 20 years earlier. Yet Gollan, makes but one reference to the Commission on Inner-Party Democracy:

'There was no cult of the individual in our party. . . But in the aftermath of the 20th Congress, we further developed our programme and also developed our democratic life on the basis of a commission appointed to examine it. We had still more open discussion at Congresses and throughout the Party, while preserving the main point of democratic centralism that once a decision on policy has been democratically reached, it is carried out by all.'

This does not suggest, to me at least, that the British Communist Party,

even now, is capable of realistically discussing the problems of socialist democracy.

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NOTES

1. Although the younger Party members **in particular** were clamouring for the Party to oppose conscription, the leadership clung to its policy of 'cutting the call-up' to one year. It **succeeded** in carrying the Congress, **but** was **lagging** far behind **public** opinion.
2. John Gollan, 'Socialist Democracy: Some **Problems...** *Marxism Today* (January, 1976).