

MOVING ON

by Ralph Miliband

Twenty years after 1956, the main problem for the socialist left in Britain is still that of its own organisation into an effective political formation, able to attract a substantial measure of support and to hold out a genuine promise of further growth. A lot has happened in the labour movement in these twenty years, and much of this has been positive. But in **organisa-**tional and programmatic terms, there has been no real advance. For different reasons, none of the organisations, old and new, which have occupied the stage in this period—the Labour Party, the Communist Party, the International Socialists, the Workers' Revolutionary Party, the International Marxist Group, **etc.—constitutes** an effective socialist formation or is in the least likely to become one. Such an organisation remains to be created. The present article discusses the reasons why existing organisations cannot **fill** the gap.

Inevitably, one must start with the Labour Party. There cannot now be many socialists in the Labour Party (and even fewer outside) who believe that most of its leaders are concerned with the task of effecting the 'fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of wealth and power in favour of working people and their families' of which the Labour Manifesto spoke in 1974. But there are many socialists in the Labour Party who do believe very firmly that they can eventually and by dint of great pressure compel their leaders to adopt left-wing policies and even to translate these policies into practice; or alternatively that they can bring to the leadership of the Labour Party men and women who will want to adopt and put into practice such policies.

There is no point in rehearsing here arguments which have been endlessly canvassed as to whether this is a realistic prospect or not. That controversy has gone on for three quarters of a century, that is ever since the Labour Party came into existence; and insofar as it cannot be conclusively proved that the Labour Party will not in any serious sense be turned in socialist directions, the chances are that the controversy will go on for a long time to come, without leading anywhere. My own view, often reiterated, is that the belief in the effective transformation of the Labour Party into an instrument of socialist policies is the most **cripling** of all illusions to which socialists in Britain have been **prone**.¹ But this is not

what I propose to argue yet again here. It will be more useful to take up some of the more important considerations which are commonly advanced by socialists for working in the Labour Party, whatever the odds, and for not looking farther afield.

One such consideration is that the Labour Party is 'the party of the working class' and that 'there is no alternative to it.'

It should be granted at the outset that there is indeed much strength in the claim that the Labour Party is 'the party of the working class.' Electorally, it is overwhelmingly the party of that major part of the working class which does not vote Conservative or Liberal, and now Scottish Nationalist and possibly soon Scottish Labour, and Welsh Nationalist. In electoral terms, whether at national or local level, the Labour Party occupies a crushingly dominant position in relation to other groupings on the left. Its nearest rival, namely the Communist Party, is in fact no rival at all; and such other left groupings as venture into electoral politics obtain even more derisory results. The new Scottish Labour Party may well do better, but must obviously be taken as a special case (although a significant one), which does not invalidate the general point.

At the level of membership, the Labour Party is also enormously stronger than any of its rivals on the left, with nearly 700,000 members as compared with the 28,000 or so members claimed by the Communist Party, and the two or three thousand members, on the most generous estimate, of the International Socialists and the Workers' Revolutionary Party, the few hundred members of the International Marxist Group, and the even smaller membership of a scatter of different sects.

Of course, 'membership' is a deceptive term, which tells one very little about levels of commitment, It has to be reckoned that a large and probably the largest part by far of the membership of the Labour Party is fairly nominal and mostly passive, except at election time. Its truly activist membership is unlikely to exceed 50-75,000 people. However, the same criteria must be applied to the Communist Party, and its activist membership is unlikely to exceed 5-8,000 members, the difference in proportion being due to the higher level of commitment which may be expected from C.P. members as compared with Labour Party ones. These estimates may be rounded off with, say, a few hundred activists for the Workers' Revolutionary Party and the International Socialists, and so on for the other groupings on the left.²

Still, when all such reckonings have been made and weighed up, it is evident that the only party of the left which can claim something of a 'mass' membership and a 'mass' basis is the Labour Party; and that no other party or grouping on the left even remotely approaches it. The membership of the Labour Party has tended to decline in the last twenty years and it is also worth noting that, at every election since 1951 with the exception of 1966, the number of votes and the percentage of votes cast for Labour

have diminished. But whatever significance this may have, it still leaves the Labour Party as a 'mass' party and its rivals nowhere.

This major fact goes a long way to explain why so many people who belong to the socialist left cling to the Labour Party, notwithstanding all their disappointments and disillusionments. Here, and here alone, they argue, in the party of the working class and of organised labour; and here therefore is where socialists ought to try and make their influence felt, the more so since it is possible to fight for socialist policies inside the Labour Party, without nowadays much danger of expulsion or other difficulties.

There are some very large flaws in this argument. Thus to say that the Labour Party is the party of the working class is one thing, and as I have noted a very important one. But this affords absolutely no answer to the point at issue, namely that a socialist party is needed in Britain, and that the Labour Party is not it, and will not be turned into it. To say that it is the party of the working class is, on this view, to open the discussion, not to conclude it. It might be otherwise if there was any likelihood that the Labour Party could be turned into a socialist formation: but this is precisely the premise which must, on a realistic view, be precluded.

Nor can the argument that 'there is no alternative' to the Labour Party be taken as in any way conclusive. If it means that there is not the slightest chance of bringing into being an alternative *mass* party in the relevant future, and that the Labour Party will continue for a long time to be the major 'party of the working class', there need be no dispute about it, since it is so obviously true. But the idea is not to bring about all at once a mass party, which would very soon be able to supplant the Labour Party. This is a silly notion. What is at issue is something very different, namely the question of the possibility of creating a socialist party which would at first be necessarily fairly small but which would have a capacity for growth such as the existing formations on the left of the Labour Party do not have and are not likely to acquire.

There is also the question of the trade unions. Those who support continued work in the Labour Party and reject any exploration of an alternative to it also do so on the ground that the Labour Party has the support of the trade unions and that no other party of the left has any chance of attracting any such support in any time span that matters. Notwithstanding tensions and difficulties, the unions continue to see the Labour Party as their necessary political expression and their affiliation to it, in every sense, remains secure and all but unquestioned.

This too is not in dispute. But neither does it have much relevance to the question under discussion. A set of peculiar circumstances have **created** an organic link between the trade unions and the Labour Party that does not exist in most other countries with strong socialist movements; and there is no reason to think that such an organic link is an essential condition for the viability, growth and influence of a socialist party of a

serious sort. Clearly, the support of *trade unionists* is vital for the purpose. But that is not at all the same thing as an organic and organisational link with trade unions. That such a link has been very valuable to the Labour Party is obvious. But there is no case for saying that it is essential for a serious socialist party. Such a party, to repeat, would need to include many trade unionists; and it would focus much of its work on the trade unions and seek to gain a hearing and influence in them. That would be enough to go on with, and the record of the Communist Party in **this** connection shows something of what is possible without organic links, and despite the marked hostility of trade union leaderships. In any case, the idea that the peculiar link between the trade unions and the Labour Party is an argument for accepting the latter's quasi-monopoly or that it sets a solid bar on the creation and growth of a socialist party of some substance is quite unwarranted. Not only is such a link unnecessary: it is in many ways undesirable.

There are socialists who work in the Labour Party not because they believe in its socialist potential, but in order, as they see it, the better to expose its leaders, to widen the gulf between these leaders and the militants in the rank and file, and generally to exacerbate the Party's internal tensions and contradictions. These endeavours, which have often formed part of a strategy of 'entrism' episodically favoured by this or that revolutionary grouping, have never come to anything much. They have produced ructions of various kinds, notably in the Labour Party's successive Youth organisations, but the Party leaders have always found it quite easy to cope with the problems which 'entrism' has created for them. As for those responsible for the ructions, they have generally passed on, and left little if any trace of their presence. It is not serious left-wing politics.

It is however one form of expression of a much more general aspiration, which has held generation after generation of socialists in its thrall, and which consists in the hope of '**capturing**' the Labour Party for the adoption *and the carrying out* of socialist policies. The point is not here that this is an illusion but rather that it is the obverse phenomenon which has very commonly occurred, namely the 'capturing' of the militants by the Labour Party. This is not only true at the parliamentary level, though it is there that it has been most obviously true. But it has also occurred at the grassroots: people on the left who have set out with the intention of transforming the Labour Party have more often than not ended up being transformed by it, in the sense that they have been caught up in its rituals and rhythms, in ineffectual resolution-mongering exercises, in the resigned habituation to the unacceptable, even in the cynical acceptance and even expectation of betrayal. A new socialist formation should be able to attract at least some of these people.

But why a *new* socialist formation? Why not any of the existing alternatives on the left? Why not the Communist Party? And if not the

Communist Party, why not any of the other parties, groupings and sects on the left?

The Communist Party is the only party on the left of the Labour Party which has a genuine political and industrial implantation in the labour movement. It is small but not negligible. It is a Marxist party, of a sort, and many of its members are devoted and experienced activists. A good many of them are young and have been recruited in recent years. Some members of the Communist Party have acquired positions of responsibility and influence in trade unions; and whether this is because they are Communists or despite of it, the fact is that they are elected and re-elected and known to be members of the Party. The Communist Party has a daily newspaper, a fortnightly journal, a monthly theoretical magazine, a publishing house and printing presses. In quantitative terms, this is not very **impressive**—*The Morning Star* is reputed to print some 40,000 copies a day, a fair number of which are sold to the USSR and other Communist countries in Eastern Europe. But in comparison with all other organisations of the left, the Communist Party is obviously something of a force, particularly if account is taken of the fact that its influence has always been and is still much greater than its numbers would suggest. Many people who belong to the Labour Left and others who are generally speaking on **the** left have much sympathy for it, the more so since it has shed some of its most obnoxious characteristics in the period since 1956. The fact that the C.P. cannot elect a Member of Parliament and does not do well, to put it mildly, in local elections either, is a matter of political significance that must not be too easily dismissed, since it does indicate a real weakness and lack of popular resonance. But this is not, in the present context, to be taken as a conclusive proof of its inadequacy as an 'alternative' socialist party. Such an electoral criterion would be much too narrow—and in any case, **no** socialist party of any kind (except possibly in Scotland) could expect to do better for a fair while.

The reasons why the Communist Party is not the socialist formation that is needed lie elsewhere. There is first of all the fact that its main political perspective is to help persuade the Labour Party to adopt and carry out 'left policies'. It is very remarkable that the Communist Party appears to have accepted as a more or less permanent and irrevocable fact the Labour Party's domination of the labour movement. It wants to inflect the Labour Party's orientations in leftward directions; but it carefully refrains from any suggestion that the Labour Party must be dislodged, in however long-term a perspective, from the commanding position it occupies on the left if the notion of socialist advance is to acquire any serious meaning. 'Contrary to the ideas spread by some Labour leaders', the Communist Party Programme (*The British Road to Socialism*) notes, 'it is not the aim of the Communist Party to undermine, weaken or split the Labour Party.' 'As Communists', it declares, 'we sincerely desire the strengthening of the

left trends within the Labour Party', and the Programme goes on to affirm the belief that 'the struggle of the socialist forces to make it a party of action and socialism will grow, and that the growth of the Communist Party will help this development.' It then follows that 'when (*sic*) the Labour Party rejects reformism, moves into the attack on capitalism, ends the bans and proscriptions against the left, it will ensure itself a vital role in the building of socialism. . . .³³

When challenged, Communists tend to admit that this does *not* amount to a belief that the Labour Party will be transformed into the kind of socialist organisation required to assume the leadership of socialist advance in Britain; and many of the formulations of *The British Road to Socialism* are sufficiently ambiguous to allow diverse interpretations of what is involved when it speaks of 'Labour-Communist unity' and the like. But this is of no serious account. For all practical purposes, the Communist Party accepts the Labour Party's domination of the labour movement and places its hopes on the strengthening of the left in the Labour Party. What it wants is a Labour Party and a Labour Government that would pursue 'left policies' ('Our strategy', Gordon McLennan, the General Secretary of the Communist Party, told the 1975 Congress, 'is for the return of a Labour Government committed by the pressure of the mass movement to **left** policies'). Communists also proclaim that a strong Communist Party is necessary to enhance the pressure of the mass movement. But it is nevertheless on the Labour Party and on those who lead it that the pressure is to be exercised, for the effective translation of 'left policies' into actual measures to be carried out by a Labour Government.

But Communists also know perfectly well that the leaders of the Labour Party have absolutely no intention of embarking on the 'left policies' which the Communist Party advocates. This is why they are driven to attack the Labour Party's present 'rightwing' leaders, and to help foster the perennial hope that it will eventually be led by better, more 'leftwing' ones. Given their acceptance of the Labour Party's domination of the labour movement as a scarcely to be questioned datum, the Communists find themselves in the same box as the Labour Left, and seek to offer the same illusory way out of it.

At a more immediate level, the Communist Party tends to see the Labour Left as a bridge between itself and the rank and file of the Labour Party. What it fails to see is that the Labour Left has traditionally been and remains a bridge (and a much-trampled bridge at that) between the rank and file and the Labour leadership. The Labour Left does not, so to speak, open out leftwards but rightwards: it affords an important link between the activists and the leadership, and cannot as a constituent element of the Labour Party help but do so. It may be a nuisance at times; but it is **nevertheless** exceedingly useful to the Labour leaders. It helps to keep alive the myth of a transformable Labour Party. The Communist Party in its turn

and at one remove is involved in the same enterprise.

This is not to suggest that the Communist Party should gratuitously and ridiculously proclaim itself as the alternative 'vanguard' party of the working class, or any such. Nor is the Communist Party to be reproached for seeking to put pressure on the Labour Party or on a Labour Government or for trying to influence the Labour Left or any other part of the labour movement. Any socialist party must try and make such connections and refuse to immure itself in self-righteous and sectarian isolation. But trying to make connections and open lines of communication and even cooperation is a very different matter from the pursuit of the politics of illusion in which the Communist Party has been engaged for more than forty years.

The fact that these policies should have been pursued for all this length of time without provoking at least vigorous debate in the Party is very significant, and suggests another and major reason for the inadequacy of the Communist Party. It is not after all as if these policies had brought it much success or even any success—if anything rather the reverse. Yet, and save for isolated mutterings here and there, there has not in all this time been any serious debate in the Communist Party on the absolutely central issue of the Labour Party and of the **C.P.'s** relationship to it. All that there has been is the endless reiteration of received policies, and that reiteration has now assumed the character of a traditional litany which makes its expected appearance in every pronouncement of the party—'left unity', 'exposing the **Right-wing** Labour leaders', 'strengthening the left in the Labour Party', 'the need for a strong Communist Party', and so on.

The reason for this lack of serious debate on this issue is very simple. It has to do with the fact that the Communist Party is an exceedingly *managed* party, in which the leadership is well able to reduce the scope and extent of debate; and to do so in the name of a 'democratic centralism' which is in fact a device for the oligarchic control of the leadership over its members.

It is quite true that a good deal has changed in the internal life and climate of the Communist Party in these last twenty years. So far as an outsider can judge, there is now much more 'tolerance' for divergent and dissident views, and these even find occasional expression in *The Morning Star* (mainly in the form of letters) and at Party Congresses. There is also now the possibility of serious and animated discussion *at branch level*. But between the rank and file in the branches on the one hand, and the leadership on the other, there is a thick layer of bureaucratic defences and devices which decisively *limit* the impact of rank and file debate, *defuse* opposition and *prevent* its organisation in the name of a sacrosanct 'ban on factions', and generally ensure that the right people—in other words the people of whom the existing leadership approves—remain in the key positions of party control and the wrong ones are kept out. The fact is that

the democratic claims which the Communist Party regularly makes for its own internal organisation are a sham, save perhaps at the lower levels of the party. It has not yet begun to learn the meaning of the 'inner-party democracy' of which it boasts, and cannot do so as long as it continues to worship the sacred cows of 'democratic centralism' and the 'ban on factions'.

The result is that it is an extremely traditional and uncreative party, which exudes a very strong impression of intellectual paralysis, as a party, and of political conservatism. There is nothing about it which suggests any capacity for reinvigoration and renewal. This is not a matter of old hacks being in command, as is sometimes suggested. It is rather that its own rules of conduct make it inevitable that hacks, old *and* young, should be in command. In *this* respect, nothing much seems to have changed in the Communist Party over the years.

It is, not very paradoxically, the item of policy where change has been most obvious which also shows up in a cruel light the stiffness of limb of the Communist Party. This is the item which relates to its attitudes and pronouncements concerning the Soviet Union.

The Communist Party is now quite willing to do what would have been inconceivable before **1956** (and for some time after), namely express occasional criticism of certain Soviet internal and external policies—for instance the treatment of dissidents in the USSR and the invasion of Czechoslovakia in **1968**. This has also been extended to include the occasional expression in Party publications of views suggesting that there are certain deep structural problems which the Soviet regime has not resolved. For anyone who remembers the totally unconditional endorsement of absolutely everything Soviet before **1956**, however absurd or criminal, this is advance indeed.

But on other (and more appropriate) criteria, it is impossible not to note how cramped and constricted, how reluctant and limited, how laggard and uncreative the change has been. The point is not that the Communist Party should have turned itself into another agency of anti-Soviet propaganda and sought to emulate the capitalist and Chinese press in the denunciation of the USSR. It is rather that the Party never at any time in these two decades gave any sign that it could or wanted to produce a serious socialist critique of Soviet experience and Soviet policies, such as might have made a really useful contribution to a discussion which is crucial to the international socialist movement. Nor has the Communist Party shown any sign that it wanted to engage in a critical reassessment of the impact of Stalinism and the Soviet connection on *the British Communist Party*. It is after all not only on Stalinism in the Soviet Union that light needs to be cast: it is also on Stalinism in Britain and in the British Communist Party. If a party is to learn from its mistakes, as the Communist Party constantly says it wants to do, it must first be willing to

identify what these mistakes were and to discuss them freely.

The Communist Party has proved incapable of any of this. Twenty years after the XXth Party Congress, the Party's former General Secretary, John Gollan, has produced a 20,000 words article in *Marxism Today* which must be taken, and has been taken, to represent the most important pronouncement of the Party to date on Stalinism and socialist democracy.⁴ It is in fact a lamentable document, written in the familiar wooden style associated by long usage with such productions, mealy-mouthed, full of careful ambiguities and euphemisms, and generally content to repeat what have become the most commonplace formulas in the Communist movement concerning Stalinism and its consequences.

It must be taken as significant that an article such as this, on this subject, should be the best that the Communist Party is able to offer to its readers and to the labour movement at large. One is told that what matters is not what Gollan says but that he should have said it in *Marxism Today* and thus made possible a more thorough discussion than hitherto. But even if true, this is a sad comment on the state of the Communist Party. And the overwhelming chances are that it is not true, and that the discussion will proceed in the traditionally constrained ways which the nature and structure of the Party render inevitable. Nor is it to be overlooked that it will proceed, for the most part, on the assumption which is central to the thinking of the Communist Party's leadership, and which John Gollan expresses very well when he says that the problems of the socialist system which he takes the Soviet Union to be are 'essentially problems of growth and further economic and social development, including that of socialist democracy and its political institutions.' This blandly complacent view of the Soviet system as a still-not-perfect version of socialism, but as a definite version of it nevertheless, is not conducive to serious discussion and appraisal.

What is at issue here is not an 'academic' discussion or appraisal but a political question of great practical importance, namely the attitude which a socialist party, of the kind which the British left requires, should have in relation to the Soviet Union. What may be said about it here is that this attitude cannot be that of the Communist Party, which continues to treat the USSR as the senior, if no longer as the dominant, member of a great international socialist family. It is no doubt a comfortable and comforting idea; but also a damaging and stultifying one. It renders more difficult, to put it too mildly, the exercise of an independence of judgment and a freedom of criticism in regard to *all* regimes which a socialist party, in the real world, absolutely must have; and which the Communist Party, given its past traditions and present stances, cannot have.

On the other hand, the Russian question is a deeply divisive one for the Communist Party. There is a part of the membership which now takes a very adverse view of the USSR and other Communist countries, on various

socialist grounds. There is another part of the membership which is rather Stalinist in disposition: some of these members are the remnants of a bygone era who hanker for the certitudes which gave them strength and endurance. Others are newer and younger people who see the defence of the Soviet Union and of Stalin—indeed of Stalinism—as part of an affirmation of a socialist and revolutionary commitment which they see most of their own leaders as having lost in a 'revisionist' withdrawal. The fact that this is a very misguided way to affirm a socialist and revolutionary commitment is not here relevant. For the rest, there are all shades and nuances, with the leadership committed as described earlier, yet varyingly uneasy in that commitment. This is not a good situation for a socialist party. But the Communist Party appears unable to get out of it; and the issue wont go away.

Nothing has so far been said about the 'parliamentarism', 'electoralism', and the 'reformism' in general for which the C.P. is constantly denounced by its opponents on the left. This will be discussed presently. But whatever may be made of these strictures, they are of far less importance than the deficiencies discussed here.

The weaknesses of the parties, groupings and sects on the left of the Communist Party are different in several important respects.

All these organisations have one major characteristic in common: this is that they are all really very small and in some cases ridiculously small. This is no ground for their automatic rejection, but it is nevertheless an important **and** in some ways a crucial fact, all the more important because some at least of these groupings have been in existence in one form or another for a fair length of time and have not managed to achieve much or any growth. What is also notable about this failure is that it has occurred over a period of time when economic and political conditions have been sufficiently varied to suggest that their capacity for growth *under any circumstances* that it is reasonable to anticipate for the relevant future is very low. In short, there is no reason whatever to believe that any of them is going to be able to achieve any kind of political take-off, such as would turn it, say, into a party of ten thousand members and upwards. On the contrary, the signs are that the existing organisations on the left of the C.P. are facing difficult times, with divisions, splits, regroupings and the like—all without any grip on the political life of the labour movement.

This last point is the one which really matters. There is no inherent merit in numbers and size, and it would certainly be a great mistake to dismiss as of no account the growth, however modest, of 'ultra-left' groupings in the course of the last twenty years. Their presence on the left scene, much more notable than that of earlier such groupings, is one of the important developments of the last two decades; and their impact too has been many-sided and out of proportion to their actual membership. But a socialist party which wants to play a really serious role in the labour **move-**

ment must have, or show signs of being able to acquire, a much more solid implantation than any of the groups concerned have been able to achieve or appear likely to achieve. And this must be taken as being particularly true under-bourgeois democratic conditions, such as have prevailed in Britain. No doubt, very small groupings may keep going more or less indefinitely, and make some sort of impact. But that is not the point. A socialist party requires a lot more than this, and this means a capacity to attract the kind of membership referred to earlier, and to go on attracting more people.

It is clearly necessary to ask why these groupings of the 'ultra-left' have not fared better—a good deal depends on the answer.

For the groupings themselves, there is no real problem. They explain their relative lack of success, in so far as they acknowledge it at all, in terms of a working class false consciousness engendered by the hegemony of the ruling class and its control of what Marx called the 'mental means of production'; by the weight of tradition; by the 'reformism' of the existing working class parties and their leaders, notably the Labour Party, and also the Communist Party.

The importance of any such factors in shaping working class consciousness is not here at issue. The point is rather that these factors do not explain why none of the 'ultra-left' groupings have been able to attract more people who do already have a genuine commitment to the socialist cause. The question is not why any of the groupings of the 'ultra-left' have failed to become mass parties or even large parties; it is why they have scarcely become parties at all. To this question, they themselves do not provide a worthwhile answer.

The answer which is usually provided by their critics on the left has to do with certain further characteristics which these groupings, for all their many ideological, programmatic and organisational differences, tend to share in varying degrees. This very prominently includes a narrow doctrinal sectarianism which in some instances assumes extreme and even grotesque forms; a marked tendency to believe that the final crisis of capitalism is more or less imminent, to which is naturally allied a strong propensity to adventurist sloganeering; and an internal rigidity of organisation which makes the Communist Party's 'democratic centralism' appear by comparison as a veritable model of inner-party democracy.

These are indeed unpleasant characteristics. But one may well ask whether they are not symptoms rather than causes; and whether the reason for the lack of attraction of the groupings of the 'ultra-left' must not be sought in much more deeply-rooted characteristics. I believe that this is the case; and that the main cause of their lack of attraction is not their sectarianism, dogmatism, adventurism and authoritarianism but their basic perspectives as to the ways of socialist advance in Britain. It is this which produces their isolation; and it is their isolation which at least in part if not wholly produces their unpleasant characteristics.

All these organisations have a common perception of socialist change in terms of a revolutionary seizure of power on the Bolshevik model of October 1917. This is their common point of departure and of arrival, the script and scenario which determines their whole mode of being. But this Bolshevik model has very little appeal in the working class movements of bourgeois democratic regimes in general, and virtually no appeal in the British working class movement. The context of a bourgeois democratic regime, in Britain at least as much as elsewhere, imposes upon revolutionary socialists a strategy of advance which has to include a real measure of electoral legitimation.

This is in no way to suggest that electoral legitimation is all that a socialist party needs to seek or that a socialist party which means business can afford to rely on such legitimation alone. On the contrary, there is no question that an attempt at the radical transformation of the existing social order in socialist directions will require a lot more than this, within a complex and diffuse scenario that must include many different forms of action, pressure and struggle.

But it also does need to include the attempt to achieve a measure of electoral legitimation at different levels and the achievement of a measure of representation in existing institutions. In the British context, as in the context of any other bourgeois democratic regime, this is an inescapable requirement for a socialist party, and needs to be treated as such, as a duty and as an opportunity, and not as a distracting and meaningless chore.

In *The British Road to Socialism*, the Communist Party speaks of the creation by the labour movement, and as a result of a many sided struggle, of 'the conditions for the election of a Parliamentary majority and government pledged to a socialist programme';⁶ and it also suggests that 'when a socialist majority in Parliament is won it will need the support of the mass movement outside Parliament to uphold the decisions it has taken in Parliament. Conversely, the Parliamentary decisions will give legal endorsement to popular aims and popular struggles'.⁷

It is very reasonable to argue that formulas such as these place too great an emphasis on the parliamentary and electoral aspects of a strategy of socialist advance; and also that they offer much too cramped a view of the meaning of socialist democracy. This is what the 'ultra-left' groupings have always claimed. But they have usually tended to spoil a reasonable case by arguing in terms which had little if any relevance to the real conditions at hand. They have rightly been concerned to warn against the dangers of 'parliamentary cretinism'. But they have themselves easily succumbed to the temptations of anti-parliamentary cretinism and to the attractions of revolutionary phrase-mongering. There is no reason to think that this will change: it clearly answers the particular needs and wishes of a small and constantly changing but constant minority of militants on the British left.

Nor is there any good reason to think that the Communist Party will

eventually be able to fill the gap that exists on the left. In order to do so, it would have to transform itself so thoroughly as to become a new party: it is not a realistic expectation.

This is not a comfortable conclusion. For there are many formidable obstacles which stand in the way of political renewal on the left. Yet such a renewal is necessary if an effective challenge is to be posed to the domination which the Labour Party exercises over the labour movement: nothing much by way of socialist advance will be possible until such a challenge can be effectively posed. This requires the formation of a socialist party free from the manifold shortcomings of existing organisations and able to draw together people from such organisations as well as people who are now politically homeless. By no means the least of its purposes would be to provide a credible and effective rallying point to help in the struggle against the marked and accelerating drift to the right in Britain.

It is of course necessary to discuss the orientations, programme and organisation of such a party. Some of this has been suggested here by implication. But there is a large range of matters which need to be tackled and worked out. Socialists who believe that the time has come to move on should begin to explore seriously what can be done about it.

NOTES

1. See for instance the Postscript to the second edition of *Parliamentary Socialism* (Merlin Press, 1972); and for a critique of the argument, see Ken Coates, 'Socialists and the Labour Party', in *The Socialist Register*, 1973.
2. These are not of course the only organisations which include socialist activists of one sort or another—though most such activists are likely to be in one or other of the political organisations of the left.
3. *The British Road to Socialism*, third revised edition October 1968, p. 24.
4. John Gollan, 'Socialist Democracy—Some Problems', *Marxism Today*, January 1976.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
6. *The British Road to Socialism*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 48.