

AN ALTERNATIVE POLITICS

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I

This challenge must be accepted, for at least two reasons. First, because the Labour Party is now subject to change, though to what extent and in what direction is still uncertain. Second, because those of us who are committed to the Labour movement, yet who are critics of what has been accurately called Labourism, have an obligation to engage with practical policy, at the levels at which this is ordinarily determined, even when we also insist on discussing those problems of theory and assumption which these processes typically evade.

It is of course perfectly possible that there will not, again, be a monopoly Labour Government. The coalition with Liberalism and with right-wing Social Democracy, which has been a fact of life for socialists inside the Labour Party, may become an even more formal constraint. Significantly the chances largely depend on the variables of negative voting. If we cannot believe that enough people will vote against Thatcherism there is no point in any projection. Yet the probability of the continuation of much merely negative, anti-Government voting, and of this as decisive, is itself a critical factor in the evolution of those political forces which, in a sense arbitrarily, benefit from it. The depth of the real crisis can be in effect ignored by identifying it with an existing government, until it seems that the mere fact of an alternative government is itself a solution. Yet since memories of identification of the crisis with a Labour Government are still quite fresh, negative voting may produce quite new forms of confusion.

However, the only response that is then possible to British socialists is a serious attempt to build positive forces and programmes for real change. The current position of what is called the Leadership—'don't rock the boat, let's unite to get Thatcher out'—is not only an opportunist negativism; it is also complacent in its assumption that it is bound to be the beneficiary, and that if it is it will know what to do (except to go on being the Leadership). On the other hand a serious alternative is not only a matter of

programmes; it is above all a matter of building (for they will not be inherited from that sequence of negotiations) reasonably adequate social and political forces for positive change.

In an earlier essay (*New Socialist*, Autumn, 1981) I tried to describe the programmes and initiatives which are necessary before any serious Left policy is possible or is attempted in government. I agreed with current proposals and campaigns to democratise the Labour Party and to re-organise the independent Left, but I mainly emphasised a major effort in research and education, on a scale which has not been attempted for at least two generations. The present essay follows from that perspective and emphasis, and is mainly concerned with what could be done, in government, to extend and sustain that effort.

This is deliberately different from listing certain major political and economic policies. Of course these are crucial, but some of the best of them—the nuclear disarmament of Britain; the control of banks, insurance companies and pension funds for productive investment; exchange and import controls for the recovery of British industry—are typically presented as if they could be carried through on the basis of a parliamentary majority. This, even on the Left, is the Labourist perspective which is at the heart of the problem. For to carry through any of those policies, which would radically change economic and political power in this country and change also its formal alliances and its now enmeshed relations with international capital, would require a degree of sustained popular understanding and support which is of a quite different order from an inherited and in part negative electoral majority.

For the Left has not only been deceived by Labour Governments. It has often been defeated, and can expect to be defeated again, when its policies are at any real distance from serious and organised majority or potential majority opinion. The very powerful forces it is certain to encounter, in any of these initiatives—over a range from national and international institutions and companies, through widely distributed organisations for influencing public opinion, to the confusions, uncertainties and lack of information among its own potential supporters—are not of a kind to be defeated from a parliamentary centre alone. Thus however urgent any of these policies might be, in its own terms, the struggle for it will inevitably take place in much wider terms, and with all the forces in play. The 'alternative strategy', that is to say, is no more than an intellectual exercise unless it carries with it, and indeed as its priority, an alternative politics.

II

We can assume, for present purposes, that a Labour Government, with left policies, has some four years of parliamentary majority. The first question is then whether what happens is (a) steady implementation of its

programme or (b) a very early transition to what is called, significantly, 'crisis-management' or (c) some mixture, in critically variable proportions, of (a) and (b).

It is very striking that (b) almost always happens, and that it determines the mixture in the eventual (c). In fact this is only to say that in any country, but especially in one so exposed and involved in a wider arena as Britain, the reality gap between a manifesto and a government is to some extent inevitably wide. Vietnam, Rhodesia and Ulster had at least as much to do with the reality of the Labour Governments from 1964 to 1970 as any programmes and policies it had itself foreseen or instituted. It is this regular experience which underlies the right-wing opportunism, or even open cynicism about any planned public policy, which is now endemic among most politicians with actual experience of governing. Most of them go on presenting policies as if this were not so, but this means very little and in any case has the effect, beyond them, of sapping public belief in planned and rational policies. The current contempt for 'politicians', however deserved, is a major obstacle to all traditional socialist construction.

At the same time those who have come to view government as crisis-management, with themselves as its self-evident candidates, have in one way bridged the reality gap, by the practical cancellation of any hope of planned and radical change. This world-weary adaptation, behind a screen of public relations, is, however, more than a historical-occupational feature of contemporary political leaders. It is also, among better or more deserving people, a readily available response to an actual and prolonged complexity of crisis. To speak differently and positively, with actual commitment to change, is morally refreshing but is still on its own no alternative. It is not only that the reality gap is repeatedly ignored or denied, for what sound like good idealist reasons. It is also that the reality gap cannot, by definition, be bridged by proposals, however internally coherent or convincing these may be. For the reality of what is called, with a certain heroic air, crisis management, is that the crises are simply exposures to existing real relations, as distinct from the presumed and limited relations within which most programmes are formulated, and moreover that what is called management is never a merely neutral process of local response and negotiation, but is a practical disclosure of existing real forces and interests. Against such real pressures, not only public-relations manifestos but on their own even genuine and coherent programmes stand little chance of success. For these become, to the extent that they are serious, the crises that others move in to manage, with all available real forces.

We can take examples from three major policies already mentioned, all of which I strongly support. The nuclear disarmament of Britain would involve, at any of its stages, confrontation with the embedded forces of

the military-political alliance (both NATO as such and the political and economic relations which underlie it). The redirection of the financial institutions to British-based productive investment would encounter not only their massive immediate interests in their own profits, and not only their retaliatory capacity in government finance and the international monetary system, but also, unless other things were changed, the incorporated interests of those who now invest or save in them. Exchange and import controls would encounter not only the powerful interests of existing trading and monetary relations, and not only the direct interests of the powerful transnational companies, but also, in their effects on consumption, and certainly on prices and availability, the existing habits of a majority of our own people.

None of these points is an argument against the policies. Each of them, however, is an argument that should determine their actual politics. Beyond a parliamentary majority for a manifesto which promised them, and again beyond a party made accountable to such a manifesto—the two powerful campaigns which now command most energy, and by which the success or failure of the Left is ordinarily measured—the crucial requirement is a genuine popular majority or potential majority for the quite extraordinary struggles that would in fact, in any of these cases, ensue. Such a majority cannot be taken for granted in the fact of an electoral majority, since this typically includes negative and alternative voting of a less specific kind, and is in any case a vote for a bundle of policies which cannot by the act of general election be discriminated. Indeed many of the positive votes, here as so often before, would be for more employment, lower prices, less taxation and the usual ideal mix. None of these aspirations would have sufficient specific weight to sustain successful struggles on the scale that must be expected. Yet we are still asking, and for at least one more parliament reasonably, what can be done, if this is so, within the existing party and parliamentary structures.

III

The defining centre of any successful Left politics is the radical extension of genuine popular controls. This will have to take many forms. Some of these depend on institutional changes, which a government and parliament can effect. Some again are legislative changes, with direct parliamentary availability. Some, finally, are broader cultural changes, which can be radically encouraged by a Left party, both before and after its election to government.

The underlying purpose of all these changes is to build popular majorities from within but also going beyond the organised working class—for both local and general struggles. It is an attempted break beyond the politics of the most benevolent or determined representative administration. It is both a practical necessity if the representative administration is

to have any chance of success in its most serious conflicts with existing real forces, and is in itself the only acceptable direction, in societies like our own, of socialist change.

Consider first, then, some institutional changes. It is part of the weakness of Labourism, as we have known it, and also a main reason for a certain deep-rooted unpopularity, that it has nationalised important sectors of the economy, and proposes to nationalise more, without significantly altering either the internal class and work relations of such industries and services, or their external relations with the general economy and society. It should then be an early priority of a Labour Government to direct each nationalised industry and service to prepare and present proposals, based on the views of all those working in it, which will at least democratise and at best socialise what are already, nominally, publicly-owned and controlled institutions.

This would be only one side of the necessary reform. Alteration of existing financial directives to the productive institutions, and of existing financial limits on the service institutions, comes within more normal definitions of policy. But this needs to be supplemented, and made more rational, by new co-ordinating arrangements of a horizontal kind, at first alongside the existing vertical arrangements with different ministries. National Planning Councils, in both the productive and service sectors, could be instituted by direct and independent election from the bodies concerned. It is a particular vice of the modern state, with its important 'public' sectors, that on top of the process of parliamentary election there is a system of monopolist appointment to the control of public bodies, which is in fact intended to ensure verticalism, concentration of power and dependence.

It is clear that the requirements of public finance and investment necessarily involve responsibility to an elected government. But there would be substantial advantage in alternative and parallel forms of public responsibility, of a less monopolist and dependent kind. A process of co-ordination based on election from the various public bodies would give an alternative presence and voice, in the determination of public policies. Such Councils could, for example, have direct access to Parliament, alongside their relations with Ministries. Further reforms could be made in the network of what are now called Consumers' advisory bodies, now typically appointed and recruited by obscure and indirect procedures. Direct election to such bodies, either generally or from constituencies of actual users, could begin to make a reality of public responsibility, in phase with the increased reality of public ownership in the reformed constitutions of the providers.

Such changes would probably in fact improve efficiency, since there have been radical failures of co-ordination in the public sector, most clearly in energy policy, and since feedback from users is now notoriously

impeded by bureaucracy and divided responsibility. But the main purpose of the reforms would be political. There is no real prospect of socialist advance, along the necessary paths of public ownership, unless the deep unpopularity of many of the nationalised institutions is admitted as something more than reactionary prejudice. There are already quite enough enemies in the affected capitalist order, and it is crucial to shift majority opinion about existing and further public ownership by real measures of democratisation and direct public accountability. That would then be the political base from which further public ownership could proceed.

IV

Such changes would take time to work out, but for that reason should be initiated very early in a parliament. There would be severe competition for priorities, most evidently from the general crisis of employment and finance. But the crucial choice between a socialist programme and what would quite quickly become an adaptation to crisis management would occur almost at once, at this overtly political level. Exchange controls and some forms of import control need not encounter significant public opposition, in their early stages, and these would in any case have to be priorities. But every indicator of the probable shape of the economy at the time of an incoming Labour Government shows desperately narrow margins for any policy of regeneration. The Labour Party, right and left, seems still to believe that it could simply cancel Tory restrictions and resume a relatively indiscriminate expansion. It would quickly discover otherwise, and would soon be forced back to negative policies, after the first rush, and especially to negative kinds of wage controls.

It is within this context that the institution of public controls over the use of public money accumulated for specific purposes—in insurance, pension funds and bank savings—has to be politically directed. The forms of control would vary, and would doubtless begin with legislative requirements of minimum levels of publicly authorised investment in Britain. Yet since it will be necessary to go beyond this, in the especially sensitive area of insurance and pension funds, it is crucial that the policy should be designed from the beginning to defeat the inevitable and powerful propaganda against what will be called a State grab. Here as elsewhere (for example in taxation and especially national insurance policies) it is politically vital that the destination as well as the source of the funds should be both visible and a matter of sustained public discussion. The acquisition of such funds by an indiscriminate and secretive Treasury, or by some Ministerially-appointed Board, would generate formidable and perhaps decisive opposition. This is why all procurement for public investment must be accompanied, stage by stage, by the development of visible and publicly approved investment plans. This political requirement is even more important than the evident economic requirement.

There are some precedents on which to build, such as the National Enterprise Board in its original conception. But the whole planning process will have to be taken very much more seriously. Singular planning, either from Ministries or from a Ministerially-appointed Enterprise Board, should be steadily replaced by more complex and more open economic planning procedures. For it is a residual delusion, which the deep crisis of the economy would in practice quickly dispel, that the flow of public money to existing British industrial structures, or to these marginally modified, would be generally regenerative. Different principles have now to be introduced at a very early stage, and because they will involve many radical shifts in the shape of the economy they are from the beginning a political problem.

Nobody can delineate all these shifts in advance. Opposition parties and groups can make opportunist proposals, in which 'Investment' is merely investment in anything and everything. The most rigorous enquiry into genuine priorities will have to be undertaken, within what is now a quite desperate contraction. Because any such decisions will have radical social effects (no less so because it is obvious that the absence of decisions or the handing-over to international market forces will have effects even more disturbing) the problem of public planning will have to be made political in new ways. The attempt to develop a National Plan will have to be resumed, and as more than an assembly of *ad hoc* or existing market decisions. There is some realistic preparatory work for this in the industrial and sectoral working parties of NEDC, which need to be vigorously revived. But what is most needed is the introduction of some new principles.

Any National Plan must eventually rest with the elected government, but the stages of its development should not be monopolistic and internal, as typically in inherited socialist ideas. At an early stage, a Labour Government should appoint and fund at least two qualified Planning Groups, each of which should have access to all available public and industrial information. Each should have the responsibility of reporting, stage by stage, both to Parliament and more generally. The point of having at least two qualified organisations is that it makes the processes of rational choice at once more visible and more practicable. Public hearings on what would be likely to be alternative sets and mixes of priorities would be a process of building actual majority choices and support, and parallel public hearings on actual investment resources—bringing the financial institutions to the bar of opinion—would have the important political effect of the construction, stage by stage, of a genuine public interest.

We would of course have to learn by doing, and the difficulties are obvious and formidable. But it is my judgment that the time has passed, in this society, when a majority can be found for any sustained delegation of major controls over our work and our resources to any monopolist

bureaucracy backed by a temporarily elected government. Ministries can have major short-term effects, but at certain levels they can now be effectively frustrated by a range of autonomous social actions, from strikes and protest movements to the equally widespread forms of non-co-operation and evasion: often necessary but also almost all negative. As these build up, in their diverse forms, they assemble the eventually decisive negative voting. Thus the planning process will either be open and public, and in those senses pluralist, or it will not occur at all, except in short-run programmes. Moreover, as it weakens, it will be swamped, as always before, by capitalist power and its highly experienced market forces.

I would add, in parenthesis, my own sense of the very general priorities which would have to govern such a plan. It is in my view crucial to alter the indiscriminate emphasis on exports. It is clear that there are important and sustainable export areas, in high technology and some other advantageous sectors. But the priority, in my view, should be that of import substitution, in any area in which the marginal differentials are not too unreasonable. This includes, incidentally, food, where the current prejudice against European-type agriculture, on so much of the Left, is even in the medium-term absurd. Given actual developments in the world market, it is not going to be possible to re-establish the old simplicities of manufactured exports and imported cheap food, and a Labour Government could waste many of our real resources in attempting to re-establish that residual Imperial pattern. (This governs, incidentally, my attitude to the EEC. A National Plan, of the kind described, would, if it came to it, have to take priority over EEC membership, but there are some indications that one kind of National Plan, especially in its relations to the world monetary system and to the transnational companies, would at its best and strongest be co-ordinated with the other European economies, and while there is any chance of this the institutional connections could be retained).

V

The political character of initiatives in international policy hardly needs emphasis, but it is obvious that any radical initiative—and at the top of the list is nuclear disarmament—is quite extraordinarily sensitive and politically vulnerable. Here also I attach great importance to an extended policy of European co-operation. The policy of a nuclear-weapons-free Europe, East and West, has a much more sustainable political base than any simple unilateralism, though unilateral refusal of new developments in the arms race is important as one way of initiating and indeed enforcing more general negotiations. Any such refusal should be accompanied by proposals for a disarmament conference conducted directly between European powers. The delegation of European disarmament negotiations to the USA and USSR should be firmly challenged and resisted.

At the same time much could be done, within Britain, to open up the defence debate. A Labour Government could at once authorise serving members of the armed forces to give their views, directly to parliament and public, on the very complex and technical options now being internally argued. At the same time members of the armed forces could be given the trade-union and democratic rights already available elsewhere in Europe, and laws forbidding direct discussion between servicemen and civilians repealed. Any government which appears to threaten national security on the basis of one among many manifesto statements will become so weak, politically, that it will either not survive or will soon fall back into the existing lines. A vigorously promoted public discussion on the realities of national security is then the only sustainable political course for any radical initiatives.

VI

The common thread in these arguments is the positive institution of a more active and better informed democratic process. In this, beyond the particular areas of policy mentioned, there is much formal and informal work for a Labour Government to do. A Freedom of Information Act is an early priority. Virtually all other processes depend on it. Major investment in the new electronic communications systems is, in my view, another priority, since many of the kinds of public discussion described could best be carried out through these technologies, with their incomparable advantages of speed, interaction, and availability and recall of information. Most of these technologies are now being developed for marketing or for marginal entertainment, though their potential for public information, discussion and decision has already been demonstrated in pilot projects, which have not yet attracted the necessary public funding.

Within the older communications technologies, and especially in broadcasting, there should be new policies of non-commercial decentralisation, with professional companies leasing publicly-owned resources and being responsible to elected regional and local boards. The same transition to elected boards should be made in such bodies as the Arts Council. In education the present system of appointed governing bodies, at all levels, should be scrapped, and replaced by bodies elected from the relevant communities and immediate users. At the same time, as was argued in my earlier essay, the Labour movement, with all necessary support from a Labour Government, should develop as a matter of urgency alternative institutions of research, education and more general publicity.

Further areas for early action, in a wider field, include the development of new national policies for Scotland and Wales, related to extended English regional autonomies. Within these different areas the same popular processes and institutions must be given priority. One crucial example would be the transfer of day-to-day administration of council housing to

elected tenants' associations.

These are only indications of a general direction of policy. It is reasonable to object that to carry them all through would take more than four years. But my argument has been that the generation of active democracy is the central policy on which all more specific socialist programmes will stand or fall. What should frighten all of us is the prospect of a Labour Government, in part elected on a negative vote, trying in centralised and bureaucratic ways to effect radical shifts of power, and then in all probability not only failing but appearing to discredit the whole socialist enterprise, thus opening the way, as the British crisis continues to deepen, to an authoritarian Right which would make the present Thatcher Government seem liberal by comparison.

The old options for moderate and centrist policies seem to me, for both economic and social reasons, to have disappeared or to be fast disappearing in this now failing capitalist country. This may mean that the next Labour Government, if we even get that far, would be, in the medium term, a last chance. Many necessary policies are now being proposed and indeed, on paper, adopted. The struggle inside the Party is bringing some of its own decision-making processes into the open. But the issues will have to be fought in a very much larger arena, and since this is so the struggle is not only for the Party but for the people: for an informed, mobilised and determined majority which can alone make real changes.