

## SOCIALIST ADVANCE IN BRITAIN\*

Ralph Miliband

To speak of socialist advance in Britain a short time after the General Election of June 1983 may seem rather strange. For the election was a major defeat not only for the Labour Party but for all socialist forces; and while that defeat may eventually turn out to have had beneficial political effects, in that it may help to break the mould in which the labour movement has long been imprisoned, such a blessing is hypothetical whereas the immediate effects of Labour's defeat are very tangible. The election results have conferred a new legitimacy upon an exceptionally reactionary Conservative government; and they have also served to demoralise further a movement that was already in bad shape well before the election. It may be said—and indeed it should be said—that the Conservative Government only obtained 30.8 per cent of the total vote and 42.2 per cent of those who voted; and that its vote was less than in 1979. But the system is designed to put the main emphasis on the number of seats won rather than on votes cast; and the fact that the Government obtained a majority of 144 seats in the House of Commons makes it possible for it to claim, however spuriously, that it has a 'mandate' for the policies it chooses to put forward.

The extent of Labour's defeat has another long-term consequence which is clearly important, namely that it would require a net gain of well over 100 seats for Labour and a swing from Conservative to Labour of over 12 per cent to bring about a majority Labour Government. This kind of swing (to the Conservatives) has only occurred once in this century, in the exceptional circumstances of 1931, when a former Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, was leading what was in effect a Conservative coalition against the Labour Party. It is useless to speculate on how things will turn out in a General Election which is some years off: but it is nevertheless reasonable to believe that the extent of Labour's defeat, leaving aside all other detrimental factors, greatly reduces Labour's chances of being able to form a majority government for many years to come.

What adds further to the demoralisation of defeat is that the election

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results—as is agreed by everybody in the labour movement right, left and centre—are not the product of some extraordinary set of events whose impact will soon be dissipated, at which point the Labour Party will be restored to its former vigour, but rather the most dramatic manifestation of a deep-seated, long-term crisis, for which no immediate remedy is at hand. My purpose here is to discuss the nature of this crisis, in the light of Labour's election defeat; and to link this with the problem of socialist advance in Britain.

Of all the reasons which have been advanced for Labour's defeat, two have obtained the most currency. One of these is that changes in the composition and character of the working class have been such as to erode drastically the support which the Labour Party might expect from its 'natural' constituency; and the other one is that the Labour Party presented the image of a party so deeply divided as to inspire no confidence in its capacity to govern. Other reasons which have found favour include the lack of credibility of much of Labour's electoral programme; the dangerously 'extreme' nature of some of its proposals, notably on defence; the mismanagement of the election campaign, to which may be linked the personality of Michael Foot; the 'Falklands factor'; and so on. But it is upon the changes in the character and composition of the working class on the one hand, and the divisions in the Labour Party on the other, that most attention has come to be focused. I will argue that the first of these explanations is misconceived; and that the second is inadequate because it does not explain why divisions, which are nothing new in the Labour Party, have been so much more significant, intractable and damaging than in the past.

It is perfectly true that the Labour Party has suffered a steady loss of electoral support since its peak achievement of nearly fourteen million votes in the General Election of **1951**, with **48.8** per cent of the votes cast. By **1983**, this had fallen to 27.6 per cent, the lowest percentage share of Labour's vote since **1918**, when the Labour Party did not contest over one third of the seats. In **1951**, the Labour Party also had an individual membership of around a million: by the early eighties this had dropped to not much more than a quarter of that figure.

It should first be said about the explanations which have found most favour to account for this loss of support that they have a strong ideological purpose: for thirty years now, a shoddy sociology has been invoked by anti-socialist politicians and commentators in the Labour Party and outside as part of an endeavour to rid the Labour Party of those of its commitments which ran counter to their own 'moderate' positions. A certain code language has grown up over the years to obscure the nature of these endeavours. After Labour had lost office in **1951**, despite its

remarkable electoral performance, it was widely said that the Labour Party must 'rethink' its policies—and who could be against 'rethinking'? After the electoral defeats of **1955** and **1959**, it was widely said that the trouble with the Labour Party was that it was saddled with commitments that belonged to an earlier age, and that it must come to terms with a new 'age of affluence': Labour must lose, so long as it refused to renew its image and its message, meaning that it must shed what formal socialist commitments it had. After the defeat of **1983**, it has been said that the Labour Party must 'learn to listen' to what 'ordinary' people were saying—and who could be so unreasonable as to refuse to listen? When all the verbiage and coded language is cast aside, however, what is left is the insistence that the Labour Party must dilute its policies and programmes, and adopt more 'moderate' positions. This was the whole burden of the battle which Hugh Gaitskell waged in the fifties to change the Labour Party, to 'adapt it to the modern age', to 'bring it up to date', and so forth. The attempt focused on Clause Four of the Labour Party Constitution: unless there was a clear repudiation of this preposterous commitment to nationalise everything in sight, including street corner shops and garages, it was said, the Labour Party was doomed to electoral disaster and annihilation. The attempt failed. Clause Four remained in the Party Constitution (with as little effect as ever before); and notwithstanding the 'age of affluence' which was supposed to have anaesthetised the working class, Labour won the election of **1964** on a platform not markedly less 'radical' than previous ones; and it went on to win the election of **1966** with a majority of **97** seats. Nor did the 'radicalism' of Labour's electoral platform in February **1974**, with its pledge to bring about 'a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families' prevent Labour from winning the election then, or the one in October of that year, again with a much increased majority.

Nothing of this is to suggest that the fact of decline in popular support is not very real: it is simply to note that explanations for it usually advanced by anti-socialist commentators are highly suspect and an intrinsic part of the battle which has been waged against the Left in the Labour Party and outside ever since World War Two—indeed ever since the Labour Party came into being. So too has it been waged since Labour's electoral defeat of May **1979**. Once again, it has been said from many quarters that the working class, in so far as it could still be thought of as a class at all, was no longer what it was, and could not be expected to support a Labour Party which obstinately refused to come to terms with these changes (read: 'refused to dilute its policies').

Here too, the point is not to deny that changes in the working class have occurred. 'Traditional' occupations and industrial production have declined, and their decline has been accelerated by the Conservative

Government's policies; white collar and public service employment has grown and those engaged in it form a larger proportion of the working class than heretofore. It is also possible, but by no means certain in the light of the history of the working class, that 'sectionalism' has grown; and it is unquestionably true that unemployment and the fear of unemployment have reduced the willingness of many workers to engage in strike action. The question, however, is what impact these and other changes in the working class may have on its political attitudes and allegiances; and it is here that instant sociology turns into special pleading and bad faith.

To begin with, a very large fact needs to be recalled about the political attitudes of the working class, namely that a very substantial part of it has never supported Labour at all, even in the inter-war years of depression, mass unemployment, the Means Test and Tory retrenchment. Instant sociology often seems to imply that there was a time of depression and poverty when the working class of course supported Labour: but that in the age of affluence, of home ownership (a new favourite in the explanation of working-class 'de-radicalisation'), a car in every garage, consumerism, video cassettes and holidays in Spain, no such automatic support could be expected. This conveniently overlooks the fact that, even if one leaves out all general elections from 1918 to 1935, when the Tory and Liberal Parties obtained a vast preponderance of working-class votes against the Labour Party, the General Election of 1935 returned the 'National' Government (in effect a Tory Government) with a majority of well over 200 seats.

This betokens an enduring conservatism in large sections of the working class; and it was this conservatism (which does not necessarily betoken allegiance to the Conservative Party) which was greatly shaken—but not overcome—by the traumas of war. As a result, the Labour Party, after forty-five years of existence, two World Wars and a Great Depression, was at long last able to win a majority of seats in the House of Commons—146—with 48.3 per cent of the votes cast. Even then, the Conservative Party was still supported by nearly ten million voters (39.8 per cent) and the Liberal Party by nearly two-and-a-half million. Twelve million people had voted for the Labour Party.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the pro-Labour and the anti-Labour votes were more or less evenly divided. Nor can it be assumed that the majority of those who did vote Labour, then and later, were fired by particularly strong radical sentiments. Many perhaps were. But many Labour voters, in 1945, were probably doing no more than expressing a general sentiment that the time had come for a new deal for the working class in Britain, and that the Labour Party was the party to bring it about. Nevertheless, and for all its limitations, the victory of 1945 was a great advance: but instead of being enlarged, that basis was steadily narrowed in subsequent years. I will argue that the main responsibility

for this shrinkage lies with Labour leaders and the 'labourism' which provided their ideological and practical framework. But it is at any rate clear, on the historical evidence, that neither the deprivations and sufferings of the 'old' working class, nor the 'affluence' of the 'new' (in any case always grossly exaggerated) provides an adequate explanation for the support or lack of support which Labour has obtained: here is vulgar economic determinism indeed, whose inadequacy is further confirmed by the fact that Labour's loss of support has continued through the last ten years of economic crisis, retrenchment and retreat.

What has sometimes been called 'Labour Socialism'<sup>2</sup> is a loose amalgam of many different strands of thought—Christian ethics, Fabian collectivism, a radical and democratic tradition of reform, based on age-old notions of social justice, equality, cooperation and fellowship. Even so, 'labourism' seems a better label for the ideology which has moved Labour's leaders—and many others in the labour movement—for a hundred years past. Labourism has never been turned into a systematic body of thought; and its adherents and practitioners have frequently made a virtue of their 'practical' sense, their rejection of 'theory', and their freedom from all 'isms' (and they themselves have never adopted 'labourism' as a label for their views). But it is nevertheless ideological promptings suitably called by that name which have guided their practice.

Labourism is above all concerned with the advancement of concrete demands of immediate advantage to the working class and organised labour: wages and conditions of work; trade-union rights; the better provision of services and benefits in the field of health, education, housing, transport, family allowances, unemployment benefits, pensions and so on. These demands may be clad in the garb of 'socialism' but most leaders of the labour movement, however much they might believe in some vague and remote socialist alternative to the present social order, have in practice only had a very weak concern—in so far as they have had any concern at all—with large socialist objectives. The reforms they have sought have never been conceived as part of a strategy for the creation of a fundamentally different kind of society, but rather as specific responses to immediate ills and needs. Their horizons have been narrowly bound by the capitalist environment in which they found themselves, and whose framework they readily took as given; and it is within its framework and the 'rationality' it imposed that they sought reform.

This acceptance of capitalist 'rationality' helps to explain some notable features of their politics: for instance, why the reforms they sought were generally so modest in scope and substance, and so geared to what 'society' could afford; why Labour governments so quickly and so regularly moved from being agents of reform to being agents of conservative retrenchment, more concerned to contain pressure from below than to advance labour's

demands; and also why these leaders were so ready to collaborate with Labour's class enemies. Trade-union leaders steeped in labourism might have to fight the class struggle, and occasionally fought it hard; but neither they nor certainly Labour's political leaders thought of society as a battlefield upon which the working class was engaged in a permanent and irrevocable struggle against the domination and exploitation to which it was subjected by a rapacious ruling class: or if they thought in those terms, they did not let it affect their political practice. But for the most part, they thought of 'society' as presented with 'problems' whose solution mainly required the kind of good will, intelligence, knowledge and compassion which their Conservative opponents somehow lacked.

Given these perspectives, labourism readily accepted the political system that was in existence when the labour movement assumed definite shape in the second half of the nineteenth century. Labour leaders might demand some reforms in this realm too—for instance, the extension of the suffrage, or the reform of the House of Lords or of local government. But they took the system as a whole more or less for granted and capitalist democracy on the British model to be the most accomplished form of democratic government conceivable—hereditary monarchy and hereditary peers in the House of Lords included. They mainly thought of the political process in parliamentary terms, and of grassroots activism and extra-parliamentary activity as party work at local level for the purpose of supporting local and parliamentary representatives and helping to fight local and parliamentary elections. The notion that a local party might be a focus of struggle, agitation and education fell outside their ideological spectrum. Nor have Labour leaders ever shown much concern to bring about any large reform in the organisation of the British state so as to change the closed, oligarchic and profoundly conservative character of its administrative, judicial, police and military branches.

Finally, Labourism has always had a strong national vocation. The Labour Party has regularly been accused by its Conservative opponents of being 'unpatriotic', heedless of British interests abroad, unconcerned with British 'greatness', etc. Nothing could be further from the truth. Labour Governments have always pursued foreign and defence policies (and in an earlier epoch colonial policies) which did not greatly differ from those of Conservative Governments—not perhaps very surprisingly since Labour Governments relied on the civil servants and military advisers they inherited from the Conservatives. Of course, there have been some differences: it may well be, for instance, that a Conservative Government, had one been elected in 1945, would not have accepted without much bitter struggle the inevitability of Indian independence; and divergencies between Labour and Conservative defence policies have widened in recent years and were manifested in the General Election of **1983**. It is permissible to doubt how far these divergencies would have been maintained, if a Labour

Government had been elected, given the lukewarm support, at best, which senior Labour figures gave to major items of Labour's defence programme; but the divergencies were nevertheless evident. On the other hand, it has to be remembered that, beyond these divergencies, all senior Labour figures, without exception, continued to be committed to the American alliance and NATO, which have been the cornerstones of the defence and foreign policies of *both* the Conservative and Labour Parties since the war years.

These being the main features of labourism, it is reasonable to see it as an ideology of social reform, within the framework of capitalism, with no serious ambition of transcending that framework, whatever ritual obeisances to 'socialism' might be performed by party leaders on suitable occasions, such as Labour Party or trade-union conferences, to appease or defeat their activist critics. Labourism, in other words, is not, like Marxism, an ideology of rupture but an ideology of adaptation.

It is this ideology which has been overwhelmingly dominant in the labour movement for a hundred years and more, whatever 'socialist' label might be given to it. Marxism, as a main alternative to labourism, has not been a negligible strand of thought among activists and its influence has been greater than the proclaimed number of its adherents might suggest. But it has nevertheless been marginal in comparison with labourism. For it is labourism which slowly made its way in the working class and became an acceptable perspective to a substantial part of it; and it is labourism which, from the peak which it reached in **1951**, has been losing support in the working class. The question I now turn to is why.

An explanation of this growing alienation has to begin with the long-standing economic decline of the British economy, and with the aggravation and acceleration of this decline by virtue of the world capitalist economic crisis from the early seventies onwards; or rather, an explanation has to begin with the response of the Labour Governments of the sixties and seventies to decline and crisis. The chronic British economic malady and the recurring emergencies which it produced presented these governments with a challenge that they always promised to meet but which they always failed to meet. Instead, and well in line with their labourist ideology, they consistently pursued economic policies which were broadly acceptable to the capitalist forces at home and abroad on whose help and cooperation they relied. In so doing, they were also and naturally compelled to turn themselves, as I noted earlier, into agencies of retrenchment and containment.

The failures, derelictions and betrayals of the Wilson and Callaghan Governments of **1964-70** and **1974-79** have been amply documented and need no retelling *here*.<sup>3</sup> The point that does need to be made is that these governments did, to a quite remarkable degree, act in ways which

were bound to alienate masses of actual or potential Labour supporters in the working class, and not only in the working class. It was the Labour Governments of those decades which inaugurated the 'monetarist' policies which the Conservatives pushed much further after 1979. It was these Labour Governments who launched repeated attacks on public expenditure by central and local government for collective services whose level is of crucial importance to the large majority of people who cannot pay for private health, education, housing, transport and amenities; and it was also they whose budgets turned into tax exercises much more calculated to hit lower incomes than high ones. It was the Wilson and Callaghan Governments which made war on industrial activists, and who persistently sought to curb wages under the guise of income policies, wage norms, social contracts and national agreements. Nor even could these policies claim any measure of success: after a combined period of eleven years of Labour Governments from 1964 until 1979, with a Conservative interruption of only four years, there was no major improvement in the British condition to which Labour could point. Meanwhile, the rich prospered; and so did a Labour state bourgeoisie loud in its denunciation of militants and wreckers who were spoiling their enjoyment of the pleasures of office.

This record alone would be perfectly adequate to account for the progressive alienation of masses of potential Labour voters from the Labour Party. The argument is not, of course, that the working class wanted more socialism and turned away from Labour because Labour Governments did not give it to them. That is indeed nonsense. The point is that Labour supporters wanted, and voted for, programmes of economic and social betterment, but that the betterment they got from Labour Governments was easily overshadowed by the negative side of the record. As a result, many of them abandoned Labour in 1983, as more and more of them had been doing in previous elections, and did so all the more readily as there now appeared to be a plausible alternative to both Labour and Conservatives, namely the Social Democratic and Liberal Parties. Furthermore, many of them simply did not vote: one of the significant facts about the General Election of 1983 is that 47 per cent of unemployed young people between the ages of 18 and 22 did not bother to cast a vote at all.

Even so, eight-and-a-half million people did vote Labour. This is really very remarkable, when account is taken of the relentless and quite unscrupulous assault to which working-class—and other—voters were subjected during the election campaign and for many years before the campaign. The assault had two obvious objectives. One of them was to get voters to overlook the viciously regressive character of the policies of the Thatcher government. The other was to persuade them that the Labour Party had been taken over, or was in imminent danger of being taken over, by

political perverts and lunatics. Not the least persuasive element in that assault was the contribution which senior and respected figures in the Labour Party made to it, by joining in the chorus of vilification which united all anti-socialist forces, including of course the ex-Labour renegade leaders and parliamentarians of the Social Democratic Party. In the circumstances, and given the intensity of the assault, the wonder is not that Labour lost, but that so many people resisted the propaganda, overlooked Labour's condition and record, and still voted for it. That so many did constitutes a precious asset, to whose significance I will return later.

The second main reason advanced to account for Labour's defeat, I noted earlier, is that the Labour Party was, and had been for a long time, so obviously and deeply divided. This makes good sense, but needs to be taken a good deal further. For there have always been deep divisions in the Labour Party and the labour movement and they have not stopped the Labour Party from doing a lot better than it did in 1983. The difference is that the more recent divisions have run much deeper than before and that many more activists have opposed their leaders, and also, most significant of all in my view, that the Labour leaders, unlike their predecessors since the Labour Party came into being, have not been able to maintain their ideological and political hegemony over the labour movement. Here lies the root of Labour's troubles.

In this context, too, account has to be taken of the economic decline of Britain and of the Wilson and Callaghan Governments' response to it. For just as the derelictions and betrayals and failures of these governments 'de-aligned' a mass of potential and actual Labour supporters, so did that record 'radicalise' a mass of left activists and give them a new determination to prevent a repetition of past performance. From the early seventies onwards, a new wave of activists emerged, not only more determined but better organised than the Labour Left had been earlier, and less susceptible to manipulation and seduction as well. Also, and not to be under-estimated, they found an articulate and resilient champion in Tony Benn, whose national position and place in the Labour Party gave them added strength. The Labour Left has always had problems with its parliamentary and ministerial standard bearers. Stafford Cripps was a weak and vacillating leader of the Socialist League in the thirties, and Aneurin Bevan in the post-war years was a very erratic and impulsive leader of the Bevanites, in so far as he could be said to have been their leader at all. Bevan soared above his followers, and did not really seek to mobilise support at the grassroots. Benn did. No wonder that he was so bitterly hated and reviled, by his erstwhile ministerial colleagues and fellow parliamentarians no less than by all the forces of conservatism proper.

The new activism was not homogeneous in ideological and political

terms. Some small part of it—on which its enemies naturally fastened drew its inspiration from Trotskyism. Some of it proceeded from an unlabelled militant socialist iconoclasm, of which the most representative figure was Ken Livingstone; and most of it was probably the product of a deep but undoctrinal anger at the grassroots on the part of rank-and-file activists who were utterly fed up with the retreat by their leaders into Labour versions of Conservative policies at home and abroad.

Furthermore, the new activists rejected the view traditionally held by Labour leaders (and by much of the traditional Labour Left as well) that the political process must have the House of Commons as its main and all but exclusive focus, with grassroots activism as playing no more than a support role for parliamentarians. On the contrary, the new activists were oriented towards work at the grassroots, and had a strong sense of the political process at local level—hence the importance they attached to what could be achieved in and through local government. Like the women's movement and the peace movement, the new generation of Labour activists (who were in any case often part of the other two movements as well) was strongly committed to extra-parliamentary pressure and did not believe that parliamentary work was so crucial as to dwarf all else: on the contrary, they saw parliamentary work as part of a larger and more important struggle in the country at large.

The new activists were, relatedly, intensely suspicious of all leaders, and notably of parliamentary leaders; and they tended to view most (but not all) left parliamentarians as being part of a 'soft left' that could not be trusted to offer sustained resistance to the retreats and compromises of the leaders of the Labour Party. In so far as this response is unstructured, it may in time fail to protect Labour left activists from appeals stemming from many diverse sources not to rock the boat, make a bad situation worse, and so on. From this point of view, the suspicion which many left activists themselves have of 'theory' is a source of real political weakness, which has very adversely affected many Labour activists in the past.

Nevertheless the General Election defeat of **1979**, coming on top of the record of the Wilson and Callaghan Governments, gave a powerful impulse to activist pressures which had been building up throughout the seventies. The left in the Labour Party was able in the following years to force through major innovations in the selection of MPs and in the election of the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party. Moreover, the left was also able to achieve temporary control of the National Executive Committee and of its important sub-committees; and it was thus well placed to make a marked impact on the programme which was eventually presented in the election of **1983**.

The most remarkable feature of this pressure from the left is that, even though the Labour leadership bitterly opposed it, with the vociferous encouragement of a virtually united press, it was unable to subdue it. This

had in part to do with the strength of the new activism in the Labour Party and in the unions; and also with the much less solid position of that leadership. For another consequence of the failures of the Wilson and Callaghan Governments was to weaken drastically the moral and political authority of the people—drawn overwhelmingly from the Right and the Centre—who had been in charge of these governments. In any case, when one recalls the relative ease with which an earlier Labour Left was brought to heel by expulsion or the threat of expulsion, or was manipulated into submission by the kind of rhetoric and deception of which Harold Wilson was the master, the inability of the Labour leaders to crush or curb their activist opponents stands out as the really new and significant fact in recent Labour history.

However, the new activists, notwithstanding their successes, were just as unable as their predecessors to dislodge the Right and the Centre from their commanding positions in the Labour Party and the trade unions. Even when they had a majority on the NEC, they were confronted by a powerful minority of senior figures (including the Leader and the Deputy Leader) who could marshal considerable resources to block the path of the left. Also, the majority of the Parliamentary Labour Party remained under the control of the Right and the Centre; and the parliamentary left was itself badly split between the 'soft left' and the Bennites. Nor did the left have many reliable allies in the upper echelons of the trade-union hierarchy.

The high point in the activists' campaign after **1979** was the vote for the Deputy Leadership of the Labour Party by the new electoral college at the **1981** Party Conference, when Tony Benn obtained **49.5** per cent of the vote, against Denis Healey's **50.4** per cent. Had Benn won, it is conceivable that the balance of forces in the Labour Party would have shifted considerably to the left, with many more people in the Parliamentary Labour Party moving over to the Social Democratic Party to which many Labour parliamentarians are in any case ideologically well attuned. But Benn did not win, and the Right and Centre remained in command, with a Leader, in the person of Michael Foot, who, for all his past Labour Left record and rhetoric, had long made his peace with the Right and the Centre. Foot had been a main pillar of the Wilson-Callaghan Government between **1974** and **1979** and a chief architect of that Government's alliance with the Liberals, and was a determined enemy of the Bennite Left.

The successes of the new activists, coupled with their failure to win a commanding position in the Labour Party, thus produced the absurd and untenable situation which is at the core of Labour's troubles: the left was able to get major items of policy adopted by Labour Party and trade-union conferences; and these items subsequently found their way into Labour's electoral programme. But the task of defending these policies was left to

leaders many of whom—indeed most of whom—did not believe in them, made no secret of the fact and found many opportunities to denounce those who wanted these policies as wreckers or fools.

The full absurdity of this situation became disastrously evident in the General Election campaign. The Labour Manifesto was not the 'extreme' document which the enemies of the left, not least in the Labour Party, found it convenient to claim, then and later. It amounted for the most part to a reiteration of policies which had been put forward in the Labour Party's electoral manifestoes of the seventies and earlier. But, in addition to the pledge that a Labour Government would take Britain out of the European Economic Community, it did include some proposals in the field of defence that had far-reaching implications: thus, it pledged a Labour Government to reject the deployment of Cruise and Pershing missiles on British soil and to 'begin discussions' for the removal of nuclear bases in Britain, 'to be completed within the lifetime of the Labour Government'. The document further proclaimed Labour's commitment 'to establish a non-nuclear defence policy': 'we will, after consultation, carry through in the lifetime of the next parliament our non-nuclear defence policy'. This appeared to commit a Labour Government to unilateral nuclear disarmament. But the document also said that, in addition to cancelling the Trident programme, it would propose that 'Britain's Polaris force be included in the nuclear disarmament negotiations in which Britain must take part'. The obvious question, on which the Conservatives and others naturally pounced, was what would happen if the negotiations failed. On this, the Labour Party spoke with uncertain and divided voices. In other words, the manifesto's attempt to square the circle had failed; and the divisions in the Labour leadership on the issue of defence made it impossible for the Labour Party to proclaim what it was left to Enoch Powell to call the 'transparent absurdity' of the theory of nuclear deterrence, based as it was on the willingness to commit national suicide 'as a last resort'. Mrs Thatcher made the typically reckless and bombastic declaration during the election campaign that she would be perfectly ready to 'press the button': Labour was in no condition to denounce this for the degraded nonsense that it was.

It is very unlikely that any major party in Britain has ever fought so inane a campaign as the Labour Party did in 1983. The basic reason for this was not incompetence and mismanagement, however much there may have been of both. These were only the manifestations of much deeper trouble, namely the division, essentially, between social reformers whose perspectives do not for all practical purposes reach beyond labourism, and socialists whose perspectives do. This age-old division has now reached a point where any attempt at accommodation only produces fudging formulas which neither satisfy nor convince anyone.

Such a situation cannot permanently endure: or at least, no party and movement can be viable in which such a situation endures. Pious references to the Labour Party being a 'broad church' which has always incorporated many different strands of thought fail to take account of a crucial fact, namely that the 'broad church' of Labour only functioned effectively in the past because one side—the Right and Centre—determined the nature of the services that were to be held, and excluded or threatened with exclusion any clergy too deviant in its dissent. Now that this can no longer be done—the clumsy and largely ineffectual attempts to banish the **Militant** Tendency confirm rather than disprove the point—the 'broad church' is unable to do its job.

The question which therefore needs to be asked is what socialists, whether they are in the Labour Party or not, should want to see by way of a resolution of this condition. The answer to that question is best considered by reference to two possible 'scenarios'.

The first of these involves the election of a new Leader of the Labour Party able to combine a vocabulary that would please the left on the one hand with a sufficient degree of flexibility over policy on the other to reassure the Right and the Centre. The task of such a Leader might be eased somewhat by the fact that no major policy decisions have to be incorporated in an election manifesto for some time to come; and a Leader who spoke an adequately left-sounding language might hope to confuse and divide the left sufficiently to isolate its more intractable elements, and thus reduce them to a marginal position.

The realisation of such a 'scenario' would restore a certain degree of coherence to the Labour Party. It would not be quite the party of Clement Attlee and Hugh Gaitskell which Mrs Thatcher was calling for during the election campaign, but it would be a recognisable version of it. Labourism, suitably embellished with some socialist phraseology (but not too much of it) would again predominate. Persuasive appeals would be made to 'unite against the common enemy', and an enticing vision of electoral victory and a Labour Government would be held out as the reward for reasonableness and moderation.

There undoubtedly exists a considerable weight of support for such an outcome: a large majority of parliamentarians would be for it, so would a large number of trade-union leaders; so would the press and the media. It would widely be represented as a welcome sign that the Labour Party was returning to the sensible policies of old, and that it was abjuring the lunatic policies which had brought it to its present pass. Nor is there much doubt that it would meet with the approval of many Labour supporters and Labour Party members.

It is, however, a very difficult 'scenario' to realise. For its realisation would represent a massive defeat for the left in the Labour Party. There is no good reason to suppose that, having got as far as it has, the left

would accept such a defeat and desist from their endeavours. Inevitably, however, these endeavours maintain the Labour Party in a state of civil war.

This being the case, a realisation of the 'scenario' in question requires nothing less than a thorough 'purge' of the left in the Labour Party, extending far beyond the *Militant* Tendency; and it would also need a redrawing of the constitutional rules so as to reduce drastically the increased influence which activists have been able to achieve since 1979 on such matters as the re-selection of MPs and the election of the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Labour Party. If this could be done, socialists in the Labour Party would be forced to decide whether the time had finally come to leave the Labour Party to labourism and its devotees, and to seek a realignment of the left by way of a new socialist party. However, this kind of action against the left seems well beyond the powers of any Labour leadership today.

The new activists, for their part, have proceeded from a very different 'scenario', which has not been clearly spelt out, but whose main lines are not difficult to draw. What is involved is a continuation of the struggles in which the left has been engaged, with the purpose of achieving predominance and turning the Labour Party into a socialist party free from the constrictions hitherto imposed upon it by its leaders. It must be presumed that many leading figures in the Labour Party would then want to leave it and seek new political homes elsewhere—in the Social Democratic Party, or the Liberal Party, or even the Conservative Party. In fact, it would be essential that such people should leave the Labour Party; for just as the left makes life difficult for a leadership which is opposed to it, so could determined Right and Centre parliamentarians make life difficult for a party in which the left had acquired predominance. No doubt, a good many other Labour Party members, at constituency level, would also leave. But these defections would be compensated by the accretion of strength which would be provided by the many people who are not now minded to join the Labour Party but might then want to do so, and be actively involved in it. It is also very likely that some, perhaps many, trade-union leaders would wish to disaffiliate from a Labour Party that had gone beyond labourism. But any such attempt would meet with stiff resistance from the left in the unions; and though the attempt might succeed in some cases, it would probably be successfully fought in others.

I must enter a personal note at this point. I have for more than ten years written that this hope of the left to transform the Labour Party—which has always been nourished by the Labour Left—was illusory, and that, far from representing a short cut to the creation of a mass socialist party in Britain (which has never existed), it was in fact a dead end in which British socialists had been trapped for many decades—in fact since the Labour Party came into being. It was this view which led me

to advocate the formation of a new socialist party able to do all the work of socialist advocacy and agitation which the Labour Party had been prevented by its leaders from *doing*.<sup>4</sup>

I am far from convinced that I was mistaken. For it is by no means evident that the new activists can realise the 'scenario' I have just outlined: on the most optimistic expectations, they have a long way to go, with many large obstacles on the way. But it is obvious that I underestimated how great was the challenge which the new activists would be able to pose to their leaders; and how limited would be the capacity of these leaders to surmount the challenge. I now take it that the question whether the activists can push matters further and achieve the conquest of the Labour Party is more open than I had believed.

Rather than speculate further upon this, it may be more useful to ask what would be the prospects of a socialist Labour Party, such as the activists seek: and the same considerations would apply to a new socialist party, born from the disintegration of the Labour Party.

Such a party would seek to advance purposes and policies which have long formed part of the aspirations of the socialist left. One of its main concerns would be the democratisation of the whole structure of government; the abolition of anti-trade-union legislation and other repressive legislation, such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act, introduced in 1974 by Roy Jenkins, then Labour Home Secretary; the drastic curbing of police powers and the placing of the police under effective democratic control; and the end of the British military presence in Northern Ireland.

A socialist party would be pledged to the return to public ownership of the industries and services which the Conservative Government has sold off and will further have sold off; and it would take it that a major extension of public ownership under a variety of forms, and with the greatest possible measure of democratic control, was one of the indispensable conditions for the transformation of British capitalism in socialist directions, and for the dissolution of the class structure which would be one of its central aims.

In the realm of defence and foreign policy, such a party would be committed to the nuclear disarmament of Britain, as part of a radical shift in the policies followed by Labour and Conservative Governments since World War Two. A socialist party could not be true to itself if it did not include in its programme an end of British support for the world-wide counter-revolutionary crusade which the United States has been waging across the world ever since the forties, and if it did not support progressive movements throughout the world struggling for national and social liberation. Such defence and foreign policies are clearly incompatible with membership of NATO.

Conventional wisdom has it that such a programme can never be

endorsed by a majority of people—indeed, that it dooms the party which propounds it to marginality and irrelevance.

Two points may be made about this. The first is that there is no point in pretending that there exists a ready-made majority in the country for a socialist programme. How could there be? One of the fruits of the long predominance of **labourism** is precisely that the party of the working class has never carried out any sustained campaign of education and propaganda on behalf of a socialist programme; and that Labour leaders have frequently turned themselves into fierce propagandists against the socialist proposals of their critics inside the Labour Party and out, and have bent their best efforts to the task of defeating all attempts to have the Labour Party adopt such proposals. Moreover, a vast array of conservative forces, of the most diverse kind, are always at hand to dissuade the working class from even thinking about the socialist ideas which evil or foolish people are forever trying to foist upon them. This simply means that a ceaseless battle for the 'hearts and minds' of the people is waged by the forces of conservatism, against which have only **been** mobilised immeasurably smaller socialist forces. A socialist party would seek to strengthen these forces and to defend socialist perspectives and a socialist programme over an extended period of time, and would accept that more than one election might have to be held before a majority of people came to support it. In any case, a socialist party would not only be concerned with office, but with the creation of the conditions under which office would be more than the management of affairs on capitalist lines. The first of these conditions is precisely a strong measure of popular support; and this support would be all the more essential, given the fierce resistance which a socialist government seeking to apply its programme would encounter from all the conservative forces in the land.

Ever since the Labour Party became a substantial electoral and political force, Labour leaders have taken the view—and have persuaded many of their followers to take the view—that government was all; and that politics is about elections: on one side, there is power, on the other, paralysis. This is a very narrow view of the political process. Elections are important, and no party functioning in a capitalist-democratic context can afford to neglect them, not least at local level. But this is a very different matter from the view that gaining office is the sole and exclusive purpose of politics. For office, however agreeable for those who hold it, has often meant not only impotence, but worse than impotence, namely the power to carry out policies fundamentally at odds with the purposes for which office was obtained. Nor is it necessarily the case that opposition means paralysis. This has never been true of the Conservative Party and the conservative forces; and it has only been true of the Labour Party because of the narrow ideological and political framework in which its leaders have dwelt, and because of their concentration on electoral and parliamentary

politics. But it need not be true for a substantial working-class party. It is by no means obvious, for instance, that the Italian Communist Party, in opposition since it was expelled from office in 1947, has, *in socialist terms*, exercised much less influence on Italian life in this period, than the Labour Party has exercised in government. The notion that the Labour Party is either a 'party of government', with all the opportunistic compromises and retreats the formulation carries, or must resign itself to being no more than an 'ineffectual sect' may be useful propaganda for all the 'moderate' forces in the labour movement, but it does not correspond to the real alternatives.

This relates to the second point that, while there is no popular majority for a socialist programme at present, it does not follow that there is no support for such a programme at all, and that more support for it could not be generated. This is where it is necessary to recall the fact that eight-and-a-half million people did vote Labour in 1983. There is obviously no warrant for the view that all of them consciously and deliberately supported all the items in Labour's programme, or even that they supported many of them: many such Labour voters were no doubt simply registering a vote against the Thatcher Government. But among these eight-and-a-half million voters, a large number may be taken to have voted as they did because they approved more or less strongly the general drift and many items of the Labour programme, and were not put off by the massive propaganda to which they were subjected, and which assured them that a vote for Labour was a vote for personal and national disaster. As I noted earlier, they resisted this assault just as millions of Labour voters have resisted such assaults at every election since 1945, when the Labour Party put forward a programme which its leaders had striven very hard to dilute, in the belief that its more radical proposals must inevitably lose them the election. This stubborn popular resistance to the unrelenting campaign of indoctrination to which the working class is subjected at election time and in between elections provides a basis of support on which a socialist party serious about its business can build. Much of the propaganda conducted by anti-socialist forces—Conservative, Liberal, Social Democratic and Labour—seeks to present a picture of the working class as irrevocably opposed to socialist proposals; but the propagandists would have to work much less hard if this was the case. They do have to work as hard as they do precisely because there does exist a vast degree of popular alienation from existing economic, social and political arrangements, which can be turned into support for radically different arrangements. I have called this alienation a 'state of de-subordination', as a result of which 'people who find themselves in subordinate positions, and notably the people who work in factories, mines, offices, shops, schools, hospitals and so on do what they can to mitigate, resist and transform the conditions of their subordination'.<sup>5</sup> Unemployment and the fear of un-

employment have undoubtedly had an effect, as they were intended to do, in reducing 'desubordination' at 'the point of production'. But this hardly means that the experience of these years of Tory Government and mass unemployment and the attack on welfare and collective provisions have generated any more popular support for existing arrangements than was previously the case. On the contrary economic decline and crisis, allied to the crying injustices generated by a grossly unequal class system provide the ground on which socialist work can effectively proceed.

Socialist work means something different for a socialist party than the kind of political activity inscribed in the perspectives of labourism. I have noted earlier that political work, for labourism, essentially means short periods of great political activity for local and parliamentary elections, with long periods of more or less routine party activity in between. Socialist work means intervention in all the many different areas of life in which class struggle occurs: for class struggle must be taken to mean not only the permanent struggle between capital and labour, crucial though that remains, but the struggle against racial and sex discrimination, the struggle against arbitrary state and police power, the struggle against the ideological hegemony of the conservative forces, and the struggle for new and radically different defence and foreign policies.

The slogan of the first Marxist organisation in Britain, the Social Democratic Federation, founded in 1884, was 'Educate, Agitate, Organise'. It is also a valid slogan for the 1980s and beyond. A socialist party could, in the coming years, give it more effective meaning than it has ever had in the past.

#### NOTES

1. **The Communist Party, with twenty-one candidates in the field, polled just over 100,000 votes and had two seats, which they lost in the General Election of 1950. Over 100,000 votes were also cast for the Commonwealth Party and under 50,000 for the Independent Labour Party.**
2. See e.g., Stuart MacIntyre, *A Proletarian Science. Marxism in Britain. 1917-1933* (1980) Ch. 2.
3. See e.g., L. Panitch, *Social Democracy and Industrial Militancy* (1976); D. Coates, *Labour in Power?* (1980); and K. Coates (ed.) *What Went Wrong?* (1979).
4. See 'Moving On', in *The Socialist Register*, 1976, and 'The Future of Socialism in England', in *The Socialist Register*, 1977.
5. R. Miliband, 'A State of De-Subordination' in *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. xxix, no. 4 (December 1978), p. 402.