

## OBSTACLES TO REFORM IN BRITAIN\*

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### Introduction

The experience of societies that have undergone a revolutionary change under socialist leadership—as, for example, the Soviet Union, China, Yugoslavia and Cuba has been well documented to bring out the lessons which it may teach about the positive and negative forces that come into play to advance, or inhibit, the processes of social transformation. But less has been written about the attempts made to bring about social change in bourgeois democracies, when social democratic governments have been elected to office on radical political programmes, that might, if implemented, have actually changed the balance of power in a significant way. This may, in part, be because there are so few examples of social transformation even being seriously advocated, let alone attempted, or it may be because even when the idea of social transformation appears in the rhetoric of the social democratic left, few expect that anything will come of it, or the failures are attributed to the betrayal of individual leaders. But neither collective nor personal cynicism should be accepted as an excuse for failing to look at the actual situation which may develop where real progress has been promised, nor should the experience of the toppling of Allende in Chile or, say Grenada, which faced an American-led invasion, be taken to be the only way by which elected reformers can be frustrated in their work. For in some other countries, parties of the Left have been elected to a parliamentary majority on radical programmes and their intentions have been much more subtly frustrated over a long period.

This article deals with the actual experience of a socialist Minister in the 1974-9 Labour Government in Britain, and seeks to identify some of the obstacles placed in the way to prevent the policies on which that Government was elected from being carried out. Obviously the circumstances that existed then were different from those which exist today, and the political situation in Britain is very different from that which prevails in other comparable countries, but even so, the lessons learned may have a more general application where a Government with a majority, in a bourgeois democracy, tries to carry through changes which would in any way alter the structure of power and wealth or reform the institutions which sustain them.

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### *1. The British Constitution*

The British people are regularly told that they live in a democracy and that the Mother of Parliaments is respected all over the world as the model on which other democracies have based their own structures and practices. However, in reality, the institutions of Britain are far from democratic and the term democracy is almost always qualified by the adjective 'parliamentary' which may appear to be a minor change but, on close examination, turns out to be a major variation of the idea that the people are sovereign. For, when the text-books are consulted, our system of Government is described as a 'constitutional monarchy' by which is meant that, in law, Britain is governed by the 'Crown-in-Parliament', an idea that goes back three hundred years to the so-called Glorious Revolution of 1688 when the present constitutional settlement was accepted by Parliament. It was then agreed that the Crown would, in future, govern by and with the consent of Parliament—at that time composed of two Houses—the Lords made up primarily of major landowners, and the Commons representing only about 2% of the male population, all of them very wealthy too. By preserving this fiction that the Crown is still the source of authority, a number of institutional obstacles to change are embedded in our system. Although the Crown in the form of the current King or Queen has very limited discretion in practice, confined to the power to dissolve parliament and decide who to ask to form a government, and its role is completely overshadowed by the Royal Family with which the monarchy is associated, it remains true that the core of the British system of Government is still feudal in character and the extent to which democracy has been allowed to penetrate it is strictly limited. Moreover, when a government comes to office, through the ballot box, and is formed under its leader, who becomes Prime Minister, that prime minister acquires, personally, many of the real powers of the Crown, for the exercise of which they are not democratically accountable, and are thus able to control those whom they were elected to represent, so long as he, or she, retains that position and the support of a majority in the House of Commons. The residual powers of the monarch personally are important because if they are used, as in Australia by the Governor General to dismiss a prime minister, the judges will regard that dismissal as constitutional, and would uphold the Crown's right to do that against the claim of the dismissed prime minister that he or she had been removed even though enjoying the support of parliament. Thus if there were ever a coup in Britain in which the Crown participated and collaborated by dismissing the prime minister, that coup would be legal and not illegal. Therein lies the essential weakness of British democracy, for it is a democracy on sufferance and not by right, making it quite different from the provisions of the American Constitution where a president who sought to dissolve or disregard Congress would have his action ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. When the Crown powers exercised by a prime minister in office are examined they are much more substantial, in that making war; signing treaties; appointing

and dismissing Ministers; creating peers; appointing judges, archbishops and bishops; the chairmen of the BBC and other public authorities; together with a mass of other appointments, are all authorized under the Prerogative, not one of which legally requires the assent of parliament or even the cabinet.

Every constitution in the world has some provision for presidential or executive power to be exercised in an emergency but none approach the scale which is present in a British prime minister derived from the Crown which he or she is supposed to serve. Even a state of emergency permits full executive powers to be exercised, during that emergency, by a body called the Privy Council which normally has a purely formal function but can be called-on a small hand picked basis—to issue Orders-in-Council which have the force of law and derive from the prerogatives. All this needs to be stated in order to provide some background understanding to the nature of the state apparatus which an incoming Labour Government is elected to control, and every civil servant, military officer and judge and bishop is sworn on oath to bear allegiance to the Crown and not to the Prime Minister, the Government, or to the majority in Parliament or Parliament as a whole, let alone the citizens. It should be noted in passing all these institutions were originally developed by a class which was committed to the status quo, and to prevent any government from altering that status quo.

The economy of Britain is overwhelmingly capitalist in character, even more so than it was a decade ago since when the great state enterprises have been privatised and sold off piecemeal, to companies which now run them and which are entirely free of any constitutional responsibility to the people of the country. However, the problems do not end there because both the structures of the state and the structures of capital ownership each have their own international links which reinforce them in their capacity to prevent change. The two main institutional links between Britain and foreign governments are NATO led by the US and the EEC, which now very largely controls the freedom of action available to British Governments. For example the decisions to invite American forces to base themselves in Britain, and to build the British atomic bomb, were taken by the post-war Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, without consulting the whole of the Cabinet or Parliament. Similarly when Mr Edward Heath, as Prime Minister, signed the Treaty of Accension of Britain to the EEC he did it using prerogative powers and the Treaty which he had signed on behalf of Britain was never published until he had signed it. One final example of prerogative powers used by the Prime Minister of the day occurred when Mrs Thatcher took armed action against the Argentine Government in the **Falklands/Malvinas** conflict.

## *2. The Labour Party Constitution*

It is against this constitutional background that an incoming Labour Government is expected to take charge of the state apparatus and use it for its own purposes, which are to serve the interests of those it represents. In order to

build the parliamentary majority necessary to secure an electoral victory, the Labour Party has, while in opposition, to represent those interests effectively, raise the issues that concern those whose support it is seeking, project an alternative policy and campaign for that policy against the Government it is seeking to defeat. The policy of the Labour Party, designed to do all that, is made by a variety of processes including resolutions from local parties, local trade unions, regional conferences, women's conferences, and then is carried on to the Annual Conference, which in theory has the final say, where the affiliated trade unions enjoy 92% of the vote and the constituencies 8%. Resolutions that get more than a two-thirds majority become part of the programme of the Party and are eligible for inclusion in the manifesto even though there is no certainty that they will feature in it. For the election manifesto itself is drawn up by the National Executive Committee, elected by Conference sitting with the Cabinet or 'Shadow' Cabinet, representing the leadership of the parliamentary Party which, in opposition, is elected but, when Labour is in Government, is appointed by the Prime Minister. Thus a new obstacle faces socialists in that the Leader of the Labour Party has often claimed that he has the right to veto items that come up for inclusion in that manifesto to which he objects, even if that policy has received the two thirds majority at Conference referred to above.

That veto was applied by Harold Wilson as Leader of the Labour Party in 1973 when he objected to the inclusion in the manifesto of a pledge that 25 major companies would be brought into public ownership by an incoming Labour Government. Since Wilson was the Leader of the Party, the manifesto committee accepted his veto because, if they had overruled him, they would have discredited the Leader under whom they hoped to win victory by showing him to be impotent in dealing with his own supporters. This means that however successful socialists may be in winning support for their policies in the party they may find it impossible to put those policies before the electorate because of this first and substantial obstacle—the use by the Leader of a vote of confidence to get his own way against the Party he leads.

### ***3. The political image-makers***

The next stage is the election campaign itself where the pressure on the Party leadership to water down the policy is very intense, mainly orchestrated by the mass media, which are owned or run by proprietors who are hostile to socialism and keep up an unremitting attack upon socialist policies in the hope of forcing the Labour Party to abandon them before polling day, in return for the generalised suggestion that, by doing so Labour will win more votes. This is all based upon the general theory of public relations politics that the way to win elections is to target the centre and persuade people in that centre to vote Labour rather than Conservative or Liberal. But in making that choice, there is an equally conscious decision to take socialist support for granted and

to ignore the non-voters who may represent 20% or 30% of the total electorate and whose abstention may derive in part from the fact that they cannot see a difference between the two parties contending for office, an idea re-inforced by the absence of any vitality or substance in the political debate. Insofar as non-voters come from the poorer sections of the community whose interests would best be served by a Labour victory, the decision to concentrate on the centre is very ill-advised, because if those non-voters voted, it is reasonable to assume that a majority of them would, in self-interest, vote Labour and there are far more such people than there are hovering indecisively in the middle. But so powerful are the pollsters and image makers in modern parliamentary political campaigning that they carry the day on almost all occasions, and thus represent another major obstacle to the presentation of socialist policies. If despite all these handicaps a Labour Government is elected, as it was in 1974, a real opportunity for socialists to press ahead with the manifesto policies does appear, since election victories disorientate those opponents who have been defeated, raise the hopes and expectations on the part of supporters and this creates a general sense of excitement, and transfers the Labour Party from the role of critic to the role of responsible managers of the situation they have inherited.

There is no doubt that an election victory thus creates the conditions in which radical policies are more likely to be expected, and accepted, by the electorate. But one word of caution must be added and it is this: that when the Labour Party moves from Opposition to Government its leadership moves into ministerial offices and becomes primarily concerned with the task of management and less involved, if involved at all, in the role of leading the Party which put them in power. Indeed, victory may decapitate a whole layer of Party leaders, leaving the Party feeling ignored and neglected and denying it many of its most experienced spokespersons who would continue to be advocating its social and political objectives, because they would be then be busy in the ministerial offices. In short, those leaders who may have been most articulate in pressing for social change, finding themselves absorbed in departmental work may honestly persuade themselves that socialism has arrived, whereas all that has really happened is that they have arrived personally. This is a very much neglected obstacle in the path of socialists because it is one that follows inevitably at the moment of victory. The effect of this may not be felt for a long time since the neglect of socialist propaganda and education on the morrow of a victory is cumulative, and after a long period of Labour Government, the absence of that education unquestionably offers to opponents on the right wing an opportunity to occupy the high ground of argument with propaganda of their own. This was very clear in 1979 when the Labour Party which had been in office for eleven of the previous fifteen years was defeated by Mrs Thatcher and it became obvious immediately that, as her parliamentary soldiers crossed the electoral boundaries to form a majority in the House of Commons, they discovered that hundreds of thousands of acres

of ideological and moral territory ahead of them had been evacuated years before, and their ideas were able to fill the vacuum thus left.

#### *4. The State Apparatus*

Next we come to the problem facing Labour or socialist ministers as they enter their **Departments** and meet the civil servants with whom they have to work. It is one of the great myths of British parliamentary democracy that the British civil service is politically neutral, ready, anxious and willing to work with equal enthusiasm for any political party that may form a majority. This is a complete illusion largely spread by those who know perfectly well that the civil service is neither ready, anxious, nor willing to work for socialist policies but has to be presented in that way so that it can perform its task of obstruction without being accused of partiality. But any social analysis will reveal that most senior civil servants come from a very narrow class base and are broadly ignorant of, and unsympathetic to, the aspirations of socialism. In addition, these senior civil servants are the very ones who devised the policies which the incoming Labour Government has been elected to reverse, and they would not be normal if they did not feel some commitment to those policies. The general thrust of policy objectives will have come from the previous Conservative Government but the patient working out of them is always left to the administrators to do, and they are bound to want to defend their work.

The power that the senior civil servants have derives from their position as permanent officials with enormous administrative experience, an intricate pattern of inter-departmental connections at official level and with the knowledge they have of all the discussions that went on in the previous Government which are withheld from the incoming Government. The only papers passed from one Government to another relate to international negotiations and understandings, which **carry** on uninterrupted, despite a change of Government and, in those matters, the new ministers do have to know what their predecessors had done before their removal from office. Otherwise they know nothing about what has happened before, and this protection of one administration, from the inquisitive eyes of its successor, necessarily protects the status quo and denies an incoming Government information that it might be able to use to get across to **the** public precisely why it was setting a new course. Most of the international links that exist are maintained by permanent officials who are in very close daily contact with their opposite numbers in other countries, at NATO, in the Common Market, the IMF or GATT and the policies that have been agreed with those international organisations make them exceptionally difficult for an incoming Government to unscramble even if it wishes to do so. It is one of the theories of constitutional government in Britain that there should be a continuity of foreign and defence policy into which no party interests should be introduced—which is another way of saying that the choices open to the electors in a parliamentary

democracy should not extend to foreign affairs or defence.

### 5. *The Myth of Realism*

These arguments are presented to departmental ministers in the form of 'ministerial briefs' which have been prepared by the civil service during the election **campaign**, one set for the Conservatives, if they were to win, and another set for Labour. The preparation of these briefs occupy most of the time of departments during an election campaign itself, when the outgoing ministers are drained of their political legitimacy because the election is in progress, and the civil servants are keeping the departments going on a care and maintenance basis, whilst reading the manifestos of the major parties and preparing these briefs. Thus when the ministerial appointments have been made and the new ministers arrive in their departments, they are handed these thick bundles of briefs by the Permanent Secretaries and are expected to read them. However, in the aftermath of an exhausting election campaign, most ministers are much too tired, and too busy, to absorb such a mass of material, particularly as a number of urgent questions will no doubt be on their desk for immediate decision. As a result, they probably do not **realise** the importance of the document that has been given to them, which is the only document in the whole electoral cycle in which senior civil servants indicate their own policies, drafted in the guise of suggesting how the manifesto policies of the Labour Party can best be implemented. But the framework of thinking is official and ministers will be told how civil servants see the task of manifesto implementation, and the changes the civil servants do not want to see made will be highlighted, and a more 'realistic' way will always be indicated, in line with the policies the senior civil servants want, which is to steer radical Ministers gently into the mainstream of coalition politics.

All ministers in effect receive an offer from their senior civil **servants—un-**spoken but nonetheless real—which runs along the following lines:

**If you follow the policies we recommend, we will help you, in every way we can, to pretend that you are implementing the policy on which you were elected.**

Ministers who accept that tempting offer will soon find themselves described in the right wing press as 'exceptionally able' and 'much admired in Whitehall' for their 'strong handling of departments' which will be accompanied by similar praise from commentators who are known to be violently opposed to the Labour Party and its policies. Those ministers who are not prepared to submit to this temptation will find themselves being described as 'difficult', 'indecisive' or 'divisive' and this briefing may come direct from the civil servants in the department which that Minister heads, or it may come from number 10, Downing Street where the Prime Minister's senior permanent advisers will have been fed a series of negative briefings from the Minister's own civil servants who are always quick to use their own Whitehall network

to undermine a minister who will not do what they want. Of course none of this would be possible if the prime minister of the day was to make it clear to his own civil servants that he gives full support to a minister thus being systematically undermined, for officials would be much more nervous about **criticising** a minister they knew had the approval of the prime minister himself.

### *6. Civil Service Obstruction*

This general account of how socialists within a Labour Government can be sidelined, marginalised and ultimately frustrated can easily be documented and one vivid example occurred in the winter of 1977/178 when a decision had to be reached about the nature of the next nuclear reactor system to be introduced into Britain. Britain had always used a gas cooled system designed in Britain, but for some time the Generating Board and the civil servants had wanted us to move over to the American PWR system. My careful reading of the brief for incoming ministers had alerted me to this and it was common knowledge that Prime Minister James Callaghan preferred the American system. I had conducted many consultations and decided to continue with the British system. However, my Permanent Secretary and all the relevant senior officials, came to my room and announced that they were united in supporting the American system and we had a very long and full discussion of the issues. At the end, I told them of my decision and asked them to prepare a paper for the Cabinet setting out my view as the responsible minister. The permanent officials then simply refused to prepare the paper that I had commissioned, on the grounds that they did not agree with the policy that I wished to put forward.

Though obstruction is common, I can never recall such a situation ever happening quite as crudely before or since and it left me with only one choice which was to ask the two political advisers in my Department to draft the paper, which they proceeded to do. My civil service private secretary whose specific task it was to work for me, as his minister, was shocked by what had happened, and he went to the Permanent Secretary to point out the constitutional issues involved, and he was able to get an assurance that my advisers could seek technical advice from more junior members of the Department who would be instructed to answer practical questions and make it possible for my paper to be prepared, which they did. However, my senior officials, unable to persuade me to take their view, then wrote the paper they had wanted me to submit and circulated it through official channels in Whitehall to mobilize other departmental ministers to frustrate my policy in favour of their own. The main vehicle for their plan was the Central Policy Review Staff—the so-called 'Think Tank' headed up by a former senior civil servant who was permitted to submit papers of his own direct to the Cabinet Committee which was going to be considering my paper.

At a social gathering just before Christmas 1977, I met one of **the** junior

members of that 'Think Tank' who told me exactly what he was doing and he said, 'The CPRS is subversive'. When I asked him what he meant, he said, 'Oh, if a minister will not do what his civil servants want him to do, then we subvert that minister by putting in papers reflecting the view of the officials in the department in question and use the power of Whitehall against him.' It was a very naive and ill-advised comment for him to have made because it alerted me to exactly what was happening and that was how I discovered that this 'subversive briefing' was going round to other ministers on the official network. In order to frustrate this I decided to use the political advisers again, this time to ring the political advisers in the Departments circulated by the CPRS to inform them what was happening and the reasons for my own recommendation. Thus when the matter came to Cabinet my departmental colleagues had before them both the official briefing against my paper which had come from my officials through the CPRS to their private offices, and the political briefing in favour of my paper which my political advisers had circulated to their political advisers, and, in the event, the decision reached by Cabinet secured 99% of what I had wanted. The only point on which I was forced to concede was that, although the Cabinet agreed to choose the British reactor, they also agreed that some preliminary design study work was to be done on the American reactor.

I have set out this story in some detail because it shows how the Whitehall mechanism works, in this case to defend the nuclear lobby, and anyone who wants to understand the difficulties which face a minister who chooses to go against the advice of his officials must understand this. It is worth noting that, after the defeat of the Labour Government in 1979, the new Conservative Government decided to go ahead with the American PWR, the first one at **Sizewell** and others to follow in series.

### ***7. Official Secrecy***

But the problem of the loneliness of a socialist minister is one that requires a great deal more attention because life is so much easier for a minister who goes along with what his officials want and it is very difficult indeed to defeat them. This is, in part, because of the workings of the Official Secrets Act which constitutes a ring fence of information control situated along boundaries of government, locking ministers in with their officials and excluding their political supporters—or the general public—from access to the knowledge they will need to influence the decisions before they are made. The only way in which a minister can gain access to that outside knowledge and support, which he must have, if he is to win, is by making it public, from the outset what decisions are about to be reached, what the issues are, what official advice he is getting, and actively seek the views of those who may have as much, or more, expertise as his officials, but who could never make it available unless they knew what was being discussed inside the Whitehall. Here is where the enactment of a Freedom of Information Act would be so helpful,

not only to an electorate that is entitled to know what is being discussed, but to a beleaguered Minister who wants support in order to implement the policy on which he was elected.

### 8. *Establishment Pressure Groups*

*In* addition to civil service power it is necessary to identify some of the most powerful pressure groups that exist within the ring fence of official secrecy, and which are able to operate because no-one outside knows what they are doing. The most powerful Whitehall pressure group exists amongst the military who have the professional responsibility for defending the country from its enemies—an objective which naturally commands general popular support, and who, as we know from the experience of other countries have the power to take over the reins of government if they were ever to decide to do so. Any Labour Government, and especially the socialists within it, inevitably face serious opposition if they wish to do anything—as for example reduce military expenditure or cancel a nuclear weapon—which the military would oppose, and, since few ministers have much military knowledge, the capacity of the military to mislead and deceive Ministers about the balance of forces in the world is immense. The second internal pressure group operating within Whitehall is the Bank of England, nationalised by the Labour Government in 1946 as an instrument by which that Government could control the City of London and the banking and financial sector in the interests of national planning. The 1946 Bank of England Act allows the Bank to give directives to any other bank, and the Treasury has the statutory power to define what a bank is, so that the role of the government is, in theory, complete. But in practice the Bank has merely become a permanent voice, inside Government, for the City of London and the Governor of the Bank who is a public appointee but not a member of the administration, acts quite independently to try and force any Labour Cabinet to meet the policy requirements desired by the City and the international financial establishment. He has enormous power as a result, because, if the Governor sees the Chancellor and warns him that cuts in public expenditure, or some other change in economic policy are necessary to restore 'confidence in the pound sterling' the Cabinet finds that a pistol has been put at its head, and on a number of important occasions—notably in 1976 when the Governor and the IMF worked together to secure major cuts in public expenditure—Labour Cabinets have capitulated.

This analysis highlights another informal understanding which Labour ministers are expected to accept, and it is offered by the banks, finance houses and industry, internally and externally, that they will not organise a run on the pound and undermine confidence to the point where it would bring down a Labour Government provided that that the Labour Government itself will not seriously challenge the power of capital. One of the most vivid examples of this emerged from Harold Wilson's book *'The Governance of Britain'* where on page 75 he describes occasions when it was necessary for him to reassure

the City about policies that had been developed by the NEC of the Labour Party and his account of how he did it is as follows:

*'Quite often, therefore, I had to make this point clear, by answers to questions in Parliament or published replies to anxious letters from City based financial institutions such as the British Insurance Association, or the merchant banking community, on more than one occasion drafting the letter to which I was at pains to reply myself.'*

In short here was a Labour prime minister actually volunteering a repudiation of socialist policies by inviting the City to ask him to deny, personally, that socialist policies were even being considered.

The third internal pressure group or groups, which are the most secret of all, are the security services **themselves**—M15, M16, and the Police Special Branch which operate under the loosest of ministerial control, hitherto on a non-statutory basis, and are in effect, free to do what they like without telling Ministers. The Spycatcher book, which Mrs Thatcher tried so hard to suppress, was only the tip of the iceberg, and the problem goes much much deeper than that. These security services operate on policies of their own, maintaining surveillance over all individuals or groups that they themselves have decided to be hostile to the status quo, or to constitute the 'enemy within', and in this category may be included ministers in the Government they are supposed to be serving, as happened in the case of the plot against Harold Wilson. On the one occasion when this all came to light, the Labour Prime Minister of Southern Australia, Don **Dunstan**, demanded access to the files of the security services when he came to power, but was initially refused it on the grounds that his head of security argued that his loyalty was not to the prime minister or elected government of South Australia, but to the Crown. Here we come up against the Crown in a new and sinister role, for the Crown is the embodiment of the State and the oath of allegiance to the Crown which are required of every military, civil and judicial official, is interpreted by them as superseding any loyalty which they might be expected to have to the elected Government. It should be added that when those Australian files were subsequently examined they were shown to consist mainly of details of the Labour and trade union movement in the state, which the security services regarded as subversive.

This constitutional fiction of personal loyalty to the crown, overriding any duty to ministers is therefore much more substantial than it may at first sight appear and represents an obstacle that has never been properly discussed, let alone dealt with, by any Labour Government. Ministers who have ever had responsibility for the security services will almost certainly have been privy to some, though by no means all, of the operations upon which they have been engaged, and if they were to call for a greater public control, later, the security services would be in a **position** to make it known, through the press or Parliament, that they had been operating with ministerial approval, thus undermining the credibility of their former chiefs. This suggests another

'understanding' which ministers are offered, namely that if they never challenge the independence of the security services, but limit themselves to marginal comments when they are seen to have behaved inefficiently, the security services will protect the minister and not deliberately destabilise or expose him, for put crudely the security services have got something on everybody, though they may only use it when it is their interests to do so.

### **9. *The Media and its political strategy***

The next source of power with which a socialist minister has to deal is the media itself. The nationalisation of the BBC which was undertaken by a Conservative Government in 1922 was done for much the same reason as Henry VIII nationalised the Church of England, in that any state power wants to be sure that it has control, as far as it can have, of the minds of those it governs, which is why the chairmen of the BBC and the IBA are appointed by the Prime Minister, and its responsible officials are vetted by the security services. The BBC thus has always been able to be relied upon to pump out information and analysis which broadly re-inforces the idea that Britain is a democracy, that the *staus quo* is fair to all, and that those who advocate radical socialist change are hostile to democracy. Any socialist minister who dares to question the myth that the BBC is politically independent inevitably finds himself subjected to a great deal of hostility by the BBC in its own political coverage.

The Press is, by contrast, free from any direct government control, but as 66% of all the newspapers are owned and controlled by three rich men, there does not need to be any but the lightest of censorship, and the only example of it is the system of D Notices which warn editors against publishing any matter which governments believe to raise security matters, together with the possibility of court actions as with the *Spycatcher* book. The establishment know that socialist ideas will never be allowed to be presented in an attractive way in a capitalist media, and those who advocate them are liable to experience abuse and harassment on a massive scale. This, in its turn, shapes public opinion in opposition to socialism, and such a hostile public opinion can be quickly harvested through the public opinion polls, which are then re-published (sometimes very selectively) as 'independent' evidence of the unpopularity of such views, in the confident knowledge that such polls can be relied on to discourage the leaders of the party from following lines of policy unacceptable to the proprietors. These proprietors buttress their power by offering another unofficial understanding to Labour leaders along these lines: 'If you, as leaders of the party, never challenge our right, as proprietors, to run the newspapers we own, according to our own interest, we, for our part, will support you in dealing with the socialists in your own party, and will accept your right to govern, even when we disagree with you.'

Historically this understanding has been tacitly accepted by every Labour leader and, in return for the limited press support which they have gained

as a result, certain press proprietors have then been made into peers—hence the phrase Press Lords. But even such a discreet understanding has never protected even right-wing Labour leaders from experiencing bitter personal attacks that go far beyond what should be acceptable in a democracy, and this combination of press pressure, de-stabilization and harassment has always played a part in undermining public backing for Labour governments. In this connection it may be worth **identifying** the priorities which the British establishment media always have in the back of their minds when they organize their political campaigns. Their first preference is, and must always remain, the maintenance in power of a right-wing conservative government that they can rely on to defend their interests. If, for any reason, such a government seems unable to rely on public support, then they move to their second choice which is a 'Yberal' Tory government that will be more sensitive to public opinion—in order to survive electorally—but which will keep the socialists out of office, for the nagging fear that exists in their minds is that the extreme right-wing might actually precipitate a real swing to the left. If even that sort of moderate Tory government cannot maintain its public backing, the third establishment choice would be a Tory and Centre coalition, also designed to keep Labour out, and in the hope that the policies followed by such a government would protect the status quo.

If all these options are ruled out then the establishment will go for a moderate Labour government, preferably controlled by some sort of a pact or electoral arrangement with the centre, along the lines of the Lib-Lab pact of 1977–8, when James Callaghan, as Prime Minister, gave instructions to all his ministers that they were not to bring any major proposals to cabinet until they had been cleared personally by the Liberal spokesperson, allowing the Liberal Party to know much more about the government's intentions than the Labour Party or Labour **MPs** whose support was taken for granted. If that moderating mechanism does not work, then a right-wing Labour government, with a working majority, may have to be accepted by the establishment as the last resort, and it will be hoped that the skilful use of the pressure groups, described above, can keep it from surrendering to its 'wilder' rank and file. The one situation that the British establishment will, under no circumstances accept—nor for that matter would the American government—would be a Labour government committed to the policies of its conference, or any attempt to carry through any sort of social or political transformation, and if one were elected the campaigns to undermine, destabilize or destroy it would be on a massive scale and would include attempts to organize sufficient external pressure to secure a retreat from the Manifesto policies upon which such a government was elected. If we are to understand what is happening at any one time, these priorities need to be borne in mind, for the establishment will move up and down the scale of options set out above, as circumstances require, sometimes appearing to be supporting the conservatives, sometimes the centre and sometimes backing the right-wing of the Labour if that is all

that stands between their interests and political change.

### *10. International Institutions and Capital*

So much for the internal pressures, now let us turn to those which emanate from abroad, all of which will have close links with the internal pressure groups. With the emergence, in the last generation, of an absolutely free international market for finance and for industry, through the multinationals, the scope for pressure from abroad is almost unlimited, and so is the readiness of those who have that power to use it to secure the acceptance of policies that will protect their interests. There were a number of occasions when I had direct experience of that pressure, as for example with Phillips of Eindhoven (who ran a balance of trade deficit on their UK operations, by transfer pricing); with IBM (who tried to cancel out the effects of a British devaluation by raising their own prices in the UK); and with the Oil companies (who did everything they could to frustrate our North Sea policy)—but the practice is so normal as hardly to need to be illustrated.

The greatest and most effective pressure can, and is, exerted by the bankers and the IMF to force Labour governments to adopt monetarist policies, as happened in 1976, and which ultimately brought Labour down in 1979, by securing such cuts in public expenditure as to lead to a confrontation with many working people, so that they withdrew their political support in the election of that year. In dealing with the international institutions, of which Britain is a member, we come up against their legal right to interfere in our own affairs, under the treaties which bind us to them. For example the NATO Council asserts its right to determine the level of our defence expenditure, and as a result has saddled Britain with a burden of weapons expenditure that has denied us the civil investment that would have contributed to our economic growth and recovery—a pressure that came primarily from the United States, which sees NATO as an arm of its own foreign and defence policy. Most effective of all has been the influence of the EEC, which now has the legal power to override domestic British legislation under the terms of the Act passed in 1972 which gave effect to the Treaty of Accession of Britain to the Common Market—a power that will be widened and deepened, after 1992, when the Single European Act comes into force and could, according to Jacques Delors, President of the E.E.C. Commission, 'federalize' as much as 80% of all British legislation under the control of the appointed Brussels Commission. This commission has interfered regularly in Britain, and amongst its interventions were some that would have removed our control of oil policy and cramped our capacity to create jobs in areas of high unemployment.

### *Conclusion*

But the greatest constitutional obstacle in the way of reforming socialist ministers derives from the immense power which a British prime minister exercises under our constitution, controlling as he (or she) does the whole executive

machine, setting the agenda for cabinet, establishing cabinet committees that other ministers may never hear of, and demanding collective responsibility from colleagues who have no knowledge of what has been agreed, by whom or when. This form of personal rule is backed up by the power of instant dismissal of ministers who may dissent, coupled with appeals to blind loyalty from the party, and buttressed by the capacity to take disciplinary action against individual members of the party, with the assistance of the National Executive Committee on which the trade union leaders have a large majority. These powers have proved to be singularly effective and it must also be added that they have hitherto been exercised by people who have shown few signs of seriously wanting to see fundamental socialist policies applied, though, in fairness, if any Labour Prime Minister were to attempt this task he, or she, would then have to run the gauntlet of all the external and internal pressures referred to above.

I have tried to identify some of the characteristics of the actual situation as it would confront any new Labour government and of the institutions it would have to change, and how they could be defeated if they attempted to block progress. The key to success would certainly lie in the extent to which popular support could be mobilized, and that, in its turn, would require a far greater deal of openness and serious political education than has ever been attempted. News management and manipulation are not going to be enough, for the truth must be allowed to come out in a very full way, and there would also be a chance of maintaining links with our own supporters, who are normally left out in the cold and do not know what is happening or why.

The failure of Labour governments in the past is that they have never told the people the truth, which is that Britain is not a democracy, that office and power are not the same, and in the absence of that knowledge people have never been encouraged to mount the counter-pressure that could shift the balance in favour of Labour and against capital, and persuade the establishment that they have no choice but to concede to that pressure because of the strength which it commanded. Historically all social progress has always come from below, yet, almost by definition, those Labour leaders who sit in parliament, in cabinets, or in the higher counsels of the trade union movement, have won their own positions by climbing up a ladder called the 'status quo' and in doing so have escaped from many of the pressures and difficulties which are experienced by those they were elected to represent. But if the demands for change are insistent enough then they cannot be ignored by those at the top and have to be addressed seriously. My experience suggests that such demands are, at first ignored, then denounced as mad or dangerous. But if they continue there is a pause while the top people come to terms with the inevitable, the changes are made, and a few years later you cannot find anyone who will admit ever to have been against them.

One way of bringing home to the establishment, and to the electors, the

opposition of the Labour and Socialist movement to the status quo, would be for us to be far more explicit in our criticism of the institutions which sustain it.

We should back this up with a partial withdrawal from involvement in some of these institutions by, for example, refusing to continue with inter-party talks at the leadership level on what are known as 'Privy Councillor terms' (which are confidential and hence exclude the party and the public), by declining to nominate for the **House** of Lords or for the position of 'Labour' Commissioner in Brussels, and by persuading the TUC to stop nominating its members of the National Economic Development Council, all of which give legitimacy to the conservative state apparatus which prop up the present system.

We should also be spending much more time on the institutional and constitutional reforms which Labour would introduce, when it comes to power, campaigning actively, and publicly, for major changes that would extend democracy in our political, economic and industrial system.

It is sometimes argued, by those who fully understand everything described in this article, that all the evidence set out proves that reform is not enough and that revolution is the only answer, but, if the experience of earlier Labour governments is re-assessed, it is so obvious that no reforms in the structure of the state were ever attempted, and that, if they had been, they would have amounted to a revolution—carried through by consent obtained through the electoral system—and backed up by insistent pressure from those whose lives would be radically improved if they had occurred. That may be the main lesson for the future which we can learn from the past, and if we decline to learn it Labour will never be able to graduate beyond its past role of being an alternative management team for capitalism, only allowed to win when the rich and the powerful know that such a government is essential if working people are to be persuaded to accept cuts in their living standards, so that capitalism can, under intensive care, be able to recover—then to be handed back to its 'rightful owners'. Such a role can have no appeal to socialists, and were it to represent the limits of Labour's political aspirations it would not justify the effort, nor could such a strategy be guaranteed to produce electoral success, for many people have sensed what is going on and would not bother to work or vote for a party that had set its sights so low.