

BUILDING NEW PARTIES FOR A DIFFERENT KIND OF SOCIALISM: A RESPONSE

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Barry Winter and I share a common starting point: a common concern with how the left can connect and communicate with the majority of people.

He believes that the most effective strategy for socialists to reach the people is primarily through the Labour Party and through building the left within it. This conclusion rests on the idea that the left will not get a hearing unless it is positioned in 'the political mainstream' – and he tends to see such a location as being the Labour Party. Political activity outside the Labour party, he describes, though not totally dismissively, as 'the fringe'.

His argument also depends on the idea that, after all, most of the people in the Labour Party are pretty representative of the wider population and if we can communicate effectively inside the party we are 'on the way to connecting' with this wider population. He believes that failures of the Labour left to achieve this wider influence are a result of major tactical blunders and anti-democratic behaviour rather than due to deeper limits on change built into the Party's institutions – which in turn, I will argue, shape, though not justify, some of the Labour left's undoubted mistakes.

I believe, by contrast, that the left's position inside the Labour Party has changed from being the opportunity it arguably was in the past into an imprisonment, which actually distorts and constrains the left's ability to convince the people of the relevance of radical socialist politics. The implication of my argument is that any section of the left which restricts its political location to the Labour Party and refuses seriously to consider the prospect of a party to the left of Labour, isolates itself from the people. It will make *itself marginal*, 'on the fringe' of political debate. My case is that in the long or even medium run, the most effective way for the radical left in the UK to engage with the political mainstream, as in most other West European countries, is with a political voice to the left of social democracy. This is not to say that working through such a party is an exclusive option; there would still be a significant left working mainly within the Labour party as, for example, in Denmark, Germany, Norway, Holland and Spain

where there is a significant social democratic left, strengthened by the existence of a political competitor to social democracy's left. (Incidentally, Ralph **Miliband** explicitly assumes the influence of such radical sources of electoral as well as social pressure when he argues that the radical left's best medium term hope lies in strengthening the left in social democratic parties. He still held to his analysis of the limits of working from a permanently subordinate position within these parties).

This fundamental difference in strategy towards a shared goal influences our understandings of the importance of social movements, the political ramifications of the collapse of Soviet Communism, the decline of social democracy and the pressures of Europe and Scotland on Britain's unwritten constitution – the further points of disagreement itemised in Winter's critique. I will dwell first on the source of the strategic difference and secondly set out the case for seriously preparing for parties of the radical left which present an electoral challenge to Labour (I put it in the plural because such preparations for an electoral – as well as **extra-parliamentary** – coalition are already underway in Scotland).

In the Labour Party's early years, the structure of the party, based on trade union affiliations as well as the affiliation of political societies and parties did provide for the left a captive audience of politically alert listeners. There were several reasons for this, both to do with the character of trade unions in that period and the early structure of the trade **union**/party alliance. First, trade union membership then was a much more conscious commitment, a commitment to collective resistance to the employers and more often than not, the state. Although one should be wary of generalising, it was a commitment against the grain of majority opinion, and often taken at some risk. As a result trade union branches and the structures built up from them, trades councils, district committees and so on, were generally lively and well-attended, real live centres of debate, discussion and action about the needs of working class people. This in turn influenced the character of union participation in the Labour Party, especially at a local level. After all, Trades Councils were 'Trades and Labour Councils' affiliated to the Labour Party. Left activists could with real justification assume that the trade union affiliates with whom they were working and arguing as they built the Labour Party were a live connection between socialists and the wider public.

In the last 60 years, changes in the character of the unions and in the structure of party–union relations have turned this captive activist audience into something nearer the dead souls of Tom Nairn's famous description of the block vote. Ironically, the very success of the Labour Representation Committee's original project, to establish the trade unions as a legitimate estate of the realm, weakened the role of Labour's union affiliates as a live connection between the left in the Labour Party and the public outside.

Moreover it made the block basis of affiliation and representation open to abuse, by left and right, since the union delegates casting votes in highly politicised discussions, were representing a membership which, except in rare periods of mass industrial action, or on issues directly affecting their interests, were politically apathetic.

Since the **1960s**, ever since trade unions had the almost habitual, indeed with the check-off system, automatic, support of over 30% of the population rather than a small, class conscious minority, the left in the Labour Party has faced a serious dilemma: to win any serious influence in the Labour Party and to do so on a sustainable and democratic basis, the left had to convince a significant section of this mass trade union membership to support left socialist policies. Such a task itself requires a political party, with its own press, campaigns and education, able to reach beyond the full-time and lay officials representing the membership in the forums of the Party. In other words to move Labour to the left, the left needed their own **organisation** with equivalent functions – other than electoral – to a party.

In its heyday in the **1920s**, this is what the Independent Labour was, a left party within the larger federated structure of the Labour Party. The Communist Party also tried to play this role, first by attempting to affiliate to the party then by acting in effect as the industrial wing of the Labour left. Apart from the limits of the Communist party as an advocate of democratic socialism, the Labour Party became increasingly centralised, losing many features of its genuinely federal political character, making any kind of dual membership or lasting alliance with another political party – even one which abstained from independent electoral activity – virtually impossible. One reaction to this and to Labour's dramatic turn to the right under Ramsey **MacDonald**, was a split in the ILP with an initially significant section leaving to form their own electoral party. At that stage, without a proportional electoral system and without any trade union support, such a move did not solve the dilemma (though those who tried to maintain the **ILP's** existence inside the party were no more able to overcome the dilemma than those outside).

There have been moments of course, when industrial and political developments have radicalised the mass of trade unionists, without the midwife of a socialist party. The **mid-1970s**, with the miners' strike bringing down Prime Minister Edward Heath was such a moment. This produced the move to the **left** in the trade unions which gave the Bennite left its hope of victory. But the ultimate defeat of Bennism illustrates the dilemma of the left described above. The 'Bennite' left did not have the sort of organisation – in effect a campaigning, educational political party – which could have worked at the base of the unions to build on the organic militancy of that period and turn it into a sustained shift in consciousness. They had an organisation that could lobby trade union representatives, at

many different levels; but beyond activist newsletters, local rallies and conference fringe meetings, it could do little more. In tactical terms it was an impressive organisational effort. As such it was able to harvest the consequences of an earlier shift in consciousness but it could not sustain and deepen that radicalisation. All too often, as Winter implies, it accepted the undemocratic mechanisms of the block vote because they worked in the left's favour. On the other hand, there were occasions when the campaign for constitutional change and for Benn to be leader did open up debate in the unions to a remarkable degree. Where they were successful, however, they could not maintain the commitment. They often ended up controlling structures where there was no sustained base of support for their position. This is one factor behind the relative ease of Tony Blair's rout of the left.

Sometimes the left was able to use control of the institutions, however hollow their initial popular content, to build popular support. Ken Livingstone's radical but immensely popular GLC would be a case in point. But more often than not the necessity to defend or win control over structures in which political participation is low has tied up the energies of Labour left activists in inward-looking wrangles. Thus while there are many critical lessons to be drawn about the tactics of the Labour left in the 1980s, I would argue that what dragged them down was the structures they inhabited of which they were insufficiently critical.

The only solution to the left's dilemma within our present electoral and party system would be the possibility of dual membership of Labour as a coalition party, with other political parties of the left. The (unique) relationship between the ANC and the South African Communist Party illustrates the possibility; a relationship with many similarities to the **ILP's** relationship to the Labour Party in its early days. But even to make the comparison, highlights how radically the Labour Party has changed since the fluidity of those early years. The process of making itself electable on the terms set by the British establishment, has led the party to mirror the establishment's view of the left and treat it as an embarrassment, something to be hidden, camouflaged and otherwise side-lined. Frosts from the Cold War at different periods have stiffened this anti-pluralist ethic.

This ditching of pluralism for reasons of electoral expediency has become extreme in reaction to four successive defeats, all blamed to various degrees on the left. It is this which has created a felt need on the left for their own political voice.

My case for such an independent voice does not rest on optimism as Winter implies. On the contrary it is because of the serious difficulties facing the left that such a political initiative needs to be prepared, through careful negotiation. In particular, there is a growing awareness of the need

to work now to prepare a positive focus for the disillusion that will set in under what we might as well call 'Blatcherism'. People remember that **as** disillusion set in under **Callaghan** and the first moves towards monetarism, there was an ominous growth in electoral support for the far right. Racism and xenophobia are now more firmly entrenched in the Conservative party than ever before, as indicated by the resignations and growing disaffection of its 'Christian democrats'. A left that simply continues with a 'business **as** usual' routine in the Labour Party, however hard-working, cannot create the confident alternative that will be necessary to prevent Portillo and his crew from sailing to power on the demoralisation created by Blair.

It is because this need for new directions – diffuse and inchoate though these presently may be – is widely felt that the basis for new political initiatives exists. My examples of a new confidence amongst some leading **left MPs**, for instance, were intended not to imply some revival of the Labour left but to illustrate how when some left **MPs** made common cause with campaigns outside the Labour Party and helped these movements gain a popular platform they had a real impact, bridging that chasm between socialists and the rest of society. This is leading to a detached co-habitation between many on the Labour left and the leadership of the party. They inhabit the same home but even more than before follow entirely different political lives.

Similarly my focus on recent progressive social movements was not driven by some naive presumption that they could give virgin birth to a new political party. It is rather that in their practice, influenced as it was and is, by the failure both of social democracy and Soviet communism, they have been testing out new methods of organising, new understandings of social change, and in particular the connections that link individual consciousness self-awareness, practical knowledge and skill to the collective capacity and the collective power to transform structures. A critical development of these insights needs to be central to the left's future initiatives if they are not to be dogged by past failures.

Barry Winter says that for me the past does not weigh heavily. In one sense that is true. But it is not because I have taken the social movement escapism pill. Rather it is because as someone who became a socialist in opposition to the actual experience of both Soviet Communism and social democracy, I have sought since their collapse and demise, to think through why and how the libertarian left with which I have identified is different. This does not mean that I now believe that the libertarian left, influenced as it is by involvement in social and radical trade union movements, has a clear programme and strategy. But it does mean I have a clear, methodological, as well as substantive sense of why the socialism for which, with many others, I am working, is different; why in a certain sense the past in so far as it is the past of regimes and governments that ruled in the name

of socialism, is not my past.

In elaborating a different kind of socialism we need to learn from the past and especially to discover socialist traditions that have been suppressed and marginalised. But with perspectives clarified by an understanding of history and a knowledge of previously hidden continuities, a modern vision of socialism can best be made practical through focusing reflective attention, with an international lens, on present and future experiments in social co-operation, public **ownership** and democratic participation.

While Barry Winter may consider that I am cavalier towards the past, I find that for Barry the present does not sufficiently impinge. In particular the present state of decay of the British state and the pressures it is under from within – most notably Scotland, but also the implosion of the royal establishment, the revelations of the Scott inquiry, the rebellions of the young and poor whose city councils can no longer provide public services – and from without, **the steady** encroachment of **European** integration. Barry Winter rather begrudgingly admits that the unstoppable pressure for constitutional reform is likely to lead to electoral reform. This, he says, might give scope to the **forces** of the right. Indeed it might. In fact constitutional reform-of itself is never **automatically progressive**. That is why the left needs to be well ahead of the process, not just predicting that change might happen and that the picture is complex and dangerous. We need to spell out what kind of electoral reform, what kind of bill of rights, what powers for local and regional government, what kind of republic. And knowing that electoral reform at Westminster is almost unavoidable as the pressure surrounds this archaic citadel on all sides, we need to prepare to make the most of it to give political expression to the millions-of **people** who presently feel disenfranchised. If anything is going to play into the hands of the right, it is to imagine that the 'inside left' can change the Labour Party to provide an adequate voice for the generations of disaffected voters it has alienated in the past.

I detect in Barry Winter's writing an effort to maintain a taboo. A taboo on serious discussion of what is part of the political scene in virtually every West European political system: a party to the left of social democracy, trying with varying degrees of success to rethink socialism, but with a continuing commitment to a different economic and social system. In effect it is a taboo, prevalent in England at least, on openly imagining what possibilities might emerge under democratic constitutional arrangements – as if the left had some vested interest in the existing unwritten constitution and should not think beyond it.

At the end of 1995 Arthur **Scargill** had the confidence – born of frustration and a touch of arrogance **perhaps** – to break the taboo. Scargill's virtue is his ability to identify an injustice and insist publicly on action to

right the wrong – whether the government's pit closure plans or the political injustice of the radical left's exclusion from political representation. His flaw, in my opinion, is his voluntaristic presumption that others might follow his lead despite the absence of the prior process of coalition building that could produce a more strategically effective initiative. It is up to others who share some elements of his long term goal to respond to his initiative and turn it into a far reaching debate that may well end up with outcomes different from that which **Scargill** presently proposes. At the time of writing it appears unlikely that this will be possible. It is likely that others on the left with different timetables and more inclusive ways of organising will need to pursue their own discussions (for instance left organisations from within the Green party, the Labour party, the Democratic Left and independent socialists in the Socialist Movement and Red-Green network are already engaged in a process of convergences).

The problem of left political representation which he addresses is too important to leave to Scargill. It is not just a crisis of representation for his particular brand of socialism but for all those – left greens, for example – who believe in a socialisation of wealth and a transformation rather than mere amelioration of capitalist political economy. Now that the **Mandleson/Blair** leadership is following to its practical conclusion the view that everything associated with the left's influence in the early 1980s has to be exorcised, it has become an urgent issue. Many long-term Labour activists have made the painful decision to leave the party: others have made the equally painful decision to hang on for the time being. Many politically active citizens are homeless or lodging in temporary accommodation.

But the silencing of the left is not just a matter of frustrated activists. A small, but significant number of voters also feel that their views no longer have a legitimate voice in the political system. It's not just the anecdotal evidence of local left activists who have told me about how they have been rung up by people who want details of Scargill's new party, or indeed of the reports from his office of hundreds of requests, especially from trade unionists, for party cards. Opinions polls show significant minorities with views on taxation, public spending, privatisation and public ownership to the left of New Labour's. There is also the question of the marginalisation of what Fenner Brockway called the 'outside left' for the wider political culture. The suppression of this left by the current Labour machine is an extreme response to the way in which the electoral system makes the floating voter the magnet to which the main parties are drawn. There is an **inbuilt** pressure on Labour to look over its right shoulder which can only be countered by pressures in the party bolstering up the left against short-term electoral imperatives – a diminishing possibility after four electoral defeats – or by an electoral competitor to labour's left, which is not a

serious possibility until there is real momentum towards the introduction of a proportional electoral system.

As the transformation of Labour into a party of modern capitalist management proceeds apace, however, the refusal of many Labour Party socialists seriously to discuss even the long **term** prospects and conditions for a new party will become a seal on their own subordination. Their timidity in providing an intellectual and campaigning alternative focus – if not an electoral one – increases the humiliating phenomenon of grown men and women slavishly obeying a leader who is intellectually vacuous, however tactically brilliant he and his team may be.

The case for a left electoral challenge to Labour and hence for proportional representation is a perfectly respectable one which could quite legitimately be supported by people within the party. A left electoral challenge under a proportionate electoral system would overcome the bias towards the centre; it would provide both a left ally for and pressure on Labour in government – opening up, **formalising** and in effect making democratic the coalition that the labour movement claims to be. None of this case adds up to the kind of 'betrayal' of which some Labour socialists accuse anyone who advocates even serious debate about a left party.

Moreover, there are a variety of ways short of an electoral challenge to Labour, in which the left inside and outside the Party could work together campaigning and refining shared socialist policies in the build-up to the election and in opposition to many of the policies that a new Labour government will pursue. The exact timing of an electoral challenge could then be open, to wait for conditions in which such a challenge would gain mass support, rather than lost deposits.

But what are the conditions for left party, parties or an electoral alliance to come into being as an effective political force? The experience of northern Europe where left parties have between 8 and 18% of the vote points to two conditions: first the existence of a proportional electoral system and secondly the occurrence of a major split in a Communist or social democratic party or both. In New **Zealand**, working with the colonial legacy of a Westminster first-past-the-post system, a split from the Labour Party there in response to the Thatcherite economic policies pursued by a Labour government led to the creation of a new left breakaway led by Jim Anderton, which, in coalition with an already-established Green Party and radical Maori party, has proved not only a serious electoral challenge to Labour but also a decisive factor in overturning the electoral system. But the breakaway was equivalent to Tony Benn, Ken Livingstone and Peter **Hain**, if not Robin Cook and Michael Meacher, splitting from British Labour.

In Britain, the historical lack of a strong communist party, the demise of the Independent Labour Party and Labour's monopoly of **labour-**

movement political representation – partly thanks to an electoral system designed to protect the establishment – has denied the left a base from which a challenge to Labour might grow organically. In this context, a few sustained campaigning movements, notably CND, have periodically acted as a convivial shelter for the politically homeless.

Discussion of the prospects for a new left party or electoral alliance in Britain needs to take account of very different national dynamics, especially in Scotland and England. In Scotland, as already mentioned, there is, in preparation for a Scottish parliament, work under way for a left electoral alliance. One of the possible components, Scottish Militant Labour, has already a small number of local government seats. The Scottish National Party is itself, on present policies, a left electoral challenge to Labour. In England, too, the emphasis has to be on preparations. After all, there is much to prepare for: the strong possibility of a real momentum towards electoral reform, assuming the Lib Dems are in a strong position after the election; the strong likelihood of policies proposed by a Labour government for which many left **MPs** will find it impossible to vote.

There are also many preparatory problems to consider – for example, problems of structure that determine how one approaches questions of programme and policy. Scargill's proposal extols the original constitution of Labour, with its coalition-like character. Moreover, he stresses that 'radical opposition in Britain is symbolised not by the Labour and trade union movement, but by the groupings such as those which defeated the poll tax, the anti-motorway and animal rights bodies, Greenpeace and other anti-nuclear campaigners, and those fighting against open-cast mining'. But the structure he proposes, 'a simple socialist constitution', does not allow for the diversity and flexibility that a coalition of left political **organisations** and a closer relation with these new movements would require.

Then there is the question of electoral intervention. If the preparations followed the Scottish model, then there could conceivably be a selective and realistic electoral intervention even at the next election. It could involve support for socialist Labour **MPs**, Green Party candidates and the left of Plaid Cymru in Wales, plus one or two high-profile challenges in safe Labour seats with leading New Labour **MPs** or safe Tory **seats** – if there are such things.

Finally, there is the question of policy. Again, given the fissiparous state of the left, it would be more realistic if the coalition of electoral-alliance model were followed and an agreed platform of economic, constitutional, social and international themes drawn up instead of a detailed party manifesto. A green socialist alliance of this kind would not be exclusively electoral. It would provide a platform and information exchange for the variety of trade union and green campaigns now emerging. Even during the

election campaign, it could organise for policies and support for **extra-parliamentary** campaigns where it did not back a particular candidate.

A vacuum has been steadily opening up in British politics to which **Scargill** has now responded, without any of the political sensitivity needed effectively to begin to fill it. If the radically minded left inside the Labour Party is to help to renew the left, it will not suffice to scoff at the idea of a new left. The possibility is irreversibly on the agenda, the debate is about what kind, when, following what preparations, negotiations, period of **non-party** coalition. For this, the left in Britain needs to learn from the successes and failures of the radical left across the world. Just as the British establishment, Labour as well as Conservative, can no longer cling on to the political cosiness of a two party monopoly, so the British left can no longer plead 'British peculiarities' and retreat into inner Labour Party obscurity. It has to learn, drawing on international experiences, how to take its message to the people, independently, no longer under the cover of Labour.

NOTES

1. See *Arguments For a New Left: Answering the Free Market Right*, Oxford: Blackwells, 1994.