

LABOUR POLICY AND THE LABOUR LEFT

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I

SOCIALISTS concerned with issues and policies may find very irritating the constant intrusion of personality into political discussion and, more specifically, the enormous amount of attention which has been concentrated on Mr. Harold Wilson ever since his election to the leadership of the Labour Party at the beginning of 1963.

But party leaders, in the British political system, are extremely powerful figures and their influence on party policy, strategy and tactics is bound to be very great. The point is especially relevant to Harold Wilson's replacement of Hugh Gaitskell as leader of the Labour Party, since Wilson has generally been thought to be well to the left of Gaitskell. He did, after all, resign with Aneurin Bevan from the Labour Government in 1951; he opposed German rearmament in 1953-54; and he did stand against Gaitskell for the leadership of the Labour Party in October 1960, at the height of the unilateralist controversy and with the support of the Labour Left; and he has, throughout the 'fifties, been one of the favourite sons of the constituency parties. Furthermore, the right wing of the Labour Party, and particularly the right wing of the parliamentary party, was bitterly hostile to him right up to the time of his election to the leadership of the Party. Within the Labour Left, however, assessments of Mr. Wilson's radicalism have been extraordinarily diverse, with some convinced that he is a genuine man of the Left, and others equally certain that he is not. This diversity of opinion alone would suggest that Mr. Wilson has been remarkably successful in covering his political tracks.

Before taking the point any further, it may be noted that, whatever the degree of Mr. Wilson's radicalism, account must be taken of the men around him. Mr. Wilson inherited from Hugh Gaitskell a group of immediate colleagues of whose political orientation there need not exist the slightest doubt: they are firmly situated on the Right, and in some cases on the extreme Right, of the Labour spectrum. The balance of forces inside the Parliamentary Labour Party at the time of Mr. Wilson's election as leader was not such as to enable him, even if he had wanted to do so, to ignore the importance of the Right, nor has any discernible shift to the Left occurred since then. Whether Mr. Wilson as leader of the Party could himself have done more to cause such a shift and how much more Mr. Wilson as Prime Minister might

be able to do are open questions. There are not, in any case, very many people already in the upper reaches of the Labour hierarchy who could be counted on to strengthen Mr. Wilson's hypothetical left-wing tendencies; the most prominent among them, Mr. R. H. S. Crossman, is a man of fertile mind and intellectual brilliance, but his radicalism has always been of too erratic and uncertain a kind to make him a serious and consistent spokesman for the Left. Other such putative radicals may be less erratic, but they are also probably less influential. No doubt, there are left-inclined eminences, who will emerge in due course, particularly if a Labour Government is elected, but the shift is unlikely to be very dramatic in any short span.

Given this disposition of forces, it would be easy to conjure up the vision of a radical leader, held back by orthodox colleagues, frustrated in his radical leanings by the team he inherited from his predecessor, impatient for change, but temporarily unable to move the Labour Party as far to the Left as he himself would wish.

Such a picture would be seriously misleading. There are undoubtedly certain political differences between Mr. Wilson and his immediate colleagues; and Mr. Wilson is also in a variety of ways different from his predecessor. But it would be naïve to think of these differences as being simply a matter of Mr. Wilson being "Left" while Mr. Gaitskell was "Right," or of a socialist Mr. Wilson being surrounded by orthodox and recalcitrant colleagues. These categories are far too crude for this particular situation. The real differences between Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson, quite apart from the latter's considerable technical skill as a politician, are far more complex; they may encompass, loosely speaking, the distinction between Left and Right; but they are hardly exhausted therewith.

One such difference lies in the fact that Mr. Wilson, unlike Hugh Gaitskell, has never shown any great wish to remove the ambiguities, confusions and evasions which have surrounded so much of Labour policy, for instance on the subject of nationalization. On the contrary, Mr. Wilson's whole career since 1951 has been built on ambiguity and a careful avoidance of too specific a commitment in the various disputes that have agitated the Labour movement since that time. Thus Mr. Wilson did resign from the Labour Government with **Bevan**, but he kept his distance thereafter from the Bevanite rebels; he was certainly against German rearmament but quickly fell into line when the Left was defeated on this issue; when Aneurin **Bevan** resigned from the Shadow Cabinet in 1954 because he was being hounded by his opponents, Mr. Wilson did not hesitate to take the vacant seat; and it was Mr. Wilson who enthusiastically recommended *Industry and Society* to the Labour Conference of 1957. This, it will be remembered, was the first major explicit attempt under Mr. Gaitskell's leadership to wean the Party away from its commitments on nationalization. Mr. Wilson was not unwilling to let it be said that he did not approve of Mr. Gaitskell's

later handling of the Clause 4 issue, but only because there was no need to raise the issue at all; and while Mr. Wilson stood against Mr. Gaitskell for the leadership of the Labour Party at the height of the defence controversy, he made it clear that he must not in any way be thought to have unilateralist sympathies. Whatever else it may suggest, and whatever the reasons, this is not a particularly impressive left-wing record. It suggests a marked capacity for political manoeuvre, rather than firm adherence to rooted conviction.

Mr. Wilson has himself said that his position could be described as a little to the left of centre. This, Clement Attlee once said, was the only proper and possible position for a leader of the Labour Party. Mr. Wilson himself has explicitly endorsed this pronouncement. But the notion that Attlee *was* a left of centre leader is one of the more carefully fostered myths of Labour politics: the record shows that on all the issues which really mattered, Attlee was unequivocally opposed to left policies. Nor indeed is this really surprising: choices have to be made and sets of policies must revolve around one axis or another. In practical terms, leaders cannot be all things to all men.

The framework in which choices are made naturally varies according to time and place. In the British context, and in relation to home policy in the 1960s, the touchstone of a Labour leader's commitment is above all his approach to the question of nationalization. Mr. Wilson's position on this central issue is quite clear. Four days after his election as leader of the Labour Party, Mr. Wilson was challenged in the House of Commons to say whether he stood by Clause 4 in the Party Constitution. He said that he did, and that so did the whole of the Labour Party. Formally this is true. The Labour Party does stand by Clause 4, as it has stood by it since 1918. In practice, however, Labour spokesmen, from Mr. Wilson downwards, have stated again and again that save for the renationalization of steel and parts of road transport, the Labour Party had no plans for any additional take-over of industries and firms. The main qualification to this lies in some formulations of the type found in Signposts for the Sixties, where it is suggested, for instance, that where "competition creates not efficiency but chaos in a key sector of the economy," "an expansion of public ownership may be necessary to put things right"; and a similarly vague case for public ownership is made for cases where "major changes of ownership and control in a vital industry are threatened by take-over bid or merger."

In addition, there is one type of public ownership which Mr. Wilson has advocated with some persistence; this is the establishment of State-owned enterprises in "growth points" of the economy, either as pilot plants or as competitors to existing private industry. The idea was much canvassed under the post-war Labour Government, without much being done about it. It would undoubtedly be much more energetically pursued under a Wilson administration. The setting-up of such enterprises may be very desirable, and they might well perform

some valuable functions, but it can hardly be claimed that they would transform the basis and character of economic life in Britain, even in a long-term perspective, nor would they disturb the existing power structure in the British economy.

The conclusion, therefore, is inescapable that Mr. Wilson has no more intention than his predecessors of committing the Labour Party or a Labour Government to any significant additions to the public sector. His aim, and that of his colleagues, is not to begin the difficult task of transforming a predominantly private enterprise economy into one with a predominantly socialized base; it is rather to direct private capitalism, to extend much further the scope of State intervention in economic affairs, to prod, encourage, admonish, cajole and bribe private interests into accepting and acting upon a Labour Government's policies. Labour's ideal would appear to be a British version of the French *économie concertée*, in which private industry, labour and the State are each to play their part within a general framework of "indicative" planning.

The Labour leaders are quite naturally perturbed at Britain's comparatively sluggish economic performance over the past decade, at its falling share of world trade, at the inadequacy and misdirection of investment, and at the waste of material and human skills and resources. They are well aware that contemporary capitalism needs State intervention on a massive scale if it is to continue as a dynamic system. Labour leaders claim that they would administer the economy much more efficiently than the Conservatives. They may well be right. For there accretes around the Tory Party a multitude of vested interests, many of a wholly parasitical kind, of which a Tory Government must take careful account, but towards which a Labour Government might prove less tender. Thus land speculators, large landlords, get-rich-quick financiers may have a thinner time under a Labour Government than during the recent golden years, which should still, however, leave them with plenty of fat. Labour would be especially concerned to help and encourage those parts of capitalist industry which showed enterprise and dynamism; and it is in this sense that Labour, less paradoxically than might appear at first sight, may justly claim to be the solicitous friend of "neo-capitalism."

If Mr. Wilson and his colleagues are to succeed in their aim of restoring vigour to the British economy, however, they will need the co-operation of private industry and finance. Such co-operation has always had its price in the past and there is no reason to believe that the future will be any different. Nor is there much doubt that the Labour leaders, like their predecessors, would be willing to pay the price demanded. This would take many forms: a "reasonable" attitude to key industrial and financial interests; a willingness, which has already found repeated expression, to preach to the trade unions the virtues of moderation in wage demands; a "sensible" attitude to tax reform;

and a sympathetic appreciation of the general requirements of an economy geared to the profit motive.

On the other hand, the Labour Party has already said that it wants to see brought about a substantial extension of social services, a major enlargement of educational opportunities, new taxation on very large property and incomes: in short, that it wants to achieve a great improvement in the quality of life in Britain, and reduce the social and economic inequalities which remain among its most offensive and characteristic features. How to achieve these aims *and* have the co-operation of industry: how to meet popular claims and respect the claims of property and privilege—these are problems very much larger than Labour leaders have so far been prepared to acknowledge; to solve them in the popular interest will require a good deal more toughness, boldness and determination than any Labour leadership has ever displayed until now.

As for external affairs, there is no reason to think that either Mr. Wilson or his colleagues nurse any ambition to depart from the principles which have guided Labour foreign policy since 1945. They remain wholly dedicated to NATO and the American Alliance. They are now free from their previous commitment to an "independent" British nuclear force and they have repeatedly emphasized that their main concern in relation to NATO was to strengthen Britain's contribution in "conventional" forces.

The Labour Party, it is true, has long advocated certain initiatives it would like to see the Alliance develop. It has, for example, subscribed for many years to disengagement in Central Europe, as a variant of the Rapacki Plan. Mr. Wilson himself has said quite categorically that he was opposed to West Germany having a share, direct or indirect, in the possession or control of nuclear weapons; and he has also spoken of the "factual" recognition of East Germany. A Labour Government would probably want more Summit Conferences and it would press for more energetic efforts to make progress in disarmament; it would also be a much better friend of the United Nations than the Tories have been; and it would undoubtedly seek a substantial extension of trade with the Communist world.

Even so, there has been no sign that the Labour leaders would bring a fresh view to Britain's role in the world, or that they would be prepared to consider any measure of disengagement for Britain—disengagement, that is, from the constrictions of the American Alliance. In fact, all Labour's plans and policies appear to be conditional upon their acceptance and support by the United States. Should an emergency like the Cuban crisis of October 1962 occur, Labour leaders could be expected to urge moderation upon their American allies. But this falls a long way short of independent initiatives, and has, of course, nothing in common with "third force" politics, let alone an active neutralism. The Labour Party has shown much sympathy with the "third world,"

but it remains so far difficult to see what this would mean, in hard and concrete terms; nor is there much to guarantee that a Labour Government would not adopt very orthodox attitudes indeed in such parts of the world as the oil sheikdoms of the Middle East.

II

In this perspective, it would clearly be a mistake to expect the next Labour Government to reach out for deep structural changes in Britain, or to embark on new foreign policies. These are not, in any case, two separate spheres of policy, independent of each other: without a radical recasting of foreign policy, involving a drastic cut-back in defence spending, the domestic programme of the Government would be that much more modest in scope.

But this is not the whole story, for what a Labour Government does or fails to do is not simply the product of its own wishes and predilections. A very great deal must also depend on the pressure to which it would be subjected. No one need doubt that these pressures would be efficiently and relentlessly applied by the Tories; and there would also be plenty of support for caution, compromise and orthodoxy that would come from within the Labour movement itself. But the question which must urgently concern every socialist is how much pressure would come from the Labour Left.

The importance of this pressure should need no emphasis. The Labour movement has always been as radical in its programmes and policies as the Left has persuaded or compelled it to be; the same applies in even greater measure to a Labour Government, beset as it must be by forces hostile to socialist policies, and prone as it is likely to be to give in to them, or at best to seek compromise with them.

As a pressure group, the Labour Left has always been a somewhat shapeless entity. It has three distinct parts—the left-wing activists in the constituency parties upon whom falls so much of the day-to-day work of the political side of the movement; the trade union left, which similarly bears a large part of the grass roots activity of the trade union movement; and the left-wing members of the Parliamentary Labour Party. These three parts are not, of course, isolated one from the other; on the contrary, they are closely connected and the political strength or weakness of one of them has a direct impact upon the political position of the others. Of the three, the most prominent element is the parliamentary Left, which is also the element that must translate the general pressure of the other two into direct and specific political terms. For good or ill, it inevitably acts as the spokesman for the whole of the Labour Left. Its position has always been difficult, since it must act in a context of know-nothing orthodoxy and bear the brunt of "loyal" hostility. It is the exposed nerve of the Labour Left, and it is not perhaps surprising that it has frequently twitched under even slight

pressure. It will be less susceptible to such pressure if it is backed by a strong grass-roots movement.

The Labour Left has seldom been so quiescent as in the last eighteen months or so. One reason for this is that the approach of an election was bound to produce a desire for an end to internecine warfare. This would have happened in any case, whoever—almost—had been the leader of the Party. But the election of Mr. Wilson has of course greatly helped, in part because Mr. Wilson has shown great skill in blurring contentious issues; and also because the Labour Left finds Mr. Wilson a much more acceptable leader than his predecessor, and one whom they believe is more likely to listen sympathetically to their views.

However that may be, and the Labour Left is traditionally prone to illusions in these matters, it would, as we have argued earlier, be the height of complacent folly to rely on goodwill for the adoption or implementation of the required policies. The fact of the matter is that the only real guarantee of an attentive hearing lies in what strength the Left is able to muster. If Mr. Wilson is radically minded, that strength would be of great help to him in dealing with his own orthodox colleagues; and if he is not, the strength of the Left is the only hope of forcing any degree of radicalism upon him. In either case, the Labour Left has an important job to do.

How wellequipped is it to do that job? The answer is — not well. Not only does it suffer from its traditional weaknesses, confusions and illusions, but, while it knows that it wants a great deal to be done, it has also so far failed to define precisely what that something is and how to press for it.

What then should it do? The traditional answer has always been that it should organize into a formal body within the Labour Party, on the model of the I.L.P. until 1932, or the Socialist League after it, with its own branches, national conferences, policies and programmes: or, much more modestly, on the model of Victory for Socialism in the more recent past.

All past experience suggests that, for good or ill, this type of all-purpose organization is not viable. It either comes to act like a rival to the official organization, in which case it soon runs into disciplinary problems, or it leads a quietly ineffective existence. Furthermore, such all-purpose organizations provide a refuge for contending factions, and therefore suffer from their own internal rivalries and disputes. In short, such all-purpose political organizations within the Labour Party are not effective political instruments.

This, however, does not preclude the creation and proliferation of Labour Left pressure groups, made up of constituency and trade union activists, and Left parliamentarians, *for limited purposes and in relation to specific issues*. What is required, in other words, is a variety of organizations, none of them seeking to make policy right across the board, but each concerned to press a specific *aspect* of policy upon the Party leadership and also to raise it inside the Party and out. There already exist a number of such organizations within the Labour Party,

and there ought to be more, under the aegis of the Labour Left.

An example of one such issue which cries out for such treatment is steel nationalization. This is one firm proposal in Labour's programme which will add to the public sector of the economy. It is reasonable to believe that if it had not been nationalized under the last Labour Government, it would not have continued to figure in the policy statements of the last decade. But the argument that would develop after a Labour Government came to power would not be, presumably, whether to nationalize, but in which way—that is to say, whether to do so in a "maximum" fashion, which could have important consequences, or minimally, so as to reduce the importance of the measure. The "maximum" type of nationalization is very unlikely to be tried unless the Labour Left, inside the House of Commons and out, maintains a steady and continuous pressure upon its own leaders. The Labour Left would also have as one of its main tasks the advocacy in the country of a *socialist* case for the nationalization of steel—a case which most Labour leaders, saddled though they are with their commitment to nationalize, have always feared to make, or have not perhaps known how to make. For its advocacy to be effective, organization is essential; and only the Left can provide it. It is by such pressure, by a continuous presentation of an informed case, that the Left may hope to be effective. It might even achieve a type of nationalization in which the workers in the industry appreciated that a change had taken place. There are many other specific policy objectives which the Labour Left could fight for, in an organized and coherent manner.

Furthermore, the Left badly needs its own means of educating itself as well as educating others. The time has surely come for it to create its own organization for this purpose, which would do for socialism what the Fabian Society has done for social reform. Turning such an organization into a political grouping would raise anew all the difficulties mentioned earlier; but as an educational body, it could fulfil a useful and even an important role.

Nothing of all this constitutes a final solution to a problem which has been with socialists in the Labour Party even since its inception, namely, how to push the Labour Party in socialist directions. But a beginning, or rather a new beginning, must be made somewhere; and the time to begin is surely now. All Labour Governments in the past have ended in the political abdication of the Labour leadership and in much disillusionment among the rank and file. The Labour Left has itself shared both in the weakness and in the disillusionment. In fact, a main reason for collapse in each case has been the inability of the Left to sustain its pressure and demands. What it does, and what it fails to do will be crucially important, not only in relation to a Labour Government, but to the future of socialism in Britain.