

WHAT DOES THE LEFT WANT?

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I

WHATEVER else Mr. Wilson may or may not have achieved in the first three months of his Administration (this article is being written in the first days of January 1965), he has undoubtedly managed to dispel the optimism of many people on the Left as to the policies and prospects of the Labour Government. From the point of view of the Left, the Government's performance is bound to appear exceedingly disappointing and socialists may well fear that it will get even worse; even loyalists, in whose eyes a Labour Government can scarcely set a foot wrong, are unlikely to believe that Mr. Wilson and his colleagues will bring about the Socialist Commonwealth as soon as opportunity offers, if not sooner. On any reasonable assessment, and making due allowance for the circumstances it inherited, the Government's record so far is clearly marked by a pronounced orthodoxy of purpose and policy.

The main point of this article, however, is to propose the view that it would be a great error for the Left to confine its concern about the Government to the latter's actions during the life of the present Parliament: for there are crucial questions about Labour policy which lie in a longer perspective. No doubt, the Left does have to concern itself with questions of immediate policy and with the Government's actions; and it must do all it can to make its influence felt on present issues. But it also needs, and needs very badly, to direct its attention to Labour's longer-range aims and prospects. In any case, the immediate and the more distant are obviously related; the Left's present attitudes and reactions to Government policy can only have coherence and vigour if they are part of a broader perspective; and such a perspective is important not only in terms of the Government's present actions, but even **more** in terms of its tendencies for the future. **These** tendencies, it will be argued here, make it essential for the Left to work out a clear set of policies and alternatives. The Left does *not* at present have such policies. Its failure to develop them in the next year or so would have crippling consequences for itself and for the Labour movement for many years to come.

II

That the Government's actual performance so far does exhibit many more negative than positive traits will not really be denied by anyone who does not have a very strong vested intellectual and political interest in refusing to confront reality. In fact, it would be very remarkable indeed if the Government's performance was not marked by orthodoxy, given the programme on which the Labour Party fought the 1964 election, its slender victory, the political and economic situation it faced when it assumed office, the known tendencies of its most senior members, and the conservative pressures to which it is subjected. It is unfortunately very easy to point to pronouncements and policies which confirm one's pessimistic expectations, and a lot more difficult to find a great deal which helps to see the Government in a more favourable light.

Thus, critics on the Left may well, in relation to the Government's foreign policy, indict its emphatic and insistent dedication to NATO, and also (shades of Nye **Bevan!**) to SEATO and CENTO; its acceptance of some element of nuclear mixed-manning and its endorsement, therefore, of German claims to nuclear status; its failure to express opposition to the American war in Vietnam, indeed its endorsement of American policies in the area in return for American support for Britain's own involvement in Malaysia; its ominous insistence on the rôle Britain must play "East of Suez"; its support for American and Belgian activities in the Congo; its continuation of Tory policies in British Guiana; and much else besides.

As for home affairs, the same critics cannot but deplore the Government's acceptance of economic measures characteristic of Conservative régimes; its assurances, all too well founded, that capitalist industry, finance, commerce and property in general have little if anything to fear from the Government's taxation policies, or from any other policy for that matter; the tendency of many ministers concerned with economic affairs to see nothing wrong with capitalist enterprise except its inefficiency; the Government's dedication to an "incomes policy" whose only consequences will be to weaken labour in relation to capital; and so forth.

It may readily be granted that there is another side to the story which does help to qualify the picture somewhat. Thus, the Government, though faced with a most difficult economic situation, has honoured its pledges to increase pensions and allowances, and to abolish prescription charges on the National Health Service; it has held to its pledge to renationalize steel; it has taken action and will take more on such matters as rent racketeering, racial discrimination, social security, law reform and the abolition of the death penalty; it has refused to deflate the economy to the extent demanded by its foreign creditors; and so on.

On the other hand, there are few such crumbs of comfort to be had

in regard to foreign affairs and defence; it is in vain that one would look for any Labour initiative which bore the clear imprint of fresh and radical thinking—on the contrary. However, while it is obviously true that the Government's record is unsatisfactory by socialist standards, and that such of its actions which may be deemed good are not good enough, it is necessary to remember that the Government itself does not act according to these standards, and that many of its members would bitterly oppose rigorous socialist standards if they came across them. At the time of the General Election, the Labour leaders made no pretence, either to the electors or to themselves, that they were impelled by a deep desire for socialist change, and it should therefore not be a matter for surprise that they refuse to do things which they never intended to do anyway, or that they **have done things which are in line** with their past pronouncements and deeds. On the basis of *realistic* expectations, and given the behaviour of previous Labour administrations in times of serious financial and economic difficulties, it is fair to say that, in relation to home affairs at least, the Government's performance could have been worse.

It may even be the case that if it is not worse, much of the credit belongs to Mr. Wilson himself. Certainly, one of the unusual features of this Labour Government is that it is made up in its majority of men who belong to the Right and even to the extreme Right of the Labour Party, but is headed by a Prime Minister whose own political commitments have been of a different kind. To say that Mr. Wilson is more radical than most of his colleagues may not, in the light of his colleagues' known political attitudes, be saying very much, but the implications of the fact ought to be stressed none the less. As Prime Minister, Mr. Wilson is certain to have a definite degree of influence on his conservative-minded colleagues, and the knowledge they have of his own inclinations is bound to affect their own proposals and **pronouncements**. Many ministers may have genuine difficulty in articulating views in any way different from those of their Conservative predecessors; but the difficulty would have been even greater under any Labour Prime Minister other than Mr. Wilson. There are people who argue that Mr. Wilson's limited radicalism has a disastrously emollient and soporific effect on the Left, and that a plainly orthodox Labour Prime Minister, pursuing the same policies, say in regard to defence, would have evoked a much more determined opposition on the part of the Left. There may be something in this, but not much; for any Labour Prime Minister in present political and parliamentary circumstances, with so slender a majority and with the prospect of another election in the not too distant future, could have managed the Left quite comfortably, even if his response to events had been even more unsatisfactory than Mr. Wilson's has been. After all, Labour Prime Ministers have always done so before. Mr. Wilson may well turn out to be disastrous from a socialist point of view, but the likelihood of disaster would

have been greatly increased with any of the possible alternative Labour Prime Ministers.

This, however, should be of very small comfort to the Left. For even if the rosiest (or the most charitable) view is taken of the present, the prospects *beyond* the immediate policies of the Government are, from a socialist point of view, by no means hopeful. The Left, after all, always hopes to see its aims become the aims of the Labour leaders and of a Labour Government. From this perspective, the Left faces an enormously hard struggle. But before it can embark on this struggle with any hope of even partial success, it has an antecedent task which it has so far barely begun to tackle, namely to decide *what* policies and alternatives it wants to press on the Labour movement and on its leaders.

III

In relation to home policy, a major concern of the Left is obviously the extension of public ownership. If there is one belief which is common to what is after all an extremely heterogeneous political element, it is that a very substantial extension of public ownership is the minimum if not the sufficient condition for the creation of anything like a socialist society. As the conflicts over Clause 4 showed, this sentiment is not confined to the Labour Left alone, but it does occupy a prominent, indeed a central place in the Left's thinking, or rather in its system of feelings; its attitude to nationalization is one of its main means of identification.

But this attitude to nationalization is quite obviously not part of the Labour Government's own thinking, or of its perspective. Some of its members, and Mr. Wilson in particular, have often said that they wanted to see established some state enterprises in certain industries, like electronics and machine tools; but it seems very likely that, even here, the main emphasis will be, at the most, on Government partnership with private enterprise, and more commonly of Government subsidies to private firms. As for the nationalization of steel, the Government has made it very clear that it would show the most delicate concern in leaving the engineering and other interests of some steel firms to private enterprise. Beyond this, the Government has obviously no plans at all for further public ownership. Such measures as it may very doubtfully come to contemplate will be of a marginal and quite unsystematic kind.

Nor is this a purely temporary acceptance of the present frontiers of public enterprise, until such time as the economic, electoral or political situation provides new opportunities for further advances into private enterprise territory. On the contrary, there is every reason to think that the Labour Government and most Labour leaders accept as permanent the present contours of the British economy, even though the largest part by far of economic activity takes place within the private sector.

One indication among many of the Government's attitude to further nationalization is provided by the aviation industry. Here, it might have been thought, was an industry which, on any conceivable criterion, was more than ripe for the elimination of private interest altogether. Had the Government been concerned with its public ownership, it is at least unlikely that it would have appointed a Committee of Inquiry into the industry whose composition makes outright nationalization the least likely of its recommendations.

It is true that Labour leaders do, in relation to economic life, think in strongly interventionist terms, and the condition of the British economy can only reinforce their wish to see the State intervene in economic affairs. Mr. Wilson and his colleagues are in any case pledged to the modernization of British industry, to some kind of planning, and to the encouragement of some forms of economic activity—for instance, exports—over others. All this, in a predominantly private enterprise economy, must depend on the co-operation and goodwill of interests one of whose main characteristics is precisely ill-will towards a Labour Government. Whatever co-operation is given to such a Government will have to be paid for, and it is even so by no means to be taken for granted that the Government will be able to get its way, save in so far as its way coincides with the purposes of the interests concerned. One main reason for the Left's commitment to further nationalization, though not of course the only one, is its awareness that economic control cannot be truly effective unless the Government itself commands the larger part of economic activity, and that only outright ownership can ensure such command. The experience of the Labour Government may enhance even further the nationalizing propensities of the Left. But it is most unlikely to create such propensities among the Labour leaders. It would at any rate be very foolish to rely on such easy conversion. All governments in advanced capitalist societies, whatever their political complexion, now help to shore up their private enterprise **economies**. If the Left wants the Labour Government to do more than help capitalist enterprise, it will have to push, long and hard.

But what, it may well be asked, does the Left want? What is it that it wants to see nationalised next? And how? What are its targets for tomorrow and the day after tomorrow in this field? What nationalization proposals does it want to see included in Labour's next programme, and in the one after that? Engineering? Chemicals? Machine tools? Shipbuilding? The banks? Insurance?

The answer is that the Left, at present, has no specific targets at all. It has only a general feeling that there ought, some day, to be more public ownership, and that it ought to be better managed than last time. The Left may be able to make a general case for public ownership, and it is of course important that the general case should be made, and elaborated, and refined. But the general case, for direct political purposes, is not enough. What is required is pressure in regard to precise,

concrete and specific policy proposals, intelligently and persuasively worked out.

The significance and implications of the lack of such specific aims should not be missed. What it means is that the Labour Left as well as the Labour leadership has come, at long last, to the end of its traditional list of nationalization proposals; this included public utilities and steel, but nothing very much concrete beyond that. The Left did over the years often put forward other specific nationalization proposals, but these never took solid root in the thinking of the Labour movement, or even, for that matter, in the thinking of the Labour Left itself. In any case, it is evident that the Labour Left has no such common proposals now. For the first time in the history of the Labour Party, which is of course its own history as well, the Left lacks a serious programme of further demands which it can press upon the rest of the Labour movement and the Labour Government; and if the Left does not put forward and push such proposals, no one else in the Labour Party will do so either.

There are those who say that the Labour leaders will never adopt such policies, come what may, which is another way of saying that the Labour Party will never become a serious socialist party. This may or may not be true, but the Left has no option but to try and implant socialist proposals in the thinking of the Labour movement, and to fight for their adoption as party policy. Realistic alternatives do not exist.

One of the things which undoubtedly inhibits the Labour Left on the subject of nationalization is that the experience of the public sector since 1945 is not calculated to arouse boundless socialist enthusiasm. But many of the shortcomings of nationalized enterprise are due to the quite unsocialist approach which has dominated the establishment and the management of the public sector. There are very definite limits to what, in a predominantly capitalist economy, can be done to socialize public ownership. But it is grotesque, as Mr. John Hughes and others have shown, to believe that these limits have already been reached. It should be one of the Left's primary purposes to press the Labour Government to move right up to these limits, and even beyond, and to make one of its main aims the rehabilitation, by deed, of public enterprise, even within the context of a capitalist economy. Here too, what the Left does not press for, no one else will; and the same is true for every other aspect of Labour policy, from education to taxation policy, from the organization of the social services to housing, from labour legislation to town planning. It is no good leaving the job to the Wizard of Huyton. Even if he wanted to, Mr. Wilson could not, without sustained socialist pressure, achieve much by way of radical reform.

Nor need the Left confine its attention to the peaks of policy. There is a multitude of smaller but worthwhile targets to reach, which no one else is concerned with. What, for instance, about a campaign for making the First of May a legal, paid holiday? It is surely a reproach to the

Labour movement that it is not. Success here would hardly change the face of capitalist Britain, but it would all the same be a symbolic little victory of the "political economy of labour" over the "political economy of capital."

IV

Foreign affairs and the weapons business are crucial preoccupations of the Left, naturally so. But its actions and reactions in this field suffer more often than not from a marked reluctance to probe and to challenge the underlying premises and principles of official Labour policy, as distinct from its immediate and specific manifestations. Yet, it is the underlying tendencies about which it is essential to be clear, particularly at a time of change and movement in international affairs.

The first thing to fasten on, in relation to Labour foreign policy, is that Mr. Wilson and his colleagues are utterly committed to the American alliance and to NATO. There is no point in anyone on the Left thinking that Mr. Wilson has sneaking "neutralist" or un-Atlantic sympathies: he has never given any sign of it. The American connection and the system of alliances which is involved in that connection remain as much the cornerstone of Labour foreign policy and defence now as they have been since the end of World War II.

This, however, has two different facets which, though related, need to be kept distinct.

The first concerns Britain's rôle in the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union; it concerns such matters as nuclear strategy, bases, pacts, armaments, the dissemination of nuclear weapons, the M.L.F., the Atlantic Nuclear Force, disengagement in Central Europe, and so on—the whole strategic and military interplay of the two super-powers, flanked by their respective allies and grouped inside the two alliances.

There need be no question of the Labour Government's sincere desire for the abatement of this confrontation, and of its hope of better relations between the blocs, ultimately leading to a genuine measure of disarmament. Nor need there be any doubt of its deep concern to prevent the dissemination of nuclear weapons.

However, hope in these matters is not enough: as a member of the Atlantic Alliance and as a faithful partner of the United States, the Labour Government is involved in policies which make more difficult the achievement of its aims. It is often argued that membership of the Alliance and the cultivation of close relations with the United States affords a valuable measure of influence to the British Government. But this is not only a very questionable claim in itself: it also overlooks the price which membership of the Alliance exacts in terms of the formulation of policy. The Labour Government sees the Alliance as enabling it to pull at the sleeve of the United States; but the crucial point is that,

as a faithful ally, it can only do so *if* it *accepts the general framework of American policy*, which may, and in many instances does, contradict the hopes often expressed by Labour leaders and also the officially adopted policies of the Labour Party.

The point is well illustrated by the M.L.F./A.N.F. debate. It was possible for the Labour Government to express opposition to the original American proposal for a mixed-manned force of twenty-five nuclear surface ships, the more so since the American Government was not itself finally committed to the proposal. But it is significant that Labour's alternative proposals should also involve a form of **mixed-manning**, rather than the complete rejection of the whole scheme.

It has been argued on the Left that Mr. Wilson's own proposals were only intended as a smokescreen the better to torpedo the mixed-manned project altogether. This is surely unfair to Mr. Wilson and those of his colleagues who are most closely concerned. The mixed-manned scheme may never come into being; but this will not be the Labour Government's fault.

The point must be taken more generally, since it applies to all facets of the confrontation: a Labour Government, as a member of the Alliance, may make proposals designed to reduce the scope of *rearmament*, rather than to increase the chances of *disarmament*. The difference is of course fundamental.

Labour leaders have always been aware of the limitations imposed on their freedom of action by NATO and the American alliance. But they have accepted these limitations for a variety of reasons, of which the fear of Russia is only one, and not necessarily the most important by any means. The American alliance has been the sacred cow of British foreign policy ever since World War II, whether a Labour or Conservative Government was in office: to infringe the taboo which surrounds that sacred cow would demand a reappraisal of Britain's rôle and position in the world which Labour leaders have not so far been prepared to undertake.

For its own part, the Labour Left has never become really reconciled to the American connection, but it too has been deeply inhibited by the taboo and it has therefore been very reluctant to commit itself to British disengagement; this reluctance, incidentally, was one of the most crippling features of the campaign for nuclear disarmament as carried on by most of the Labour Left inside the Labour Party. The Labour Left has always hoped that a relaxation of tension would in any case reduce the acuteness of its dilemma, and it has meanwhile been content to campaign against specific aspects of Alliance policy, almost as a way of avoiding a direct confrontation with the question of the Alliance itself. But it seems reasonable to believe that the Left will get nowhere in this field until it does think through its own wishes and feelings, and puts **forward** a reasoned set of alternatives to the Labour (and Conservative) leaders' Atlantic commitments.

There is a Palmerstonian dictum to the effect that Britain has no permanent friends, only permanent interests. In the context of the 1960s and 1970s, the permanent British interest is peace and disarmament. If it is to make a serious contribution to the debate on how these objectives may be best served, the Labour Left will have to be much bolder than in the past. Many, perhaps most people who feel themselves part of the Left, already believe that the first element of a socialist foreign policy is British disengagement, which does not of course mean a British withdrawal from the world; they should now dare to say so, and begin making converts. They certainly should not be lulled by the improvement since the Cuban crisis of 1962 in the relations between the United States and the Soviet Union; for there is no guarantee that this relaxation is more than an episode, and the armaments race has not slackened in the least. How much positive British disengagement may contribute to genuine disarmament measures is not certain; but it can scarcely be less than the contribution a British Government may hope to make as a NATO power.

In any case, even if the relations between the super powers did continue to improve, there would remain a *second* facet of the Cold War, in regard to which Britain's connections with the United States are exceedingly relevant, notwithstanding improvements in the international climate. This second facet of the Cold War concerns American efforts to sustain established governments, however reactionary, corrupt and unpopular, against revolutionary challenges, however genuine, and also to destroy, or at least cripple, revolutionary governments, as in the case of Cuba and China. These efforts will not soon come to an end; on the contrary, they are likely to be intensified as more countries, particularly in the Third World, enter a revolutionary phase. What countries like Cuba or Vietnam have had to suffer from American action, other countries may well have to suffer in the future. It would be otherwise if there existed any serious prospect of an effective radical opposition to American policies inside the United States. But there is no such prospect for the immediate future, and revolutionary movements will have to do the best they can without American radical help.

It is perfectly natural that conservative governments in capitalist Europe should view American policies in the Third World with sympathy and understanding. As far as their own more limited capacities permit, they are themselves involved in the same game. But it is less obvious why a Labour Government should show sympathy and understanding for these activities, save in terms of its own acceptance of the desirability of a colonialist *quid pro quo*. Mr. Wilson may not wish his endorsement to cover all American actions everywhere; and he may even, behind the scenes, seek to "restrain" his American allies. But the basic commitment remains, and aligns Britain quite unequivocally with the attempt to support regressive forces everywhere in the world.

Nor is this made any the less true by ardent expressions of sympathy for under-developed countries or even by the provision of aid to some of them. There is a lot of slop talked about the rich nations and the poor nations, and by the Left as well. The antithesis is rather between some reactionary rich nations, and a variety of revolutionary movements and nations struggling to free their peoples from man-made and man-maintained backwardness and poverty, often man-maintained by the very countries whose rulers are most splendidly eloquent on the moral duty of the rich nations to help the poor.

There are many Labour leaders who are wholly impervious to such considerations and who can only think of America in terms of cheery clichés. But the Labour Left cannot afford to leave unchallenged the assumption which often seems to pervade official Labour thinking, that American policy, particularly under a Democratic President, is moved by progressive considerations. As well as denounce its Government's own imperialist commitments, it should be one of the Labour Left's major concerns to insist on the fatal contradiction between Labour's basic commitment to regressive American policies on the one hand and any kind of socialist or radical commitment on the other. The sooner the Left does make it its concern, the sooner will its voice cease to be muffled and the sooner too will British political debate become less artificial and dishonest.

W

There is thus an enormous amount of work which awaits the Left, the more so because there is a Labour Government in office. The Labour Left lacks, of course, its own organization for pursuing political work. In the *Socialist Register* 1964 it was argued that the Left should *not* seek to create its own all-purpose organization. But this, it was also said, did 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"; and it was also suggested then that the Left badly needed its own educational organizations.

The coming into being of a Labour Government has only underlined how necessary such agencies of intellectual clarification and political pressure are. Some excellent work has been done in regard to steel nationalization; and some tentative proposals have been made in the past year to set up Socialist Centres in various cities which would organize socialist education for activists in the Labour movement; but just about everything remains to be done. Specialist committees of Labour M.P.s have been set up in the House of Commons which cover a wide variety of subjects, from agriculture and education to foreign affairs and housing. But there exists no committee in any part of the Labour movement to seek ways of bringing a greater degree of socialization into

nationalized enterprises. This is an obvious subject for a **study/pressure** group; so is future nationalization; and so are many other subjects of crucial importance to the Labour movement on which the voice of the Left ought to be heard.

The beginning of wisdom is surely to realize that a programme of genuine socialist advance will not be produced by spontaneous generation, or by any grouping in the Labour Party other than the Left. If the Constituency and Trade Union activists, the parliamentarians and other socialists in the Labour movement want to see such a programme come into being, the time to start working for it is now.

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