

THE LABOUR GOVERNMENT AND BEYOND

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I

EVER since the General Election of October 1964, Socialists inside and outside the Labour Party have inevitably been so concerned with the Labour Government's immediate actions and policies, and with Mr. Wilson's "performance" and pronouncements, that they have generally tended to neglect the underlying pattern of ideological and political commitment of which the Government's policies and actions are the concrete expression. Exclusive or near-exclusive attention to the shape and health (or lack of health) of particular trees has helped to obscure the configuration of the forest, or even that there was a forest at all. Yet, it is about this basic pattern that it is necessary to be clear, not only because it helps to explain a record which may otherwise seem baffling or fortuitous or due to the personal attitudes and views of this or that Minister, but also because it provides the essential clue for an assessment which ought to be a central concern of socialists, namely the nature of Labour's *future* commitments and policies. A great deal, in terms of socialist action, is bound to hinge upon such an assessment.

It may be objected at the outset that to speak of a pattern of commitment in relation to the Labour Government is inappropriate. For is not Mr. Wilson the pragmatic opportunist incarnate? And are not the Government's policies and pronouncements to be explained by the financial situation it inherited, the economic difficulties it had to face, the minute parliamentary majority it obtained at the Election of 1964, all of which forced it to do things it disliked, to postpone things it wanted to do, and generally to improvise as it went along?

There is something in these points, but not enough to provide an adequate explanation of the Government's record; to lean very heavily on Mr. Wilson's opportunism, or on financial crisis and economic necessity, is both facile and misleading. Opportunism, however consummate and unprincipled, and pragmatism, however deliberate, are never unlimited; they always find expression within a certain range of ideological dispositions, which point to certain options and exclude others. On any given wavelength, a number of stations may be picked up, but only a certain number. Mr. Wilson and his colleagues do operate on a particular wavelength, on which some stations are heard very loud and clear, and others hardly or not at all. Mr. Wilson is

fond of dismissing large ideological questions as irrelevant "theology"; but, as always, this dismissal of ideology itself rests on some very firm ideological foundations, not the less firm for being inadequately articulated or artfully obscured. As for crisis and necessity, the Labour Government has indeed had to react to a whole series of crises, many of them unforeseen and some possibly unforeseeable. But how it has reacted to them, which options it has taken up and which it has excluded—this has not only, or not even mainly, been dictated by external circumstances or a slender parliamentary majority or some other such factor, but by prior ideological and political commitments, by an overall view, rather than by imperative necessity. Governments do have to take account of a variety of more or less compelling circumstances; but their actions and policies are very seldom wholly determined by them—those who find themselves in command of the political executive do have a certain freedom of choice. No doubt, a less difficult financial and economic situation, and a less precarious parliamentary majority, would have increased that freedom and affected some of the Government's actions. But it is quite fallacious, and part of the dream world in which many people in the Labour movement choose to live, to believe that a more favourable economic and political situation would have **radically** affected the Government's actions. Even a superficial reading of the programme with which the Labour Party went into the General Election should be sufficient to dispel that illusion. For all its breathless public relations prose and its description of the Labour Party as "impatient to apply the New Thinking" and "restless with positive remedies", that programme was, in concrete terms, quite modest. Nor is it the less an illusion to believe that a more favourable set of circumstances in the future, such as an increased parliamentary majority, would cause the Labour leaders to show a new socialist boldness. Even if all previous evidence is left out of account, the Labour Government's record in office should be sufficient to show that these leaders work within a pattern of policy which is firmly set, and which excludes socialist commitments. It is with the nature and implications of that pattern that this article is mainly concerned.

II

What the present Labour leaders are basically about is not at all complicated, or mysterious, or very new: they are about the more efficient and, in a limited sense, the more humane functioning of British capitalism. What distinguishes them from their Tory and Liberal political colleagues and competitors is not their will to create a socialist society on the basis of the social ownership and control of economic power—they have no such will—but a greater propensity to invoke state intervention in economic and social life than these

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competitors are willing to accept. The latter do of course accept a large and increasing measure of state intervention, and are well aware that this now constitutes an essential condition for any kind of economic viability; but they see that intervention as residual, restricted, and mainly subordinate to the purposes of private enterprise, with such matters as social welfare weak claimants upon the state's attention. The Labour leaders, for their part, conceive of intervention as pervasive, systematic, institutionalized, with the state acting deliberately, not only as a benefactor to private enterprise (though that too), but as a partner, guide, and, occasionally, task-master; with, also, a rather more positive view of the state's responsibility in the field of welfare.

State intervention is obviously nothing new in the history of capitalism. On the contrary, it has always been an intrinsic element in its development—in fact, an essential condition of that development. The notion that capitalist enterprise and *laissez faire* are twins is historically ludicrous. But it is true that the state is now more closely and more intimately involved in economic and social life than at any time since the early days of capitalist enterprise: even more than early capitalism, late capitalism needs propping up by state action at every turn, so much so that the scale of the state's intervention has made it appropriate to speak of a distinct historical stage in the evolution of capitalism, which it would be tempting to call its last stage, if this did not suggest that the system itself was likely to be soon transcended. It is not.

State intervention in the conditions of "neo-capitalism" has some obvious characteristics: a degree of planning, mostly of an "indicative" kind; the attempted regulation and control of the financial and credit system and of some parts of private enterprise; the much more determined attempt to control and curb wage demands; state aid on a huge and expanding scale to private firms, particularly in industries concerned with military procurement and technological innovation; the existence of a substantial, "infra-structural" public sector; and, in a different context, the provision by the state or by state-backed agencies of a (uniformly inadequate) set of welfare and social services, in such fields as health, education, housing and pensions.

Because of the scale of state intervention and control typical of "neo-capitalism", and because of the trend towards managerialism largely divorced from ownership, this system has often been declared, not least by social-democratic writers, to be fundamentally different from the bad old capitalist system which socialists were of course quite right to oppose—the obvious implication being that since that capitalism is dead and gone, the type of socialism which it bred, with its demands for wholesale public ownership and similar root-and-branch changes, is itself old-fashioned and irrelevant, and in need of

replacement by a more modest commitment, more in tune with the requirements of a "post-capitalist" society.

Such claims cannot be taken seriously, or rather should not. For "neo-capitalism" represents no more than an extension and an adaptation of capitalism from, so to speak, within. In this system, private enterprise remains by far the most important element in economic life, and what state regulation is imposed upon it does not destroy either its private character or its profitability or managerial domination. In many ways, state intervention means, more often than not, an increase rather than a reduction in the influence and power of private enterprise, particularly of large-scale enterprise, not least because the state's controllers and advisers are themselves drawn from the "business community", or are at least well attuned to the latter's wishes and requirements. Nothing is more typical of "neo-capitalism" than the massive entry of business in the institutions of state supervision, planning, co-ordination and control, with all the direct influence and power this affords. Nor is this compensated by the inclusion into these institutions of a number of generally tame and "responsible" trade union leaders. In the "pluralist" societies of advanced capitalism, some are much more plural than others.

"Neo-capitalism" has brought about no marked change in the distribution of income and property in Britain, or anywhere else for that matter. It even appears that, in the two decades since the end of the war, such modest trends towards a progressive re-distribution of income as had occurred during the years of war have been reversed.¹ Nothing, in the economic and social policies of "neo-capitalism" suggests that the truly grotesque inequality of property distribution in Britain—which is the cornerstone of the social edifice—is likely to be disturbed in egalitarian directions. That the Welfare State has been more generous to the comfortably-off than to the poorly-off should not dim its importance to the texture of working class life. But poverty, whose abolition had been triumphantly proclaimed in the 'fifties, has been rediscovered as a huge and permanent blight of the "affluent" society? and provides a bitter comment on the nature of "post-capitalist" society, and on its ideologists.

The point is not that state intervention in advanced capitalist countries has failed to bring about a radical transformation in the basis and character of these societies; it is rather that such intervention is neither intended to achieve such a transformation nor is it capable of bringing it about. Far from transcending the system, it is a means of consolidating it, of enabling private enterprise to function and prosper.

This is also one of the main purposes of the Labour leaders. The trouble with the Labour Government is not that it has failed to destroy capitalism in a year or so. No one ever thought that this was on its agenda for 1965 or 1966. The real trouble, at least from a socialist

point of view, is that absolutely nothing that the Government has said or done during its period of office holds out even the most remote and shadowy promise that this is what the Labour leaders want, *in however long a perspective*. On the contrary, everything they have said and done shows that they are not only very comfortably but also *permanently* installed in the "mixed economy", and that their furthest ambition is to administer it rather better than their Tory opponents.

In no respect is this more clearly evident than in the matter of public ownership. If "neo-capitalism" is to be transcended at all, the basic though not the sufficient condition for that transcendence must lie in an extension of the public sector far beyond the "infrastructure" of the economy, to the point where it encompasses the private industrial and financial empires, without whose appropriation into the public domain any talk of a Socialist society is either a hoax or a delusion.

But this, it has been made clear beyond any doubt, is precisely what the Labour leaders have no intention of doing, in whatever time span. Had nationalization been a crucial element in their scheme of thinking, they might not have found quite so compelling the need to defer steel nationalization, with little sign that they found this a painful sacrifice. Nor might they have been quite so ready to "listen" to their anti-nationalization rebels, in marked contrast to the "toughness" they have been so eager to demonstrate towards their critics on the left. But even dropping steel nationalization is not as significant as the spirit in which the Labour leaders defended the proposed measure before they abandoned it. What their half-hearted and embarrassed defence of it showed was that steel nationalization, far from being part of a continuing programme, one further instalment in a general plan, was but the last ripple of the post-1945 wave, an awkward survivor washed up on an unfriendly shore.

No doubt, it is not finally excluded that a Labour Government, under its present leadership, might undertake some partial measure of public ownership. So for that matter might a Tory Government. The Clause 4 controversy was never between those who opposed all nationalization for all time and those who wanted wholesale nationalization tomorrow morning if not earlier. Such were never the terms of the debate. It was rather between those who saw the issue in purely "pragmatic" and "empirical" terms as one weapon not wholly excluded from the arsenal at the disposal of a Labour (or a Tory) Government, to be used most sparingly and for the sole purpose of ensuring greater efficiency in an industry or firm unable to survive on a private basis; and those who saw the nationalization of a predominant part of economic power as a condition for the creation of a new sort of order in industry and in society. A widespread myth has come into being that, in this debate, Mr. Wilson was opposed to the "revisionists", or that he was at least neutral between the protagonists.

This is a misconception. It was Mr. Wilson, it may be recalled, who, speaking on behalf of the Labour Party's National Executive, enthusiastically commended *Industry and Society*, the most important of all "revisionist" programmes, to the 1957 Labour Party Conference; and in the Clause 4 battles of 1959-60, Mr. Wilson was only neutral in the sense that he wished the issue had never been raised at all. His view of it as "theology" is a sufficient token of the importance he attached to it. At the most, the only difference between him and the straightforward **anti-nationalizers** was that he seemed more inclined to view some modest experiments in public ownership, particularly at "growth points of the economy", with more favour than they did. Even this, however, does not appear to have stood particularly well the passage from opposition to office. The accent throughout has been on "partnership" with industry, generally meaning vast public subsidies to private corporations, in return for a limited measure of formal state control, in any case to be administered by men mainly drawn from the world of large-scale corporate enterprise.

The "partnership" in industry which the Labour leaders seek remains narrowly confined within the relations of managerial domination and labour subjection typical of capitalist enterprise and mentality. Nothing much has been heard about the "commanding heights" of the economy in the commanding heights of the Labour Establishment since October 1964. The overwhelming odds are that nothing much will be heard about them in time to come.

This has very little to do with electoral considerations or parliamentary majorities. It is much more deep-seated than that: it rests in fact on a final acceptance of the "mixed economy" and "neo-capitalism" as a perfectly adequate framework for Labour's purposes. This is quite alien to socialism in any meaningful sense of the word; but then, neither are the Labour leaders socialists in any meaningful sense of the word. What their record and pronouncements show is that the "revisionists" have after all won the battle for the Labour Party, through (such are the meanderings of history) the agency of Mr. Wilson. Whatever else a larger parliamentary majority may induce them to do, it will **not** turn the Labour leaders into **eager** climbers of the commanding heights. Far from ensuring that these heights will be conquered, Labour provides a sure guarantee to capitalist enterprise that they will remain **unscaled**.

Even more immediately revealing of the Government's whole spirit is its attitude to the trade unions, and its dedicated pursuit of an Incomes Policy.

This policy (with some ministers almost an obsession) is not, it should be noted, a distinctive Labour nostrum. It is vigorously advocated by the Conservatives, who found they could not carry it through, and has been tried by a number of quite un-Labour Governments in Western Europe. What is "Labour" about it (and even this must be

qualified) is the "social justice" and "fair shares" rhetoric wrapped up around it by Mr. Wilson and his ministers.

The rhetoric, however, cannot conceal the fact that an Incomes Policy is above all else a means of curbing wage demands and of reducing the bargaining power and militancy of organized workers. The accompanying measures of price supervision over a range of products may prove temporarily irksome to some firms; but they are in the highest degree unlikely to affect profit margins in any significant way. If it could be successful, the wage restraint required by an Incomes Policy would do no more than freeze the existing distribution of income, and more likely diminish the share accruing to wage-earners. To rely on the Chancellor of the Exchequer to redress the balance is to underestimate the Treasury's concern to retain the confidence and good-will of the "business community", not only at home but abroad. Some misguided socialists have advocated support for an Incomes Policy on the ground that the trade unions might ask in return for such things as effective planning, a genuine redistribution of income or workers' participation in management. The notion (it would be too much to call it a strategy) is purely academic, in the bad sense of the word. What attitude organized Labour might adopt towards a socialist government, actively and visibly engaged in socialist work, is an interesting question, but one which does not arise at the present. The Labour Government is not engaged in socialist work; and all it really offers, in return for the surrender by the trade unions of hard-won and essential rights, is a highly problematic degree of price supervision, to be administered by a board whose chairman is utterly steeped in the ideology of business, and a self-proclaimed believer in more inequality. The South Sea venture was not a much worse proposition.

Even if it could be made to work, an Incomes Policy would do nothing to cure the chronic ills of British capitalism. But provided a high level of employment is maintained, it cannot in any case be made to work by "voluntary" means. This is why the Government in proposing a determined legislative attack on the rights and prerogatives of the trade unions and their members, on shop stewards and other militants. This is well in line with the Government's general attitude to trade unions. Ever since it was elected, the Government has shown that, in this field at least, it is prepared to be "tough". No sooner was the new Minister of Labour in office than he was denouncing the "threat of anarchy" posed by the anticipated one-day unofficial strike of London dockers. "This is the first time for at least thirteen years", the Labour correspondent of *The Guardian* noted at the time, "that a Government has, on its own initiative, anticipated an unofficial strike with a public warning to the men. Mr. Gunter, on the first day at his department, has served notice that this Government intends to pursue a forward policy".³ Since that time, that "forward

policy⁷ has been proclaimed on every conceivable occasion, not only by the Minister of Labour, but through the more exalted medium of the Prime Minister, the Minister of Economic Affairs and the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Again and again, men struggling to defend their livelihood and to resist managerial domination have been denounced by the most senior Labour ministers as wreckers. Indeed, employers have repeatedly been urged to be "firm", while trade union leaders have again and again been threatened with dire consequences if they failed to sell labour cheap. Already, and there is a lot more to come, and worse, the Labour Government has been responsible for a more sustained campaign against trade union rights than at any time since the twenties. In this campaign, the Labour leaders have of course had the support and the approval of every Tory politician and newspaper, as indeed of many Labour politicians and such "Labour" newspapers as the *Daily Mirror*, though that support has been allied to objurgations and demands for more and more "toughness".

Attacks on the trade unions have long been a standard theme of British life and culture, and no myth has been more assiduously fostered than that of their vast power and the danger they are supposed to represent to "the national interest". But this, up to recently, had been a Conservative middle class theme, and Tory politicians have had to tread carefully in their relations with the unions. Labour politicians, trading on the unions' loyalty to "their" government have been able to do more. By joining and often leading the attack on the unions' "selfishness", by adding their authority to the attempt to make the unions the scapegoat for the shortcomings of British capitalism, the Labour practitioners of "neo-capitalism" have rendered a major service to the main beneficiaries of the system. Their willingness to denounce trade unions for the elementary performance of their job, compared to their respectful approach to industry, finance, banking and the rest, speaks volumes about the mentality and the ideology of the men who now command the destinies of the Labour Party.

III

As in home affairs, so in the field of foreign affairs, colonial affairs and defence. Whatever measure of comfort Labour supporters may be able to find in some of the Government's actions at home, there is no such comfort to be found in relation to foreign and colonial affairs or defence policy. In these fields, the Government has shown a degree of conservatism and orthodoxy more consistent and unswerving than would have been thought likely by even very sceptical people before it was elected, the writer included. After all, it was only a few months before the General Election that Mr. Wilson, then Leader of the Opposition, asked the then Prime Minister, Sir Alec Douglas Home, to "make it quite clear—as we asked him to make it clear in

March—that we would not support any extension of the war into North Vietnam"; and it was only a few months before that that Mr. Wilson had said that "there never has been a time when the world, through the U.N., or the Commonwealth, has looked more anxiously to Britain for a lead, a lead on disarmament—instead of tamely following every American statement—a lead in the attack on world poverty, a positive stand on racial discrimination and racial oppression".⁶ Whether the world was waiting quite so anxiously for Britain may be in doubt, but if it was, it must have discovered its mistake fairly early on in the life of the Wilson Administration. For "tamely following every American statement", and act, and policy, is precisely what the Labour Government has done throughout its period of office. The notion of a "special" British relation to the United States has sometimes been discounted in the recent past. It should not be, for it has been reinvigorated by the Labour Government, in a special sense: no government, apart from satellite and client states proper, has been quite such an eager and faithful supporter of American purposes and enterprises.

Vietnam is of course the most obvious as well as the most ignoble instance of the spirit which has moved Mr. Wilson and his colleagues. In the face of one of the clearest and most authentic cases in this century of a popular struggle for national and social liberation, the Labour leaders have not hesitated to support America's attempts to drown that struggle in blood, or to endorse the most spurious American claims as to the nature of the conflict.

But Vietnam is not an isolated blot on the Labour Government's record. It could not be. It is only one episode in a consistent story which has included the continuation of Conservative policies in Aden, British Guiana and Malaysia, the abandonment and reversal of Labour's policies on defence, and support for American policies at all points East or West of Suez. Everywhere, the British Labour Government has shown again and again that in the great international civil war of our times between the forces of change and the forces of the conservative status quo, the Labour leaders are to be found on the side of the latter against the former. Labour ministers are quite clear that Britain cannot independently play a "world role" They have therefore settled for the second best, and to play that "world role" as the United States' most diligent ally and accomplice.

It is sometimes said that this choice is to be accounted for by Britain's economic and financial difficulties, and by the imperative need to buy the support of a demanding paymaster. And indeed, it was Mr. Wilson himself who warned the T.U.C. in 1964, before the General Election, that "you can get into pawn but don't then talk about an independent foreign policy or an independent defence policy."

But this explanation from financial weakness misses the real nature

of Labour's foreign policy commitments. After all, if the perils of dependence are so acute, and if Mr. Wilson really had desperately wanted to pursue an "independent foreign policy or an independent defence policy", he would presumably have avoided at all costs getting his country into pawn.

However, it is Mr. Wilson himself who indignantly denied before the assembled delegates of the Labour Party Conference in October 1965 that President Johnson had brought any pressure to bear upon the Labour Government for support of American policies in return for financial backing.⁷ The denial may have fallen somewhat short of the truth. But the Government's policies do indeed suggest that Mr. Wilson is not the sullen and reluctant prisoner of dire and inescapable necessity and blackmail, and that his Government's support for the United States' global strategy does spring from conviction. It is quite probable that Labour ministers have some reservations about this or that aspect of America's conduct of affairs, but they have nevertheless made it very clear ever since they have been in office that they endorse America's determination to prevent social revolution everywhere, particularly in the Third World, and that, where it cannot be prevented, they may be relied upon to support American attempts to try and crush it. They may even be relied on, as San Domingo showed, to support the United States in situations where the issue of social revolution is only raised as a flagrant excuse for the assertion of American hegemony and power.

The basic reason for this commitment does not lie in financial stringency but in a particular view of the world, at the core of which there is a profound hatred and fear of revolutionary social change. This is not because of any dewy-eyed recoil from violence as such: Mr. Wilson and his colleagues are not pacifists in regard to war, only to revolution. They believe in political and social reform, so long as it is limited, gradual, parliamentary, constitutional and "democratic". But since this is not to be had in the countries where the need and the pressure for change are greatest, the Labour leaders easily settle for support of ruling elites whose régimes are anything but parliamentary, constitutional and democratic.

To justify these attitudes and policies, the Labour leaders have rediscovered in office the reflexes of the Cold War which they had begun to subdue in opposition—this time less in relation to the Soviet Union, which it is now difficult to depict as an aggressive nation only prevented from pouncing on other countries by Western strength, than in relation to China, the new bogey. Conveniently, with the discovery of China as an aggressive and expansionist power, the liberation struggle in South Vietnam suddenly ceases to be indigenous and the hungry peasant guerillas who dare oppose the greatest industrial and military power in the world are transformed into mere puppets, manipulated by distant and sinister forces. Dr. Fu-Manchu rides again.

Such an approach no doubt requires a very blinkered, narrow, unprobing view of the world we live in. But this is no obstacle: the requirement is amply met, as any one who heard Mr. Michael Stewart speak his brief at the Oxford Teach-In on Vietnam can easily testify; for what was revealing about that performance was not so much the blatant inaccuracies of the brief *itself*,⁸ but the obvious conviction with which an unqualified American apologia was presented by the Labour Foreign Secretary.

As in home affairs, the Government's record in foreign affairs, colonial affairs and defence must not be seen as a transient aberration, but as the result of a permanent commitment. This commitment may admit variations and shifts, but it does not admit a radical re-orientation, an agonizing reappraisal, a new view, independent initiatives. Again and again, Mr. Wilson and his colleagues have shown in practice that they are very firmly guided by a conservative view of the world and of Britain's interests, from which they cannot be expected to desist.

IV

Ever since the Labour Party came into being as a non-socialist organization, socialists in it have nursed the hope that, some day, they would succeed in transforming it into a Socialist party, the instrument of a fundamental recasting of the social order, the agency for the creation of a Socialist Commonwealth and a "society of equals". This transformation of the Labour Party was to be accomplished by steady socialist pressure upon the leadership through the constituencies, the unions, the parliamentary party, Annual Conference, etc. This was the work to which such organizations as the I.L.P., the Socialist League, Victory for Socialism and other groups addressed themselves inside the Labour Party; and other organizations, notably the Communist Party, have at one time or another devoted much effort to the same purpose from outside the Labour Party. Alternatively, the Labour Left inside the party occasionally hoped, not merely to persuade the leadership to adopt more progressive policies, but actually to capture the party, and to substitute its own voice for that of the existing leaders; such hope certainly existed in the early 'fifties, when it was believed on the Left, rather unrealistically, that **Aneurin Bevan** might win the struggle for the leadership of the Party, and when it was also believed, whether realistically or not is a moot point, that this would mark a dramatic shift in the bias and policies of the Party. For the most part and at most times, however, the Labour Left has been well aware of the fact that it stood no chance of capturing the Party and it has therefore been content or at least resigned to gain some footholds in the apparatus (e.g. in the constituency representation on the National Executive) and to try and influence

the party leaders by pressure, persuasion and *mancœuvre*; with the ultimate hope that, somehow, some day, the Labour Party would not only call itself a socialist party, but actually act like one.

For all its defeats, it would be a mistake to dismiss the influence of the Labour Left as of no account in the history of the Labour Party. On the contrary, it may justly claim that its efforts and persistence over the years has often prevented the Labour leaders from moving even further to the right than they would otherwise have been inclined to do. This pressure might conceivably have been more effective if the Labour Left had not been crippled by its own confusions, inhibitions and illusions; but its presence in the Labour Party has not in any case been a negligible matter.

It is perfectly reasonable for socialists inside the Labour Party to argue that this, for the present, is where they must continue to do their work, to present clear and unequivocal socialist alternatives to the Labour rank and file and to ensure that the socialist case does not go by default; and that they must try, by means of pressure, opposition and in every other way that may be deemed appropriate, to extract whatever concession they can from the Labour leadership.

However, it is not reasonable or realistic for Socialists to believe (whether it ever was is of no immediate relevance here) that they have any serious prospect of shifting the Labour leaders to the left in any substantial or comprehensive sense.

The reason for this is not that the Labour Left is now as weak as at any time in the history of the Labour Party. Even if it were to re-emerge in time to come as a more serious force, and begin to challenge the total hegemony now exercised by the leadership, it would find that leadership once again ready, though the vocabulary and the manner would be different, to "fight, fight and fight again" to save the Labour Party from socialist challenges *rather* than accept a genuine reorientation of party policy in socialist directions. The Labour leaders have shown again and again that, in such struggles, they have sufficient resources to cope with rebellion at the grassroots, not least because of their command of the party machine and their support by a parliamentary party the vast majority of whose members are hostile, often bitterly hostile, to left-wing policies. Rebellion, particularly if it emanates from or is backed by powerful trade unions, may well occasion changes in party policy, but there are limits to this which are soon reached. The Labour Party, it is always tritely said, is a coalition; but it is less often noted that it is a coalition on certain very definite terms, mainly that the Left should not expect to shift the whole axis of the Party.³ Not that the Left has ever come near to doing that. But on those occasions when it has managed to defeat the leadership on an important issue of policy, it has also, with very few exceptions indeed, found that there was a world of difference between defeating the leadership at a Party Conference

and forcing it to act upon that defeat. This has been the case even when the Labour Party has been in opposition. It is doubly true when the Labour Party is in office, precisely at the moment where policies can actually be implemented, but also when the power of the Labour leaders *vis-à-vis* their followers is greatest.

When Mr. Wilson so unexpectedly became leader of the Labour Party, many people on the Left thought that their situation had been drastically changed, and that left-wing voices would at long last be effectively heard at the highest reaches of Labour policy-making. If these illusions were at all permissible at the time, they are surely not permissible now, after more than one year of Labour Government. For what this has shown is that Mr. Wilson *as Prime Minister* is certainly no more left-inclined than any previous Labour leader. Indeed, not since Ramsey Macdonald has any such leader been quite so insistent on making a "national" appeal and projecting himself as a "national" Prime Minister, far above sordid considerations of party, class or "sectional" interest. The only trouble with this "national" vocation is that it excludes left-wing positions and policies. How could it include them since the achievement of a national "consensus" depends upon the systematic appeasement of Labour's enemies?

Not, of course, that this is only a matter of Mr. Wilson: most of the men around him are at least as orthodox-minded as Mr. Wilson has shown himself to be in office, some much more so. It is absurd to think that the men who now rule the Labour Party, *and who will go on ruling it*, will ever want, or would agree under pressure, to push the Labour Party in socialist directions, and to show the resolution, single-mindedness and staying-power which such reorientation would require. Carthorses should not be expected to win the Derby. To believe, against all the weight of accumulated evidence, that the Labour leaders can, for instance, be made to adopt a "socialist foreign policy" if it is presented to them in sufficiently alluring terms is pure delusion, on a par with Robert Owen's hope that Metternich would act on the plan for a Co-operative Commonwealth of Europe which Owen presented to him at the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1818. There is everything to be said for working out such a socialist foreign policy, and many other socialist proposals as well. But they should be addressed to the Labour movement rather than to Mr. Wilson and his colleagues. It may be that the Labour leaders lack the knowledge to apply socialist policies: but what they lack even more, and irremediably, is the will.

What this amounts to is that the Labour Party is and will remain as much of a non-socialist party as it has ever been, with its leaders providing a Lib-Lab, non-socialist alternative to the Conservative Party.

This does not mean that the two parties are now "the same". They are in fact very different, in terms of the kind of people who mainly vote for each party, in terms of their membership and the aspirations of their activists. But the parliamentary leaders of the Labour Party (and the point applies, though to a lesser degree to the leaders of the Conservative Party) have always been able to attenuate the political expression of these differences to the point where they do not, in concrete terms, endanger the "neo-capitalist" framework which both party leaderships now accept as permanent.

However, even this common acceptance of "neo-capitalism" as permanent does not eliminate all differences between the two party leaderships; there remains plenty of room for political divergence and controversy over economic and social policy. Even the task of strengthening British capitalism, to which the Labour leaders are dedicated, is not one that can be pursued, particularly by a Labour Government, without arousing hostility on the part of many interests well represented in the Conservative Party.

This reproduces, though at a different level, a situation which endured for the best part of the nineteenth century as between the Tory and Liberal parties. These parties were not by any means "the same"; but, as Lord Balfour noted in a famous Introduction to Walter Bagehot's *The English Constitution*, their "alternating Cabinets, though belonging to different Parties . . . never differed about the foundations of society".¹⁰ It was at one time thought that, with the emergence of the Labour Party as the main opposition, the confrontation had assumed an altogether different character and that what now divided the parties did concern "the foundations of society".

It may be difficult for socialists inside the Labour Party to accept that this was a mistaken interpretation, and that there is no genuine likelihood of it ever coming to correspond to reality. It is the more difficult to accept this in that the Labour Party remains the "party of the working class", and that there is, in this sense, no serious alternative to it at present. This, of course, has always been the central dilemma of British Socialism, and it is not a dilemma which is likely to be soon resolved. But the necessary first step in that direction is to take a realistic view of the Labour Party, of what it can and of what it cannot be expected to do. For it is only on the basis of such a view that socialists can begin to discuss their most important task of all, which is the creation of an authentic socialist movement in Britain.

There is no such movement in Britain today. There does exist a strongly-rooted and widely-based *Labour movement*,¹¹ with a great many socialists in it, in the Labour Party, in the Communist Party, in the trade unions, the Co-operative movement, youth organizations, student societies, and in a variety of other groups. But there does not exist a socialist movement of any real substance and numbers. Had

there been such a movement in the past, or did one exist now, the Labour leaders would not have been able, throughout the history of the Labour Party until now, to ward off with such comparative ease socialist challenges to their hegemony, from inside the Party and from outside. Nor could the parliamentary left have been so weak and compromising.

A substantial socialist movement must include many members of the Labour Party, but it cannot be conceived in terms of yet another "ginger group" within it. As has been argued in *The Socialist Register* before, there is much to be said for single-purpose pressure groups inside the Labour party, but the endless troubles into which more ambitious efforts have always run provides conclusive evidence of the permanent and successful concern of the Labour leaders to render such ventures ineffective. Nor, it should be added, is the Communist Party capable of leading or organizing this movement. Its leadership is far too burdened by its past, too bureaucratic in its habits, and too politically and ideologically uncreative for the job. A socialist movement must also include members of the Communist Party. But it cannot *be* that party, or stem from it, or take direction from it.

A similarly negative view needs to be taken of the loose talk sometimes heard of a new party or political combination. It is precisely the basis for such schemes which does not exist. Quite possibly, a new political formation will have to come into being sometime in the future, which will include Socialists who are now members of old political parties and groups, and many others as well. But if such a formation is to be more than another ineffectual sect, it will have to be the product of a really genuine demand for it, not least within the trade union movement. That demand does not now exist.

The question is not at present one of parties and political combinations, but of a broad and sustained effort of socialist education, cutting across existing boundaries, free from formula-mongering, and carried on with patience and intelligence by socialists wherever in the Labour movement or outside they may be situated. Such an effort is not an alternative to an immediate involvement in concrete struggle but an essential element of it.

January 1966.

NOTES

1. For a review of the discussion around this issue, see J. Saville, "Labour and Income Redistribution" in *The Socialist Register*, 1965.
2. As shown in the work of Titmuss, Abel-Smith, Townsend and others.
3. *The Guardian*, 20 October 1964.
4. House of Commons Report, 30 June 1964, vol. DCXCVII, col. 1,135.
5. On 5 April 1964, quoted in *Tribune*, 18 June 1965. Italics added.
6. T.U.C. Conference Report, 1964, p. 383.
7. *The Times*, 30 September 1965.
8. For which see J. Gittings and A. Singh, *Vietnam Briefing—A Commentary on the Foreign Secretary's Oxford Speech* (1965).

9. Even so, the amount of toleration shown to the **left** should not be exaggerated: expulsions, refusals to endorse certain left-wing parliamentary candidates, etc., have always been and remain a notable feature of the Labour Party's internal life.
10. W. Bagehot, *The English Constitution* (World's Classics Edition, 1945), p. xxiv.
11. Though there is not much room for complacency even here. For an excellent discussion of this, see P. Anderson, "Problems of Socialist Strategy" in *Towards Socialism* (1965).