

Labour in Crisis? — Continued

A CRISIS OF ALLEGIANCE?

by

MARTIN J. BEIRNE

The Labour Party's ignominious defeat at the polls, June 9 1983, educated the unpopularity of contemporary left political practice. Yet, it is an indication of the confused and contradictory nature of the present crisis within the Labour Movement that the post-debacle inquest spawned two markedly different forms of revisionism or 'realism'.

"Tactical Pragmatism" —

The union movement's brand of 'tactical pragmatism' is, as it were, quantitative. It highlights the inadequacy of the material and institutional provisions made by trades unions for **all** their members in terms of the members' own professed values and calculations. To the hard-fact-facing centre-right majority on the TUC General Council, Labour's election defeat exposed a fatal flaw in the movement's representational function. The political policies and practices, refined by union leaders and the TUC Congress over many years, had been spurned by disaffected members. There was, in effect, a 'credibility gap'. However, the common-sense right in their mood of revaluation devised a bridge.

At the 115th congress of the TUC at Blackpool, the centre-right platform inferred that trades unionism could best flourish in a particularised form. The TUC General Secretary, Len Murray, delivered an assertive homily on the movement's role as a pressure group representing the practical interests of members in their dealings with employers and government. The outgoing President of the TUC, Frank Chapple, and Alastair Graham of the Civil and Public Services Association, were more provocative, combining an attack on the left wing of the Labour Movement with an appeal to union leaders to unite their members rather than divide them by party politics or prejudices (Chapple's expression).

Ostensibly, Chapple and his colleagues had discovered a new calculative form of trades unionism. Significant parts of the traditional political activity of the union movement seemed no longer essential. The centre-right interposed negotiations with the Conservative Government; the rejection of industrial action for party political purposes; the distancing of unions from the Labour Party, coupled with an assessment of the benefits accruing from a concordance with other political parties.

— Or a "Progressionist" Strategy

The TUC General Council's calculative accommodation to political reality stands remote from the 'progressionist' strategy forged on the Kinnock-Hattersley axis now dominant in the Labour Party. This second or qualitative aspect of Labour's response to the election defeat represents the perennial aspiration to a future which is understood in terms of the visions announced by activists of varying stripe and legitimised in terms of the socialist critique of modern society and its spirit.

The lesson on this view is that Labour spokes-people must promulgate their finer vision more effectively with the elaboration of a 'popular ideology' or 'realistic rhetoric'. Advance will come only by winning voters to the cause of socialism. Rapprochement here means 'tactical politics and balanced tickets'. Specifically, it means piercing the internalised debate and embracing more attractive socialist practices. For instance, the subsumption of a 'productionist philosophy' figures prominently in Kinnock's populist restatement of socialist practice. As a product of the reassessment of strategy, the intention is to spread the appeal of socialism as a source of efficiency as much to the affluent as to the needy.

The implications of this quantitative-qualitative dichotomy are momentous for the Labour Movement as a whole. It is, perhaps, premature to posit disintegration although the phenomenon could presently be described as a kind of entropy.

The Right Analysis?

The purpose of my commentary is partly to elaborate, though principally to oppose, the forces unleashed in the wake of Labour's election defeat. The leading argument advanced is that the trend to separatism is dangerous and that it results from a misreading and a misunderstanding of the situation. The danger lies precisely with the forces pushing trades unionism inward towards the centre of the liberal-capitalist establishment. That is to say, the 'tactical pragmatism' invoked by the TUC General Council will surely inflame voracious individualism, disparage fraternity and facilitate the spread of self-regarding sectionalism among trades unionists.

Conversely, the direction of the 'soft left' realism blossoming in the Labour Party seems correct even if the destination is some way off. If the Labour Movement is to flourish once more then certainly socialist ideas, or at least the public understanding of them, must be analysed in a critical spirit. The arguments for socialism may be as sound and pertinent as ever, but it does not of necessity follow that socialism should have an exclusive proprietary right to votes. Labour's presentational concerns do, therefore, augur well for the future. The party must, in the short term, express its opposition to capitalism by outbidding the latter's promises and seeking further to develop its own potentialities. The attempt to expunge popular notions of bogey-man socialism, and the near unanimous

desire to plunge below the surface of splinter groups and doctrines will *ipso facto* engender voters' confidence or, at the very least, swamp a few of their qualms.

Having said all this, it must be argued that the reasoning behind both the Labour Party's 'realism' and the union movement's 'pragmatism' is remarkably shallow. In fact, their theoretical presuppositions are closely interwoven for the surface manifestations of Labour's decline are typically treated as causes. 'Revisionists' have juxtaposed internal wrangling, constitutional rows, organisational maladies, the malevolence of Militant, the defence of putative class interests and stultifying starry-eyedness.

In short, there is a common belief that the Labour Movement has itself violated the conditions of its own legitimacy. Of course, this is not a recent phenomenon. Partisans have argued, for many years, that Labour suffered by its very success in 'humanising' capitalism. There may be pervasive truth in these ruminations, but to ascribe Labour's decline entirely to their contents, whether old or new, is to evade its underlying cause.

The Fundamental Problem of Labour

Anticipatory sectionalism is at the heart of Labour's perplexities and discontents. 'Enlightened' self-interest is the issue which inclines or has in the past inclined the majority of Labour supporters to opt for what they believe to be a 'socialist' road. Fraternity was never the principle to move people. Labour's past electoral strength issued from the basic calculative attitudes of an electorate operating through the instrumentalities of the Labour Movement.

The merits of 'socialism' were judged according to the material preconceptions and expectations which guide, for the most part, the actions of voters at the polls.

However, the present problems stretch beyond the unpalatable truth that socialist ideas have been twisted out of shape in the public mind. In fact, the electorate's misconstrued socialist road has led the Labour Movement itself into a disastrous blind alley. It seems that because Labour has failed to change basic social attitudes during the past eighty years or so, significant sections of the trades union movement are resolved to accept some form of accommodation, or, more accurately, the progressive dilution of socialist principles.

In fact, it is not too much of an exaggeration to suggest that there exists within the Labour Movement an ideology of quasi-socialism. Many trades union leaders and some individual Labour Party members seem to be guided by the myopic self-interest of the liberal-capitalism to which they supposedly object. Complainants are frequently 'socialist' in their language, yet beneath the veneer of camaraderie many find an excuse for the pursuit of personal and sectional interest. This vulgar socialism masks 'sectionalism' which constitutes the taproot of division and dissension within the Labour

Movement, and informs the 'pragmatic' response of revisionist union leaders.

Marching to Pragmatism

It would be a mistake to regard the union movement's 'pragmatism' as a distinct departure. The roots of quasi-socialism or 'sectionalism' lie deep in union history. The difference to-day is that union leaders no longer play down their significance. 'Revisionists' are prepared to recognise sectionalist attitudes openly in theory as well as in practice. For 'tactical pragmatism' is designed to demonstrate the continuing relevance of trades unionism to members and potential members in terms compatible with their affinity towards Margaret Thatcher's acquisitive brand of economic liberalism. The 'revisionist' drive from powerlessness should, therefore, be understood as an attempt to buttress the underlying individualism which exists in the union movement through its attachment to voluntarist dogma.

From the perspective of the wider Labour Movement, this quantitative response to Labour's defeat is intellectually feeble, since it implies declining an explanatory challenge which would lead across the conventional boundaries of labourism. The union leaders of the centre-right have more or less succumbed to utilitarianism. They take for granted the basic values professed by society. Self-help and self-interest are the watchwords guiding the 'revisionist' activities of union leaders content merely to consolidate their members' stake in market-capitalism. It seems that, in a laissez faire world in which each freely takes as much as he or she can, it is in the interests of trades unions to pursue their own narrowly defined advantage because others are doing so. 'Tactical pragmatism' apparently exists not in order to expedite the fraternal doctrines of labourism, but to recover the assent of workers by reinforcing the solidarity of sectional interests striving after material objectives.

Pragmatism v Socialist Principles?

However, the sad truth is that the progress of the Labour Movement as a whole is hampered by the quantitative response. The difficulties of reconciling the demands of union members with Labour principles will be accentuated if union leaders reserve their passions for sectional loyalties and ephemeral causes. Indeed, the populist re-statement of voluntarism will frustrate even the perception of common union-wide goals as work groups are divided more effectively than ever. In truth, sectarian exclusiveness and easy going pragmatism are just as close to extreme conceptual limits of the Labour Movement as are, on a different level, the opposing tendencies of the 'hard left'.

Yet, the analogy with the 'malevolent left' can be taken beyond the harmful consequences of belligerent sectionalism or factionalism. Romance

masquerades as realism on each perspective. One side is chimeric in its account of a virile working class, and the other is quixotic in the assumption that it can extend its hegemony with the resurgence of voluntarism. The 'revisionist' leaders of the union movement seem impervious to the fact that conflict will inevitably accompany the employment of 'tactical pragmatism'. Their 'realism' will merely exacerbate the sectionalism of the unions and make it even harder for them to establish an understanding with any political party. Sectionalist demands and strife will also foil 'revisionist' efforts to increase the movement's effectiveness in purchase over the Conservative Government.

In short, the tenets of tactical pragmatism are defective. The core propositions will issue in sterility. The signal danger with this plan is that the union movement will lose touch with the leading principles of labourism and become petrified in the defence of outlandish and nihilistic positions.

Alternative Proposals

Human acquisitiveness is a force which cannot be ignored by the Labour Movement, nor expunged from its organisation. The tensions between utilitarianism and aspirations to social justice are real enough and will unavoidably be reproduced within the Movement. Significantly, Labour's policies, strategies and calls to action are at their most potent when individual, 'ground level' loss or gain is involved. Nevertheless, if the Movement is to replace the indifference of market-capitalism with the maximum development of human capabilities, then trades union leaders must abandon their 'revisionist' ideas of sectional independence and self reliance, and reject egoism completely. They must fight against something as well as for something. Their 'pragmatism' should not be automatically justified by the existence of utilitarianism. Union activists and members need to be given a sense of purpose which is greater than mere self-defence. Union leaders must ventilate the idealism which remains in at least part of themselves and weigh carefully the state of the Movement in relation to the consummate tasks which ought to be carried out.

Of course, Labour principles will not be vindicated by the isolated actions of union leaders. Their exhortations must, in fact, be allied to the electoral politics of the Labour Party, since shop floor aims and expectations are tempered by the hallowed values of British society, which in themselves, act as a fetter on the promotion and realisation of a coherent Labour programme. The 'British Ideology' — utilitarian liberal-democratic individualism — underpins and legitimates the self-regarding sectionalism which stands opposed to the development of the non-instrumental, truly solidaristic union consciousness so necessary to any socialist strategy. Political action is therefore essential for an onslaught on acquisitive aspirations.

Labour will only be able to replace or modify the consciousness that individuals receive from the pervasive ideology if activists overleap the

shrinking boundaries of the Movement and unite behind a socialist strategy for cultural change. Any stretching of the traditional separation of industrial and political questions will merely issue in chaos with the political wing electorally barren and trades unions confined to an insidious, isolated and combatant existence.

Note of the Author

MARTIN BEIRNE graduated from Paisley College of Technology in 1982, with an Honours Degree in Public Policy, and from the University of Strathclyde in 1983 with an MSc in Industrial Relations. He is presently employed as Research Assistant, Department of Office Organisation, University of Strathclyde.