

Liberalism and the Left



by
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Foreward

In recent years the Labour Party has taken a number of steps to the left. It is quite entitled to do so. It is equally legitimate for those who disagree with this trend either to abandon the Labour Party, as many have, or to remain in it and fight. It is foolish and impolitic for opponents of Labour to use the current low electoral standing of the party as an excuse for avoiding proper evaluation of recent trends. The lottery of the electoral system, and the fickleness of the electorate, could give us a Labour Government virtually by default, on a small minority of votes.

Elections in Britain are not won by parties; they are lost by parties. The capacity of the British electorate to forgive and forget is immense, and is exploited by all parties. See, for instance, the current Labour poster campaign depicting a graph of the numbers of unemployed with the slogan 'Look what happens when you don't vote Labour'. Given that the most telling Tory poster at the 1979 General Election was the unemployed queue and the slogan 'Labour isn't working' the present Labour attitude is particularly cynical.

I planned this booklet with four readers in mind. The first was myself! I wanted to do the necessary reading on the Labour Left with a view to assisting my own education, and to try to put Labour's current position into a fair comparison with Liberalism. At the risk of sounding pompous I have to confess that I prepared the material on the Labour Left with increasing sadness. It seemed clearer and clearer that the Labour Left was on the wrong tack altogether and that its thinking was stuck on tramlines that restrict original thinking and are routed in a direction that does not coincide with current problems. It also brought a feeling of increasing frustration that the efforts of radical Liberals to bring their philosophy to bear on current problems are not more widely considered, when they seem so much more appropriately radical and relevant. Perhaps everyone feels like this about their own cause, if so I hope someone will point out where I have gone wrong!

The second reader I had in mind was the Liberal colleague who wants a handy source book on the current Labour left and related views, with a Liberal commentary on them. This, I hope, explains why there are so many passages quoted. I also hope that I have assisted this reader to appreciate that there is no need to lack confidence in expounding and promoting Liberalism today.

Thirdly, I know of a number of individuals who, I believe, ought not to be in the Labour Party. Their personality and their views are more libertarian than statist and yet, perhaps because of prejudice about the 'traditional' image of the Liberal party, they stifle their discomfort with Labour. I hope this booklet will at least assist an objective analysis.

Finally, I had in mind the concerned individual who is anxious to play a part in tackling the immense problems facing the world today and who is anxious to join up with a group of people of like mind and with similar concerns. I hope I have indicated which political party that reader should join.

Introduction

The recent conflict in the South Atlantic was not only very serious for its own sake and for the future of diplomacy, but it was also highly significant for its effect on people's attitudes in Britain. The immediate nationalistic response, fed by the crudest jingoistic headlines in most of the press, jolted me out of the complacent view that popular 'consent' to a major military operation would today be extremely difficult to obtain. It also suggests that those of us on the progressive side of politics, who depend on the exposition of a reasoned case to win support, have a tough task.

Nevertheless it is a crucial and worthy task. We see a country and its people slipping towards the edge of a precipice, apparently unaware of the immense dangers at hand. Occasionally part of the cliff edge gives way, and we get the inner city riots of July 1981. No matter, says the Tory Government, there's actually plenty of grip. All we need is to shore it up and forbid those on the edge to shout for help. After all, it's always been all right before.

It is not all right, and many Liberals have for years been warning both people and government that there is very little time left for Britain to seek firmer ground and to build sounder foundations. In particular, those of us in the big cities have emphasised that conditions of living on most of our huge old council estates are so appalling that the inner city riots are nothing compared to what will happen when the Council tenants decide to take the law into their own hands'. It is simply not possible to force people into inhuman and insensitive ghettos and then to expect them to behave humanely and sensitively.

These conditions are a stark and vivid reminder of the failure of socialism. Almost all our major cities have been governed by Labour for 75% of the relevant period and it is Labour policies that have brought the cities to their present sorry state. In my own City of Leeds, despite a 25,000 housing waiting list, we have maisonettes and flats less than twenty years old that are unlettable. We have 1250 flats in a deck-access design that are now to be demolished - a mistake that will cost public funds £76 million. Labour may now appreciate the folly of a particular design but their paternalistic and dogmatic attitude remains.

The danger in mentioning council estates and inner cities in the first few paragraphs of a booklet is that only a small minority of politicians lives in such areas and the rest may feel that they can safely ignore or gloss over the warning. Nothing could be further from the truth. Our society is so constructed that there is overwhelming concentration of political, administrative and economic power in a handful of urban centres. If those centres become unstable the effect is felt nationwide. It is not possible to erect some sort of ring fence around areas of conflict and then expect towns to continue in some sort of mini-Vichy fashion.

Just as the head of a northern Polytechnic² stated that the unemployed were "bearing the burden of change for the benefit of Society as a whole" so those of us who struggle to build a liberal society in the city are fighting the battle for stability on behalf of all. I say this, not to invoke sympathy - we are, after all, volunteers - nor to appear unduly pompous, but to emphasise the unity of the cause and the need for solidarity amongst all those who believe in the primacy of reason and the importance of debate. The point has been made most vividly by Sir Alec Clegg³, the former Director of Education for the West Riding, and therefore not in the strict sense a politician:

'Some of the industrial towns of the north are places that combine maximum need with minimum resources and overwhelming dereliction....There are whole areas of our country affected in this way and nearly all of them are in the industrial north. They lack both the charm of the countryside and the amenities and entertainments of the town. Furthermore they are areas of no political consequence. The 'left' know they will not lose them and the 'right' know that they cannot win them, and so both political sides can ignore them, manipulate and exploit them politically, socially, economically and educationally, without fear of reprisal.'

Fortunately in some of these areas there is a radical, community based Liberal party that has begun the task of raising the political consciousness of the people. Their example shows that there is hope and that there are new ways of building caring communities that have security and stability. It is only thus that the latent compassion and neighbourliness can be realised.

The demand continually is for action not talk. So far as casework is concerned, and the righting of individual wrongs, action is needed, but in the context of developing the right response to the current problems of society, I am increasingly of the view that we have had too much action and not enough talk. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in connection with employment measures. Trying to cope with the constantly changing rules and Programmes of the Manpower Services Commission convinces those involved of the need for clearer aims, more flexibility and deeper awareness of the problems.

The siren voice of the Labour Left sounds particularly seductive in comparison with the harshness of the present Conservative regime. Surely, faced with the carnage being caused by the Tories, we must do something. And here, conveniently to hand, just happens to be Mr Tony Benn and the Alternative Economic Strategy! It may be superficially alluring but it requires vigorous analysis in the light of current conditions. Particularly as the Conservatives' failure stems from the rigid application of an economic formula to deep-seated social problems. It would hardly be wise to apply rigidly another economic formula to the same problems.

Background

History is important to politicians, particularly as it can educate us on the interplay between the governed and the governors over the years, given different kinds of circumstance and of stimuli. The failure of the Liberals in the early part of this century to respond to the increasing demands of working people, and the impossibility of liberalism embracing social democracy, is important to us facing a reversal of that situation today. However, there are vital differences now, both socially and economically, which should ring warning bells wherever there is any attempt to compare our current situation with any previous recession.

It is not now possible simply to spend our way out of recession. Any attempt to do so depends on printing money. Given that there is insufficient "slack" in the economy - and to eliminate what there is will increase unemployment - and given that we do not have access to cheap raw materials, a massive increase in government subsidy for industry will inevitably increase inflation. Consequently, if we stick to the traditional economic machinery, we are left with trading off inflation for unemployment. New approaches are required, to which attention is given below.

Socially too the situation today is very different. All the efforts of the past sixty years have failed to unify society. All our urban areas are still very clearly divided into attractive and unattractive 'sectors'. Such a judgement is, of course, subjective and superficial and deals only with the bricks and mortar of an area rather than the strengths of the community and its local institutions. Nevertheless we are all familiar with those areas of our cities to which the doctor, the teacher, the social worker and other professionals commute in a 1980s version of missionary work. There are honourable exceptions, it is true, but there are also others who sometimes, alas, conform who are even more culpable, such as community workers and left-wing Labour Councillors. Is it any wonder that the subconscious encouragement to any young person of initiative and ability is to get out if they wish to better themselves? The consequence is communities continually shorn of their natural leaders.

No matter that no-one need actually starve today; no matter that, potentially, the working class community has more innate resources with which to survive recession than the consumer based middle class society, the bitterness and despair that is rife in many areas will not be bought off by politicians' promises of jam tomorrow. It is a dangerous and insensitive underrating of working people to suggest that it is possible - let alone desirable - to embrace a magic formula that can transform the economic situation. Working class areas have for decades had their communities bisected by roads and decimated by demolition in the sacred name of progress. And in all the years that the economy grew, that employment was virtually full, and there was the prospect of a bigger wage packet year by year, this trade-off of houses for homes, of cash community, and of betterment for belonging was accepted as being worthwhile and modern.

Now that the economy is static, unemployment is rife and making ends meet is a day to day struggle, the legacy of these short-sighted decades is an immense extra burden. It need not have been so. Liberals certainly understood the situation and spoke out. They were not alone. George Orwell warned and Jeremy Seabrook now explains and analyses.⁴ In essence strong cities depend on strong neighbourhoods, and strong neighbourhoods depend on strong communities. Without communities that encourage and enhance inter-dependence and discourage and inhibit exploitation, it is not possible to construct 'The Good City'.⁵ If vandalism, violence and theft are felt to provide as much excitement and reward as more legitimate activities then no amount of extra policing or harsher penalties will deter it. Human beings need to belong and to believe in a future.

The whole emphasis of the Labour Left is on economic equalisation rather than on personal well-being. It seeks to return to an improved version of Labour's pre-Thatcher rule and endeavours to persuade us that it is economically possible so to do. Liberals, on the other hand, put their emphasis on 'being' rather than 'having' and work towards aims for society that are not only more attainable but are also more worthwhile.⁶ Such aims are not mutually exclusive but it is a question of emphasis. Considerable thought needs to be given, for instance, to the ways and means of revitalising the social fabric of our communities.

It is curious that, even allowing for the traditional socialist emphasis on economics, there is so little attention given to human values for their own sake, as well as for their impact on class culture. Many individual Labour party members are involved in, and concerned for the arts, for instance, but they appear to have far less impact on Labour Left thinking than do Liberals with similar interests in their party's thinking.

It is inconceivable that there would be a debate or a publication on Liberal values without serious consideration of the role of the arts, and of ways and means of developing cultural opportunities within the community. Liberals regard human values as being the object of policy and the reason for the creation of economic resources. It was summed up in a Liberal party report as follows:

"Once the basic needs of food and shelter are met, man's greatest satisfactions are to be found in love, trust and friendship, in beauty, art and music, and in learning, none of which are served by the mythology of growth for its own sake."⁷

The rigid divisions historically into parties and the traditional wariness of crossing party lines on issues (except for the occasional important 'grand gesture' of peace or anti-racist marches) have inhibited co-operation on issues. However, at one and the same time as Britain is in economic and social turmoil there is also an extremely volatile political situation. This is not merely coincidence - indeed, the wonder is that our traditional party structure and electoral system have survived so long. The Conservatives are the most skilled at containing and stifling dissent within the party but it is

clear that a substantial minority of Tory MPs (and a less substantial minority of Conservatives outside Parliament) does not support the obsessive concentration on monetarism and all its attendant evils. The Labour party is in turmoil; its tradition is of open conflict - a good clean fight and no survivors - and the trend inexorably and inevitably is towards the Left, not least because the remaining social democrats within the party have, almost by definition, nothing of clarity and substance upon which to crusade.⁸

The latest 'own goal' of the Labour party - i.e. establishing a register of internal groups and giving 'Militant' three months to conform to the NEC's interpretation of the Constitution - has all the ingredients of doom. Sometimes the Labour leadership appears to be the opposite of Midas: everything it touches turns to dross. Nothing short of a McCarthyite purge of individuals can outflank 'Militant', as the further re-selection of Pat Wall in Bradford North, with a huge majority immediately after the NEC decision, shows.

The SDP has struck out bravely, has gathered an impressive number of people not previously involved in politics, and appears now to be faltering. It faces two separate problems: firstly it has to develop a consistent philosophic base and a coherent set of policies. It will no doubt produce something of substance but its dilemma is whether or not to continue to argue that the SDP is in the historic social democratic continuum, which, as with the present right wing of the Labour party, does not amount to a great rallying cry, or whether to strike out in new directions with but a nod to the past. The latter may seem more attractive but pragmatism and 'buying time' are particularly dangerous when the country's needs are so serious as to demand a deeper 'view of society' towards which individual policies contribute.⁹

The second problem faced by the SDP is whether or not its momentum can be sustained by its own efforts or whether it depends on the unpopularity of the other parties. The evidence so far is at best ambivalent. SDP members have amazingly optimistic expectations - and there is nothing intrinsically wrong with that, except that it heightens the disappointment of defeat - but have got to learn to consolidate on local support through campaigning. Time, and the next General Election, will tell whether the SDP is a fixture on the British political scene.

The Liberals have grappled more vigorously with the 1970s and 1980s than any other party and amazingly appear reluctant to accept that they are on the right track. Small wonder that they have not persuaded the electorate at large!

If Liberals lack confidence in their liberalism, it is not surprising that it is not immediately attractive to that wide constituency of radicals and idealists anxious to be involved in relevant and dynamic causes. If by default many such end up in the Labour party it may take some time before the elitism and the 'small print' of labourism drives them out again.

Alone of the parties the Liberals have gone back to the fundamentals and re-assessed their basic philosophy.¹⁰ This was followed by a consideration of 'Liberal Values'¹¹ and a Liberal Programme.¹² The answers to our needs as a country at the present time are not to be found in an over-concentration on economics and a rigid application of economic panacea - of left or right. What is required is a thorough-going philosophy of people and community to which economic measures that help not hinder can be applied. The Labour Left is wedded to the construction of an economic framework into which the individual and the community have to fit. Such a process is inimical to human nature and cannot succeed.

The 'common central goal' of the Labour Left is "to bring about a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families".¹³ A very worthy aim, with which it would, at first sight, appear difficult to argue. It is only as one appreciates the implications of the words that one begins to doubt their worth and their efficacy. It is the assumption that power and wealth are the over-riding arbiters of success and satisfaction and, therefore, that the acquisition of them is paramount and must be achieved whatever the cost.

I firmly believe, as a Liberal, that power and wealth are important. They are, after all, the keys to so much else. BUT I do not believe that their acquisition guarantees security and happiness, particularly if the trauma of securing them wrecks the structure of society itself. Class parties, engaged in a class war, have some validity, particularly when resources are in one class's possession and largely denied to the other, but the ultimate possession of a desolate battlefield may not be particularly advantageous. The rightness of a cause, especially in human affairs, is not necessarily the sole reason for asserting it. The rightness of heart transplants per se is not to be gainsaid but the advantage of utilising them is very much to be questioned when the patient so often dies (of other causes - the transplant is, we are told, usually successful) and many other sufferers are denied less costly and comprehensive treatment. Ralph Dahrendorf put it thus: "for many equality is a condition of liberty, but....there are situations in which it threatens to destroy liberty. When and where this is the case, liberty has primacy."¹⁴

There is a 'political ecology' to which Liberals are particularly sensitive. It requires an awareness of the whole nature of man and an ordering of legislation and political action that understands and accepts that nature. Whatever the fine ideals with which they commence, extreme political movements and revolutions invariably become distorted and the safeguarding of political gains for their own sake tends to become the norm. The French Revolution was a vivid example of this and it provoked Friedrich Schiller to write:

"When the artisan lays hands upon the formless mass to shape it to his ends, he has no scruple in doing it violence; for the natural material he is working merits no respect for itself, and his concern is not with the whole for the sake of the parts, but with the parts for the sake of the whole. When the artist lays hands upon the same mass, he has just as little scruple in doing it violence;

but he avoids showing it. For the material he is handling he has not a whit more respect than has the artisan; but the eye which would seek to protect the freedom of the material he will endeavour to deceive by a show of yielding to this latter. With the pedagogic or the political artist things are very different indeed. For him Man is at once the material on which he works and the goal towards which he strives. In this case the end turns back upon itself and becomes identical with the medium; and it is only inasmuch as the whole serves the parts that the parts are in any way bound to submit to the whole. The statesman-artist must approach his material with a quite different kind of respect from that which the maker of Beauty feigns towards his. The consideration he must accord to its uniqueness and individuality is not merely subjective, and aimed at creating an illusion for the senses, but objective and directed to its innermost being.¹⁵

Power and wealth can only be two of the vital tools we use to transform society. They are not the ends of that transformation. To reverse that process is to fight one's way into a political cul-de-sac.

Definition

It is a paradox of the British political system that to have only three (or now arguably four) political groupings does not produce clear cut distinctions between the parties, particularly the parties of the left. It is a considerable drawback of the present electoral system that it necessitates broad alliances within a handful of political parties and that an individual wishing to be active in 'mainstream' politics has really no choice but to join one of those parties. Almost by definition there will be some members of that chosen party with whom one has little in common. What matters therefore is the party's philosophy, its own definition of its political values, and the main thrust of its programme.

One of the intolerances of the Left in politics has invariably been to deny the description of 'socialist' to all except those in agreement with them. The fact is that the term 'socialist' covers a very wide spectrum of opinion, from extreme statism to extreme libertarianism, and there is much common ground across that spectrum, as is often found in single issue campaigns.

The divergences tend to arise over the relative emphasis given to equality or to liberty. In practical policy terms it usually means, on the one hand, more demands for state intervention and, on the other, pressure for more devolution and community control. Recent trends in Labour and Liberal parties mean that we have a Labour party that looks more to Marx than hitherto and a Liberal party that looks to Mill. I reiterate that I do not wish to caricature either party as being narrowly exclusive but rather to define the distinctive thrust of its thinking and hence its place in the spectrum.

Keeping this distinction in mind I want now to examine some of the key issues to ascertain where the differences between Left-Labour and Radical-Liberal lie.

The Economy

The Labour party has, since 1972, in one form or another, promoted the 'Alternative Economic Strategy'. It is an important comprehensive strategy and it deserves an examination in detail. I concentrate here on a critique of its direction. Briefly the Strategy consists of the following policies:¹⁶

- (i) reflation of the economy, mainly through increased public spending;
- (ii) planned controls on foreign trade and movement of capital;
- (iii) an industrial strategy based on an extension of public ownership, planning agreements and industrial democracy;
- (iv) a national economic plan;
- (v) price controls.

It is possible that, as a package, the Strategy could work better in strictly economic terms than Thatcher monetarist policies but it would be at an unnecessary and unwarranted social price. It has some inherent weaknesses. For instance, increased public spending Labour style would be too traditionally based to be 'profitable' in terms of cost to the Exchequer and would require subsidy, in the end through printing money which inevitably increases inflation. We have to come to terms with the world forces that impinge greatly on our freedom of action, and accept economic strategies that are alternatives to traditional thinking rather than just alternatives to Thatcherism.

A second major objection to the Strategy is its dependence on selective import controls (or 'import penetration ceilings' in 'The Socialist Alternative' presented to the 1981 Conference). The problem with import controls is that where they are effective (i.e. against low wage economies, mainly in developing countries) they are immoral, and where they are not immoral (ie against industrialised countries) they lay us open to retaliation and are therefore ineffective. Alone amongst Labour Left groups 'Militant' also opposes import controls arguing that they would weaken the international bonds of the working class.

Thirdly, the Strategy depends on a massive extension of state control and planning. The socialist belief in planning is the triumph of hope over experience. Somehow it is thought that the failures of planning so far can only be overcome by the introduction of still more planning! The case against central planning has been argued forcefully from within the Labour movement in a Fabian tract by David Webster.¹⁷ He states:

"....centrally planned economies suffer from certain inherent, and not accidental, weaknesses....First, the problem of information. To function at all, a complex economy requires phenomenal amounts of information to be transmitted between consumers and producers, and among producers, about needs and preferences, production possibilities and the availability of supplies of finished goods, materials and labour".

He goes on to argue that the price mechanism conveys this information effectively and that central planning limits the amount of information made available. He continues:

"Second, the problem of incentives. Why should anyone in a socialist economy attempt to produce more or better?".

He argues the problems arising from both commitment and non-commitment.

"A third characteristic of a planned economy arises from the problem of decisions about production quantities and methods. In an economy without markets, the task of ensuring consistency between the activities of the various producers and consumers must fall to a central body. Hence a planned economy must be characterised by a high degree of centralisation and bureaucratisation."

David Webster asserts bluntly, on the basis of his analysis that "The model put forward by Labour's New Left is based on an evasion of these truths".

Geoff Hodgson is another writer, this time on the left of the Labour Party, who confronts the public ownership problem with honesty. With reference to leftwing demands for the nationalisation of 200 firms he states:

"A final objection to this...is a serious and political one. It is well known that nationalisation is not a popular measure in Britain at the present time. There is no example to point to of a genuinely democratic socialist society in which more than 50 per cent nationalisation actually works."¹⁸

He follows the logic of his analysis and argues for more experimental, decentralised, forms of enterprise and planning, i.e. "popular" rather than "public" ownership, which is the Liberal position.

In contrast Tony Benn appears to wish to get over the public antagonism to nationalisation by controlling without ownership, presumably through planning "agreements" forced on companies. In an interview with Eric Hobsbawm he said:

"Now, a mixed economy? Yes, but a different sort of mix. Big companies - that means that 2 per cent by number, but about 75 per cent by output - must be either publicly controlled or publicly owned."¹⁹

Like virtually everyone on the Labour Left he believes that it is possible to solve our national economic problems through an internal, structural formula.

I do not believe that it is possible to resolve Britain's economic problems by unilateral action in Britain. It is tempting to believe that if only one could find the right package of economic policies then all would be well. Alas, that cannot be the case. Clearly the best 'package' is needed to make the most of the limited room to manoeuvre we still have, but Britain's place in the world entails new - and very challenging - approaches to economic survival. Britain having been the first industrialised country is the first to face

structural decline. We are not facing it alone, indeed we appear to be only four or five years 'ahead' of the much vaunted West Germans whose unemployment rose even more than ours in 1981. Eighty per cent of the world's new materials are in the hands of Russia or the developing world and it is clear that the oil producing countries of the Middle East (plus certain allies) are determined to make the industrialised countries pay massively for their oil in order to redress the world balance in favour of the developing countries.²⁰

It might just be possible to manipulate the British economy one more time and to 'buy' votes for the next election on a protectionist economic platform - overtly by the Conservatives, covertly by Labour - but it would be a fraud, in that it could not be sustained, and would be immoral, in that we cannot go on maintaining our comparative richness at the expense of others' poverty. We have to share with our constituents our deep conviction that we do not face a future in which, in isolation, we can expect to become better off financially but instead we have to seek different rewards for our work, which can be more satisfying in human terms and which contribute to a fairer and more peaceful world. It may be hard to "sell" this initially but I believe there is now an instinctive awareness in most people that the rat race is at an end and must be replaced. In any case there is no apparent alternative that meets so many competing demands.

It is this voice of international awareness and commitment that I find lacking in the voices of the Labour Left. Whether at meetings or in pamphlets the line is to reverse the economic decline in Britain, to secure better pay and conditions for the British workers, and to improve the Welfare State in Britain. I have actually been shouted down at anti-cuts meetings in Leeds for asking whether, if nursery education was a right in Leeds was it not also a right in Calcutta! Or, if a free health service is a right in Britain is it not also in Bangladesh? I make this point not to exaggerate my virtue but to demonstrate the shallowness of the Left's attack and how special is their pleading.

There is work for all - but there is not employment for all, in the traditional sense; there are worthwhile, satisfying tasks for all who want them but only a minority may be in work that is 'profitable' in the narrow economic sense that is still necessary to produce the national surplus that buys all the services we need. The package that radical politicians have now to put together is not the Alternative Economic Strategy but one that enables the economically productive to continue to 'support' the rest; that provides resources for work in the community - in the widest sense - at no nett cost to the economy; and that grapples with the problem of enabling everyone to have a happy social and cultural life without stultifying bureaucratic structures. Liberals have gone much further along this path than has the Labour Left, but there is a long way still to go.

Trade Unions

The most delicate and sensitive issue for everyone on the Left is trade union reform. Whilst working people are under threat from a right wing Government the Left will - and should - defend the unions. Even though aspects of the Tebbit Employment Act are in themselves defensible the aim of the legislation is to undermine the Unions and weaken their ability to protect their members. It is wrong to reduce the support for working people at the present time without providing other guarantees or forms of protection. It ought to have been opposed at all stages, and the Liberal party recognised that even if most Liberal MPs did not.²¹

I have always been a member of a trade union whenever possible. Indeed when, at the age of seventeen, I was told that if I wanted to get on in banking I should join the Staff Association rather than the Union - which was then not recognised by the Bank - I immediately joined the Union! (And didn't get on in banking - for other reasons!). Unions are essential and, contrary to the knee-jerk, Daily Mail view, play an important day-to-day role in smoothing out problems and enabling work to continue. However unions have big faults and when things go wrong they tend to go wrong in highly public ways. Possibly the bravest initiative of the Wilson Governments was the attempt to broach trade union reform. "In Place of Strife" proved to be foolhardy rather than brave but it was convincing recognition by a Labour administration that reform was needed.

On the face of it the current union situation is both dangerous and indefensible. Consider the incestuous nature of the relationship. The unions provide the bulk of the Labour Party's income, they now virtually control the election of the Labour Leadership and, through the party conference, determine party policy. In return Labour controlled local authorities introduce 'union management agreements' which ensure a closed shop for a handful of key unions, and Labour Governments maintain 'contracting out' of the political levy, which secures the bulk of the funds which come to the Labour party. Thus the whole cycle continues. And no Labour Government can ever be in a position to tackle the abuses of trade union power nor to reverse the increased centralisation of union structures.

The problem is heightened today because of the interlocking of key control mechanisms through new technology. It is not now possible to isolate industrial action to a particular section of industry or of a workforce when to pull the plugs out of a few computers can bring vast areas of production to a halt. Nor is it possible, perhaps for the same reason, to confine industrial action to combatting traditionally legitimate industrial wrongs. Consider how we increasingly accept as normal strikes for political objectives and strikes by workers in public services, such as fire brigade, ambulances etc, that only a short time ago would have been inconceivable. The problem is that even to mention these facts lays one open to being labelled a fascist by the mindless Left that fondly believes that slogans are an effective substitute for argument. The problems remain, however, and I am anxious to talk them through and to find solutions that give the best possible protection to management, workers and consumers.

Eric Hobsbawm recently pointed out the significant change that has developed over decades:

"...the strength of a group lies not in the amount of loss they can cause to the employer, but in the inconvenience they can cause to the public, that is, to other workers by power blackouts or whatever. This is a natural consequence of a state-monopoly capitalist system in which the basic target of pressure is not the bank account of private employers but, directly or indirectly, the political will of the government. In the nature of things such sectional forms of struggle not only create potential friction between groups of workers, but risk weakening the hold of the Labour movement as a whole."²²

It is puzzling that realisation of this shift of target, and its effect, has not led to consequential changes in structures and in negotiating machinery. In the long run the best and healthiest solution is the development of worker co-operatives and the decentralisation and devolution of work structures. The increasing involvement of workers in the control of their work is the best way to break down the 'sides' of industry and to minimise the 'us' and 'them' mentality which breeds distrust and conflict. Working co-operatively is the silent way of reducing the centralised power of the ultra-hierarchical craft unions - which is one reason why many union leaders have serious reservations about co-operatives.

So far, so good. Much of Labour thinking in recent years has come into line with Liberals on co-operatives, even though on matters such as the Co-operative Development Agency the leverage of the Lib-Lab Pact was necessary. But what of Labour attitudes to unions generally? 'Militant' is pleasurable clear: the unions are the working class! 'Militant', for instance, wants "Workers Management of the nationalised industries on the basis of one third of the places on the management board coming from the unions in the industry, one third from the TUC representing the working class as a whole and one third from the government".²³ (Quite whom the unions would be negotiating with thereafter is unclear.)

Stuart Holland's important work "The Socialist Challenge",²⁴ thinks through the problems in much more depth and rejects the notion that, left to themselves the unions have the capacity to bring about the transformation of industry into a socialist model. He argues that union structures do not lend themselves to varied levels of negotiation and that a co-ordinated union initiative would be likely to kill off smaller firms and thus provoke a substantial backlash. However, for Holland, this only points to the need for a more sophisticated approach because "if a Labour Government in Britain is to herald a socialist transformation, it will only do so both with support and under sustained pressure from the trade union movement".

A further inhibiting problem for the Labour Left was articulated by Danny Harris of the T&GWU at the 'Debate of the Decade' in 1980.²⁵ At one and the same time the unions are the only vehicle for a workers' mass movement and the Labour Party is the only vehicle for the workers. Danny Harris spoke about how he was one of the architects of defeat of the Social Compact in 1977 and then went on:

"The workers are not a political power as such. The workers are a mass movement and it's only within the trade union movement that you'll keep them as a mass movement because the splinter political parties will never do it. I'm also chairman of my constituency Labour Party and my Labour Party a few years ago moved its MP and we will move any MP that doesn't carry out what we, the workers, the people, want. We are proud to do that and we'll carry on doing it".

It is not possible, nor right, to run a country as if it were a giant trade union. There are different constraints and tensions within entities even less cohesive than trades unions, and attempts to dominate society by one section of it, however powerful and numerous, are likely to lead to a permanent embattlement similar to the Polish situation today.

Incidentally, I am a member of the same union as Danny Harris and I am not entirely sure that I recognise myself in his all embracing swathe!

Probably the best argued summary of the Labour Left position on the unions is the Labour Co-ordinating Committee's booklet written by Pete Rowlands, Secretary of Hounslow Trades Council.²⁶ It is certainly more honest than most, as its opening sentences show:

"The British trade union movement remains one of the most powerful in the world and a source of great potential strength for the socialist movement. However it has rarely moved beyond a defensive and economic role and has often adopted a deliberately non-political stance."

His historical summary is useful and frank but he reverts to type when he turns to consider future tactics. Argument and reason give way to assertion:

"Despite a periodic fragility this arrangement (i.e. bargaining rather than confrontation) functioned up until the 1970s but has now effectively broken down. Its demise is mainly due to the inability of a faltering economy to maintain the expectations generated by the 'long boom' of the post-war years and has resulted in fissures within the ranks of capital and labour, and accumulated tensions between them. Thus stalemate has been reached, which cannot be resolved as in the past, although it is on the assumption that it can be that many trade union attitudes are based. The stalemate will be resolved, and our task is to make sure it is on our terms."

Alone amongst current Labour Left writers Pete Rowlands does confront the organisational problems of craft unions and argues for efforts to create industrial unions together with agreement between the big general unions on the areas they cover. He also tackles the problem of the block vote and rehearses some of the powerful arguments against it. Alas he eventually cops out with the argument that the block vote is all right as long as there are fully democratic processes within each union by which it is arrived! That has about the same amount of logic as suggesting that because Regional Water Authorities have a large number of local authority representatives they are somehow democratic. The sad truth is that power tends to

corrupt, that those who have power tend to use it and that there is a fairly general rule of 'winner takes all'. Just as indirect elections on this basis are undemocratic so is the block vote a weakening factor in the struggle, not a strengthening one as its apologists assert.

Pete Rowlands' picture of the future shows the same lack of faith in the force of argument and reason as the rest of the Left. Rather than a future in which hearts and minds will be won for socialism and in which its benign rule will earn support, he sees the need to bolster a left wing government by the organised power of those groups that will directly benefit:

"Our aim must be that of a mass left wing Labour Party integrally linked to a powerful trade union movement in the fight for socialism. Such a movement will be vital not only to defeat the Tories and elect a left wing Labour government to office but more importantly to sustain it there, for without such a movement no left wing government will last for long. We need to be able to mobilise the extra-parliamentary power of the working class, and its allies, to defeat the extra-parliamentary power of the ruling class".

That sounds to me like a recipe for a siege society in which an incipiently unstable government depends on industrial union power to try to retain control. It contains the seeds of economic and social collapse within itself and is not by any means an attractive scenario.

Tony Benn has a shrewder viewpoint. He asserts, rightly, that "industrial democracy imposes a far greater strain on the trade union movement than it does on management".²⁷ Also rightly, he argues that combine committees, that is groups of shop stewards from different unions but within the same industry or factory, "may appear to have more in common (with each other) than either of them will have with their full-time officials in their own union". He does not follow logically to argue for reforms in union structure but contents himself with saying that "it is something to which the trade union movement will have to give a lot of thought". That, I believe, is not enough. There is too much at stake to leave it to those with power to consider giving it up. No one with four aces asks for a new hand!

This particular nettle is grasped with what one might call 'delicate firmness' by the authors of 'Manifesto - A Radical Strategy for Britain's Future'.²⁸ They state bluntly that "the trade unions will need to give an explicit constitutional status to the 'combine committees'". They also go further than other writers by setting out cogent criticisms of the present situation:

"The potential of collective bargaining can only be realized if trade unions are strong. Insularity and competitiveness stand in the way of stronger trade unionism when power is crystallized in rival structures each of which jealously guards its autonomy. Leaders can then become obsessed with the interests and influence of their own union and negotiate amalgamations as a means of empire

building. The criteria for trade union amalgamations can often be the status and career interests of their bureaucracies. The General Council of the TUC can at times be like a gathering of suspicious tribal chiefs. The issue of how trade union power should best be consolidated in new democratic structures is crucial and too little discussed....Undemocratic unions, however large or powerful, cannot be vehicles for an expansion of democracy."

Powerful stuff! Alas having got the analysis accurately done one looks in vain for the prescription. The authors are right - it is "too little discussed"!

Another Labour Left writer who confronts the conservatism of trade unionism with honesty is Barry Hindess. He refers to "the example of the Lucas Aerospace Combine who confronted a major obstacle in that their methods and objectives were incompatible with the commitment to centralised control that characterises the 'left wing' leadership of TASS".²⁹ He talks also of the "tensions between socialist feminism and other positions on the left" and concludes:

"To talk of unity in the face of such differences is to discount the specific objectives, principles and political concerns around which groups organise and about which they differ."

He is right, and I believe that this is the heart of the matter. No 'voluntary' body, whether it be a trade union, a chamber of commerce, a community association or the WRVS, can have other than a - legitimate - sectional interest. However large and powerful it is, it still exists for the precise benefit or work of its members. It may, one hopes, exercise its influence unselfishly but it is still only a part of the whole society. For all its failings and faults only the state, national or local, encompasses the whole and it is by the active use of the democratic processes that individuals and organisations determine the course and direction of its policies.³⁰ To usurp the state's power by force is possible but the consequences of so doing are not to be contemplated. 'Might is right' is not a slogan for a civilized society.

So what is to be done? Firstly a firm declaration that the Liberal party is committed to the principle of trades unions and wishes to enter into discussion with the unions with a view to enhancing, not diminishing, workers' collective influence on their work situation. The aim would be voluntarily to establish industrial unions, possibly based on combine committees, which would secure Government help in the transitional period, particularly if financial support is required to safeguard the existing union staff's pay and conditions. It would be a prize worth gaining.

The second stage would be for public authorities to take the bold step of announcing their willingness to negotiate locally with a single union (or, initially, a co-ordinating committee of unions) thus, in effect, withdrawing from the interminable structure of national negotiating committees.

Thirdly, incentives should be given to all steps towards worker participation and involvement in their industry or service, including fiscal measures for existing firms and capital support for co-operative initiatives.

Only when these three steps have been consolidated, together with measures to provide employment opportunities for those who want them and to establish an incomes policy designed to narrow differentials and to improve the situation of the low paid, can one look at the closed shop and contracting out. Only when there is relative stability and the prospect of reasonable security can one tackle the entrenched prejudices of the present system. Frankly, just as, as a politician, it is an insult to have to have compulsory voting to attract the electorate, so, as a trade union leader, I would regard it as an insult to require the closed shop and contracting out. Naive it may be, but I believe that in a Liberal Society unions could concentrate on their true role without threat and without the present reactionary tensions and pressures and thus be sufficiently attractive not to need external coercion to join and participate. At least it is a more attractive goal than the permanent strife offered by Labour and Conservative strategies.

Equality

The struggle for equality, put in such stark terms, is such a worthy cause as to inhibit challenge. Yet it has proved to be more elusive than virtually every other political aim. Considerable research has been done in recent years which shows that fiscal policies have had some effect but that indicators can be selected that show a widening gap between rich and poor. There is also no doubt that there are still some exceptionally rich families in Britain.

Whilst there was general economic growth in Britain even the poorest could see an absolute improvement in their own position and therefore did not tend to worry whether their relative wealth was improving. Now that there is virtually no economic growth the gap between richer and poorer is again brought into the spotlight. The unemployed particularly have every right to feel aggrieved when it is seen that in 1977 the dole was 51% of the average wage whereas now it is less than 40%.

Jim Cousins, in a similar publication to this fifteen years ago,³¹ identified a dissatisfaction resulting from economic growth:

"One of the principal assumptions underlying modern politics is that the growth of prosperity has resulted in a rough social equality that has produced, in its turn, a landslide in political allegiances. Class ties have been weakened, and, as a result, the desire for radical change has died down. But class solidarity was the cause not of Radicalism or Socialism but Labourism. The supposed bourgeoisification of society has actually brought about a new sense of inequality and a new desire for radical change, a new unity between those bumping around at the back of the bandwagon and those not on it at all."

That "new sense of inequality and a new desire for radical change" led Liberals to a deliberate community politics strategy in the early 1970s. In a very real sense the encouragement of community identity, community solidarity and, in turn, community control is an attempt to bring about social equality from a different starting point. Our philosophical commitment to equality is firm:

".....the existence of great inequalities of wealth is inimical to the development of a Liberal Society and embitters communities and individuals. Consequently the Liberal works to reduce the inequalities between individuals, between communities and particularly between countries. Significantly, however, the Liberal's belief in equality of resources stems from a commitment to the value of diffusing power rather than from envy or any passion for uniformity".³²

The problem for Liberals, more than for the Labour Left, is firstly what kind of equality, and, secondly, what is the cost of achieving it? To judge from its recent writings the Labour Left defines equality in relation to wealth and income, i.e. equality of distribution. (It does, of course, also argue strongly for equal treatment of women, in comparison with men, and blacks in comparison with whites, as do Liberals, but the discussion of these tends to be under the heading of 'discrimination' rather than 'equality'.) It follows, also, that because of its greater emphasis on economic values the Labour Left pays much less attention to the effects on other values of a single-minded assault on economic inequality.³³

The authors of "Manifesto - A Radical Strategy for Britain's Future" argue cogently that a socialist ideal of equality is more than a mitigation of severe poverty and hardship by some sacrifice by the more prosperous, with half an eye to aiding social harmony and cohesion.³⁴ The socialist concept of equality should be "a natural distribution of the social product to maintain equality between people at different stages of life" and between people with disadvantages from prejudices or birth. They state: "There can be no natural right of the more privileged to retain advantages of property and power, however these were acquired". Their prescription for achieving this includes a maximum income limit, a national minimum wage, a radical reform of the tax system, including phasing out the network of tax allowances and reliefs, an extensive and flexible system of cash benefits and subsidies, and a periodic wealth levy.

The Draft Labour Manifesto of 1980 spells out the details of most of these points - apart from a national minimum wage where 'Militant' supplies a figure of £90 a week for everyone, in or out of work. This Draft Manifesto talks about dealing with 'perks' and tackling tax evasion through the 'black economy'. Frankly, for as long as people at all levels of society are prepared to pay cash to get something cheaper the 'black economy' will, alas, flourish and will not be 'tacklable', indeed the more severe is taxation, a la Labour Manifesto, the more incentive there is to find ways of avoiding it. The Draft Manifesto also proposes an annual wealth tax, commencing at 1% on "net personal wealth of more than £125,000" and rising to a top rate of 5%.

Not all Labour writers have such a naive view of human attitudes to money. Nye Bevan, for instance,³⁵ writes sadly on tax evasion which, he believed "underlines a significant shift of values in modern society". He goes on:

"Orthodox Socialism believed in direct taxation. I listened to Lord Snowdon on many occasions explaining its virtues. It never seemed to occur to him that there was a definite limit to taxation as a means of redistributing wealth; and as a device for financing expanding social services".

A present day Labour Left writer who also confronts the problem is Nikolas Rose in an excellent essay 'Socialism and Social Policy'³⁶. He writes:

"It is partly in relation to....difficulties inherent in the utilisation of the notion of equality itself, that analysis and criticism of social policy in terms of equality and inequality first of all constructs equality as principally a question of the distribution of wealth, income and other resources which are amenable to analysis in monetary terms. Whilst Tawney, in his classic 'Equality'³⁷ treats 'equality of status' and 'equality of regard' as the touchstones of equality as far as socialism is concerned, and recent writers make constant reference to questions of equality of 'power', 'influence' or 'control'³⁸, it has been this 'monetarist' question which has dominated egalitarian analyses of social policy. It is, indeed, the apparent amenability of questions of the distribution of resources across households of other social units to analysis and documentation that makes them such an 'obvious' object of social investigation. However, as soon as income or resource distribution becomes an object of an investigation which seeks to draw political conclusions, problems immediately arise with regard to the question of equality. These problems are such as to make it very difficult for data on income distribution to play the role required within political argument, or to act as a means of political calculation or evaluation".

I have quoted Rose at some length because I believe it is high time the Labour Left gave up the rhetoric of superficially attractive but unattainable sloganising on equality and concentrated more on the highly relevant and topical question of relieving poverty'. It may be thought that here too there is the problem of definition. If so, I would urge the intrinsically unscientific but more Liberal definition of David Donnison in his recent 'The Politics of Poverty'.³⁹ He defines poverty as being the lack of the means to live with dignity in one's own community. The means to alleviate such poverty do exist and can be applied, through pragmatic but effective measures using much more flexible Manpower Services Commission support for new jobs in the community, for instance.

Even so, Liberals cannot dodge the philosophic question of equality and our position needs restating.⁴⁰

For the Liberal there are aspects of equality that are absolute. These include equality of esteem and equality of treatment. There can be no compromise with the view that each

individual, whatever his failings and weaknesses, is intrinsically worthy of respect - by virtue of his humanity if not his deeds. This view should be at the root of all our educational and penal policy.

The Liberal also should accept that identical human needs should be equally met. The diabetic requires insulin, whether in London or Calcutta; the artist deserves the means of expression, whether black or white. Within the scope of such definition our present inequalities are intolerable. The resulting lack of self-respect is a significant component of the volatile mixture that is now beginning to explode in our inner cities. The Liberal emphasis is on "being" an individual rather than on "having" things.

Economic equality is another matter. Whether through nature or nurture man appears to need incentives to work and to yearn for tangible evidence of material success. Paradoxically there is a general assent to the justice of equality, combined with an equally general rejection of the means of achieving it on a broad scale. Even so the crisis in Western capitalism would appear to demonstrate that not only is international inequality morally obscene but that judicious use of the possession of vital raw materials and an industrialised workforce can begin to achieve by force what could not be gained by persuasion. The recent talk of a "Fourth World" indicates the effect of this new dynamic.

In a small way a similar change has been wrought within Britain. Some groups of workers have achieved by brute industrial force what decades of conscience hawking failed to deliver, and have left far behind those with arguably an equal case but no 'muscle'. Compare, for instance, the relative changes in the pay of miners and nurses.

The practical problems of reducing inequality are considerable. Leaving aside equality of opportunity, which is easier to achieve but which makes little contribution to improving society given that it merely raises the plateau of competition for an unchanged number of desired positions, one is left with equality of distribution. Many of the symbols of parity with those better off than oneself are literally unattainable by everyone (such as the cottage at the seaside) and, given that virtually everyone commits themselves to the maximum, particularly in regard to housing, it would require the most draconian and disruptive laws to enforce a levelling down. Furthermore there are so few wealthy individuals - relatively - that even to confiscate a substantial 'excess' would only generate a tiny sum for everyone else. In other words, to achieve by force the liberal end of equality would require such illiberal means as to render the eventual achievement more destructive than the inequality it replaced.

Nevertheless Liberals must strive to diminish inequality by Liberal means. For instance, the example of the Mondragon Co-operatives in Northern Spain in steadily bargaining away the differentials between the highest and lowest pay within a co-operative demonstrates the most valid way of moving in the right direction. A reduction in the inflation rate would also enable the lower paid more easily to receive proportionally greater increases than the well off.

Indeed this method, plus the use of flat rate increases, may well be politically and socially necessary to aid the poorest in the community. A further possibility is a 'Cash Flow Income Tax' which is a refinement of the Expenditure Tax idea, and which is well argued in a valuable recent contribution by Dick Taverner to the whole debate on equality.⁴¹

Defence, Europe & Internationalism

The divide between Liberals and the Labour Left is nowhere more acute than over Europe. The Labour party at its 1980 Conference decided that its policy should be withdrawal from the EEC, without even a further referendum. Liberals, on the other hand, have been enthusiastic supporters of British participation in the Community since its inception in 1950. In some respects the Left or radicals in both parties share the same worries about the EEC: that it could be an introverted, capitalistic club that creates barriers rather than overcoming them. But whereas these worries encourage Liberals to get more involved to ensure that it is a dynamic entity, capable of progressive change, they provoke a negative response in Labour, towards withdrawal in favour of a rather nebulous socialist grouping ('Militant's' phrase: 'a Socialist United States of Europe as a step towards a World Socialist Federation').

I do not believe that there is any foreseeable possibility of a viable alternative to the EEC. It would be nice to think otherwise but the choice in reality is between making the EEC work or retreating to a much weaker and more isolated semi-independence. The Labour Left attitude on Europe is rather like a small boy trying to engage in a game with out-of-date tactics and an unwillingness to abide by the rules of the game. Not finding it easy to make headway on such myopic terms he threatens to start a new version of the game in the hope that others might also swap the real game with real prizes for an inferior version which may well be more satisfying intellectually but only offers intellectual prizes. Besides which, like national parliaments, there has to be the possibility of democratic change. The argument is, or should be, about Europe as a democratically controlled political entity which has the capacity to move Leftwards or Rightwards as the electorate wishes, rather than a 'voluntary' grouping of states based on a permanent socialist outlook.

There can be no doubting the virulence of the Labour Left opposition to the EEC. Stuart Holland states:⁴²

"It is arguable that the EEC is neither European, Economic nor a Community. In practice, it is an insecure alliance of some Western European governments who are more ardent in defence of their national interests than in pioneering a Community of Europe".

Eric Heffer identifies the Treaty of Rome itself as the stumbling block:⁴³

"The Labour Party has always been strongly in favour of European co-operation. But we believe that co-operation based on that thoroughly Thatcherite document, the Treaty of Rome, is incompatible with our principles and with the needs of the British people in the Eighties".

Elsewhere⁴⁴ he has written rather more defensively (and selfishly):

"There is no doubt that some of our socialist comrades in Europe are confused because of our decision at Conference to come out of the Common Market. The point being that under the Rome Treaty some of their people gain in certain respects, whereas we are net losers. What we have to do is keep the balance between our British interests and our international socialist position, which I admit is not easy."

The case for withdrawal, together with a detailed statement of the method of withdrawal, is contained in a well written Labour NEC Statement prepared for the 1981 Conference.⁴⁵ Tony Benn sums up his main arguments for withdrawal under three headings:⁴⁶ the loss of political self-determination; loss of control over the UK's industry and trade; and the "closely related question" of increasing unemployment. There is no need here to restate the detailed and statistical case made by Tony Benn - it has been clearly and extensively set out elsewhere - but rather to consider, firstly, whether the EEC is the cause of the problems and preventer of their solution, and, secondly, the crucial question of sovereignty which is at the heart of the differences between Liberals and the Labour Left.

On the first question, that of effectiveness, Ann Clwyd, Labour Member of the European Parliament, has contributed an important article "Why I changed my mind on the Common Market".⁴⁷ She details some of the practical ways in which her involvement in the EEC has benefited her constituents and asks, pertinently, why none of the Socialists in the national governments "find EEC Membership incompatible with their aims". She also makes the point, which I as a Liberal find particularly relevant, that as an elected body the European Parliament is only two and a half years old. Believing, as Liberals do, that democratically elected bodies have their own dynamic - whatever has gone before - and that it is therefore quite ridiculous for Labour policy to be "set firmly against increasing the power of the 'Assembly'. You can't hobble a horse and then criticise its lack of speed". And even the 1981 Labour Conference Statement "The Socialist Alternative" stresses that Britain "to a greater degree than most large economies, is closely integrated into the international economy".

West German Socialist Leader Willy Brandt in a recent lecture⁴⁸ said that he "regarded Europe without Great Britain as a torso". He did not believe that membership of the EEC inhibited solutions to national problems:

"I think it would be wrong to regard the European Community as the source of current difficulties in Great Britain. In my view, there is a great deal to support the belief that a continuing development of co-operation with the Continent would help in solving your problems as well as other people's. At any rate, both Great Britain and her partners in the Community would forfeit some of their political stature in the world if they were to separate from each other. We ought to continue trying to live together and see the specific traditions of individual peoples not as an

obstacle to co-operation but as an enrichment for all. This may not be the right moment for European exuberance, but it is certainly not the time for any unjustifiable resignation either".

It would appear that virtually all the Socialist members of the EEC apart from some of the British, believe that it is possible to resolve national economic problems within the EEC. At the very least the Labour Left case is "not proven". It is necessary therefore to turn to the fundamental question of sovereignty.⁴⁹ It is here that the Liberal position is particularly clear. Liberals have always believed that the prime purposes of the EEC are political rather than economic and have explicitly stated their willingness to forego national sovereignty for the sake of supra-national progress.⁵⁰ I suspect that most Liberals felt at least some emotion over the opportunity in June 1979 to cast a vote for the first time ever for a supra-national Parliament that covered more than one State. How can one believe that this is anything other than a big step forward for mankind?

I do not doubt that socialism is internationalist. What I do doubt is that the Labour Left are sufficiently internationalist to make sacrifices or to take risks to make that internationalism effective. In particular, the Labour Left's commitment to the nation state is incompatible with an effective internationalism. The nation state has been the source of conflict down the ages and its existence still aids and abets a nationalism that is negative and backward looking. It is not possible at one and the same time to believe that world forces now shape our destiny more than ever before and that technology draws countries closer together and also to maintain the unhelpful pretence that Britain can act independently.

Compare the emphasis of the following paragraph from the 1980 Draft Labour Manifesto:

"Labour's objective is the creation of a wider, much looser grouping of European states - one in which each country is able to realise its own economic and social objectives, under the sovereignty of its own Parliament and people".

with the equivalent passage in the Liberals' 1981 'Foundations for the Future':

"We are part of the world community, and partners in the European Community within which we share a common historic civilisation, common democratic values, and problems common to post-industrial economies. Whilst we recognise the sense of national community in Britain and other countries which is called patriotism, we condemn the perversion of patriotism represented by the absolutist and exclusive claims of nationalism, denying the existence of the wider international community in its insistence on the supremacy of the nation-state."

The line between self-determination and nationalism may be very narrow but it is vitally important to know to which side one belongs. If British passion for the Falklands conflict had been limited to an informed belief in the right of

self-determination for the islanders then popular support for the Government might have been understandable and could have been the basis for healthy public debate of the practicable options. Instead much of the passion was on the basis of a nationalistic fervour for what was 'ours' and the justness of going to war to regain our 'possessions' from the Argentines.

An Italian Liberal member of the European Parliament recently expressed the difference in a helpful description:⁵¹

"Let us not forget that in many aspects the modern State in its administrative complexity is a Liberal invention, just as the modern totalitarian State is a sort of degeneration of the Liberal State. I would say that what divides the Liberals from the Marxists on this level is that the first have a sense of the State and the second the cult of the State. For us the State is not an idol, a devourer of men and steel; it is a collective intelligence, an administrative reason, created by men for their own protection and not for their own oppression".

In practice this is the difference between the ideal Welfare State as envisioned by Beveridge in 1944 and the ever more bureaucratic and impersonal machine that is now our Social Security system, in which inordinate detail is required in a vain attempt to cope with all kinds and conditions of men and women.

Tony Benn attempts to square the European circle. In an attractive pamphlet on 'European Unity'⁵² he hangs on to the necessity of "fully self-governing states" whilst arguing for the need for political initiatives to bring together the whole of Europe, i.e. Eastern and Western Europe. I have tried to distil from his writings whether he favours British withdrawal from NATO but both the pamphlet and his book 'Arguments for Socialism' are silent on this key issue. The pamphlet, it is true, talks about "a security system ultimately replacing both the Warsaw Pact and NATO", but the immediate issue for progressive politicians in Britain is whether or not to risk the step of faith of unilateral withdrawal from NATO.

The trend within the Liberal Party is towards European independence and, eventually, European neutralism. It is by no means fully formed but it is the basis on which the Liberal Assembly of 1981 took its considered decision for partial unilateralism by voting for the rejection of Cruise missiles on British soil (having already opposed Trident and supported the phasing out of Polaris) and for the creation of a nuclear free zone in Europe. It is a moot point whether, as Labour appears to believe, it is possible to remain in NATO after declaring for unilateral nuclear disarmament but I believe that the crucial strategic decision for British political parties in the immediate future is between continuing to shelter under the American umbrella and thus believing that, contrary to all the available evidence, there is a chance of multilateral disarmament within a balance of tension, or taking the step of faith and reducing the tension on Russia by distancing Britain from America and working for a neutral Europe.

Clearly such a decision is a risk but I believe that it is worth taking. Without it I do not believe for a moment that there is any prospect whatever of relaxing Russian pressure on Poland nor of anticipating any successful libertarian explosion such as was crushed in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Whilst there is an ever-intensifying confrontation between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, Russia will not slacken its hold on its buffer states but with a lessening of East-West military tension there is at least a chance that Russia, which is itself under serious economic pressure, would ease the leading rein on the Central and Eastern European States.

It is essentially a political decision - and one which follows more logically for a party not obsessed by the nation state - but the economic incentive of a significant reduction in defence expenditure is considerable. Certainly a united Europe is economically powerful enough to stand on its own and to hold out the hand of friendship and co-operation to other European countries currently within the Eastern block. More than anyone else E.P. Thompson has developed the case for 'Europeanism' as opposed to 'Atlanticism'.⁵³ It is a powerful and emotive case and is much more Liberal than Left-Labour.

Community

The most visible characteristic of current Liberal political activity is community based campaigning. The ten years or so in which Liberals have developed the concept of community politics have ensured that most Liberal groups appreciate the philosophy as much as the practice.⁵⁴ It would be wrong to be complacent but the earlier dismissive charges of 'instant compassion' and 'mindless activism' have now virtually no substance. Even so, it does not inhibit those who have little or no understanding of, or, as is usually the case, no feeling for the Liberals' "sense" of the Community, attacking it viciously. It perhaps tells us also a great deal about Labour's own motivation that their usual charge is one of 'vote catching'. Would it not be better to put motivation - alleged or agreed - on one side and to develop a debate on the many legitimate problems that remain in a community politics strategy? We could do a swap! Liberals could admit that they have something to learn about the politics of the workplace if the Labour Left accepted its ignorance on community concepts. It really is ludicrous for political parties to feel the absolute need to claim a monopoly of virtue and understanding on every issue.

The Liberal position is concisely expressed in 'Foundations for the Future':⁵⁵

"Most people feel the need to belong to a local community, rooted in familiar surroundings. Britain's structure of local government, its system of planning, its prevailing fashions in architecture, its provision of schools, shopping centres and medical care, have all been moving away from the organic communities in the past forty years. Liberals are determined to reverse this trend: to re-create a proper 'sense of place', of membership and pride in the community, within each locality and within each town, city, county and region. Such communities recognise the interdependence of the individual and society that is a key to human survival, let alone personal fulfilment."

Searching Labour publications for equivalent passages is a depressing and vain task. To be sure there are brief pieces on local democracy but they are invariably within a context of participation in the provision of services and are subordinate to economic imperatives. For instance, in the 1980 Draft Labour Manifesto, after detailed sections on new statutory requirements (not powers) in relation to the provision of services, there is a short section on 'Local Democracy' which is largely about new divisions of powers between tiers of local authorities, revision of the Exchequer grant system and minor tinkering with local representation rules. 'The Socialist Alternative', prepared by the Labour NEC for their 1981 Conference, is even more lacking. Tacked on to the very end are a number of unrelated items on extending individual participation in specific service provision. These are to be welcomed but they are palliatives unless built into a coherent whole with a resulting dynamic of their own.

There is a vital distinction between doing things for people and enabling them to do them for themselves. One reason for the superficiality of British politics, and for the low level of political involvement, is the attitude of the two old parties to electioneering and vote catching by extravagant promises. Tom Woolley put the Liberal viewpoint in an article "The Politics of Intervention":⁵⁶

"Many political changes and reforms can be brought about for people, or on their behalf, by elites, minority pressure groups, and parties, but without the physical and thinking involvement of the mass of people, then those changes and reforms are merely improvements in the management of a passive population, not their liberation."

The consistent rule of thumb for Labour Left views on local democracy is to be generally in favour of it - as long as it is harmless! This can vary from the parochial, as when the Labour Leeds City Council emasculated the Community Education Service in 1974 because it had - rightly - begun to threaten the hegemony of local councillors, to the general assertion that local devolution must always be limited by central considerations:

"Our view is that central government must devolve as much as it can to local democratic decision. But its responsibility for national economic planning means that it will always ultimately have the final power over the distribution of resources and revenues; be they collected nationally or locally."⁵⁷

Michael Heseltine's recent legislation on local government finance is going to come in very handy for a future Labour Government!

Of course, this is simply the general trend of Labour Left thinking and is not the entire Labour view. How could it be when they have Peter Hain and some other ex-Liberals? Peter's views do not seem to have changed much over the years but, reading his recent contributions, they seem just to have become more plaintive and apologetic. Frustration with the Liberal Party, which we all, I hope, feel from time to time, is a poor excuse for switching to a party whose basic direction is

inimical to one's view. His recent pamphlet on creating a mass party⁵⁸ is almost entirely devoted to a much more direct attack on (Labour) party structures, strategies and tactics than was ever necessary during his Liberal days. He says, for instance, that "looking now at the Party itself, far too much of what passes for political activity is geared to 'declamatory politics' rather than 'activist politics'. I suspect that changing the Labour Party's fundamental direction and philosophy is likely to tax the resourcefulness and capacity of even those who ascended to the leadership of the Young Liberals. A recent Labour Co-ordinating Committee booklet⁵⁹ at least showed its awareness of the entrenched problem:

"...a move towards a defensive and dogmatic form of state socialism holds little hope for the future of the Labour Party. What is needed - and what is taking place - is a renewal and rethinking of socialism which attempts to come to terms, in a serious way, with the problems of bureaucracy and centralisation."

The argument is not new, nor exclusively that of the Labour Co-ordinating Committee: Tony Benn has also been arguing for broader affiliation to the Labour Party,⁶⁰ including the Indian Workers' Association, the women's movement, and the ecological movement. The argument is based on the fallacy that the purposes of such groups are compatible with those of the Labour Party! For instance the L.C.C.'s booklet "Labour and Mass Politics" states that "...alliances of this kind are a significant element in creating a mass public opinion which will support the policies to which the Labour Party is committed."⁶¹ To be fair the authors are brutally honest about the failure of Labour to accommodate both the thinking and the practices of autonomous campaigning and community groups. But the fact remains that the whole theology is predicated on the fond belief that, underneath it all, Labour is really the only movement that is relevant to them.

The reality is very different. The collectivist and centrist structures of Labour, against which the authors struggle, are not temporary aberrations but are essential components of its emphasis on economic management and social planning. There is nothing inherently socialist - in the Labour Left sense - with the Peace movement, women's organisations, ethnic groups, ecology campaigns, anti-apartheid and civil liberty groups, or tenants and community organisations. Insofar as specific policy is concerned they may find themselves torn between Labour and Liberal from time to time, but in terms of style, of an understanding of the plural society, the value of dissent and the integrity of voluntary groups, the Liberal movement is a far more congenial political ally than Labour can ever be. All too often Labour tries to hi-jack such groups, or even tries to stifle them if they show a proper and healthy independence.

Patrick Wintour, in an extended review of the L.C.C. booklet in the "New Statesman"⁶² remarked on how reminiscent it is of "the Young Liberals of the past and now the flourishing Association of Liberal Councillors". He asserts that

"attacking bureaucracies and state monoliths wins elections.....But, in this contest Labour doesn't even get off the starting blocks. It is, par excellence, the party that creates and administers bureaucracies as its means of settling social conflicts".

Patrick Wintour then goes further and states brutally:

"Calling for links with autonomous movements of women, blacks and youth has become a commonplace on the (Labour) Left - though it is often a thin disguise for the desire to use these movements for the party's short-term electoral benefit."⁶²

The irony is that, in addition to its leftward trend on economics, trade union corporatism and fiscal policy, the Labour Party's internal reforms are also inimical to genuine partnership with and even assistance to autonomous voluntary groups. The argument has centred, in the Peter Tachell case and with 'Militant', around the primacy of parliamentary democracy. It is however the case that, unless one regards the Eastern Europe states as being parliamentary democracies, the current Labour debates entail a single party dominated state in which the main debate is within the party, and is dominated by the trades unions who, in turn sustain the party in office. Members of Parliament are under the duress of compulsory re-selection always to vote according to the party's direction and enact all the manifesto - no matter what the constraints of changing circumstances are.

The implications of this Labour Left rigidity and dogmatism for our democratic structures are immense. It cannot accommodate dissent by its own elected representatives and still less can it be sensitive to the varied needs of volatile voluntary groups. Its dogmatism is strangely insecure and is fearful of being undermined, hence the retreat into inflexibility and bureaucracy. In essence the Labour Party is, by its nature, incapable of being liberalised. Although I believe that there is an inherent problem for the Labour Left to change direction so dramatically, that by no means allows us to drift into complacency. We need constantly to renew our community links and our approaches to current problems. In particular, and to differentiate us from the Labour Left's over-emphasis on economics and on its slightly arrogant assumption that all radical groups should really be part of the Labour movement, we need to take note of the academic work now being done on community development which, as the following passage shows, supports the Liberal position:

"...by concentrating only on economic factors there is a failure to discuss work such as that with play-groups, adventure playgrounds, Tenants' Associations, neighbourhood visiting schemes and the skills and resources that are needed for these kinds of activities, including efforts to find alternatives such as co-operative industries, food co-operatives, free schools and communal living. Such work does not involve the radical redistribution of wealth and power, but it is important to community work and is in a libertarian political tradition that we believe can improve for people the everyday quality of their lives."⁶³

This takes us naturally on to an examination of Labour Left and Liberal views on developing social welfare in the current economic situation.

For some of the Labour Left the problem simply does not exist. 'Militant', for instance, simply stands for "Reversal of all Tory cuts and a massive programme of public works on housing, education, the health service etc."⁶⁴ 'The Socialist Alternative' of 1981 is rather more coy: "We need to reassert the positive socialist case for increased public spending in order to provide properly financed social services to the whole community on the basis of need, not an ability to pay."⁶⁵

The intractable current problem facing these 'solutions' is that of how to foot the bill. Some socialists have been sufficiently frank as to admit that their proposals require growth in the economy. Tony Crosland⁶⁶ was one such, and his successor at Grimsby, Austin Mitchell, put it starkly:⁶⁷

"Without growth Socialism is impossible. Without a solution to inflation, growth is impossible, without a solution to both problems, all the rest is castles, magnificent and shimmering, but built on air, mirages and manifestos."

Liberals on the other hand are not dismayed by the prospect of no growth, believing "that sustained economic growth as conventionally measured is neither achievable nor desirable."⁶⁸ Ecological constraints are crucial to human survival and stability and, although some selective growth is possible in areas that do not have deleterious effects elsewhere, we seek an end to the overweening pursuit of economic growth.

The Labour Left is caught between two dilemmas on growth. Firstly the Marxian belief in the inevitable crisis of capitalism, which would appear to be now upon us, encompasses the gradual ending of growth, whilst secondly, the available evidence suggests when 'incentives' for private gain and advancement are abolished under public ownership productivity and growth decline.⁶⁹ With amazing prevision John Stuart Mill argued for human values and for a balance between liberty of action and common ownership within a 'stationary state' in his 'Principles of Political Economy' in 1848. Ralf Dahrendorf took up the theme in his Reith Lectures in 1975.⁷⁰

What then is the practical strategy for developing services in the current situation? Three and a half years of working with the Council for Voluntary Service in Bradford has convinced me that not only is the theory right of developing a partnership between statutory and voluntary agencies but also that such collaboration is entirely practical and worthwhile. Statutory collaboration with voluntary groups is not some cheap way out which threatens further jobs but a dynamic partnership that can not only improve social and community care but can also create jobs. Its essence is a partnership that encourages negotiation over the content and methods of a project, and that understands the need to provide professional underpinning and organisation in order to gain the full value of voluntary participation. It also entails recognising the legitimacy of voluntary groups

that one would not necessarily welcome in the normal course of events. Jo Grimond dealt with these ideas in 'The Common Welfare'⁷¹ and a recent book 'Social Welfare and the Failure of the State'⁷² develops the theme in some depth. Interestingly, for my argument in this booklet, the authors state:

"... a constituency that would lend weight to the sort of developments advocated here is more difficult to identify. Certainly it finds only a weak expression through existing political configurations. Thus it is difficult to envisage either of the main parties espousing these proposals as a major part of its programme for the Social Services, although they might be favoured by the Liberals".

They certainly should be favoured by Liberals in every local authority area. They should be part of the whole Liberal strategy of devolution from central government to regions, from regions to district councils and from district councils to neighbourhood councils, tenants' associations and voluntary bodies. Even if the result is not precisely what we intended we must seek to make changes by local persuasion and not by superior power from above. The Liberal principle is not whether a body will act liberally but whether it is legitimate to prevent it having the choice.

Conclusion

The purpose behind writing this booklet was not to go systematically through every issue. There are plenty of other publications that set out Liberal values and policies to which the reader can be referred and a reading list is appended. Nor was it to score cheap points. On many points of social policy Liberals and the Labour Left have similar aims and my aim was to put these into the different philosophic frameworks and to attempt to demonstrate that Liberalism had taken a more radical look at current problems and alternative solutions, and that the Labour Left was becalmed in a dated political, economic and social framework that had the appearance but not the reality of an effective radicalism. Interestingly, independent evidence is that Liberal supporters are 'popularly considered to be a middle-of-the-road party. But poll data show them to be more extreme on issues not less.'⁷³

The Labour Party is in the process of crucifying itself by its internal Left v Right battles. It has lost a considerable amount of electoral support but it still attracts allegiance from many radical people and groups who, though they analyse and investigate every other aspect of their life and work, fall into the Labour Party without analysis or investigation. This always puzzles me. Feminism or black identity or pacifism are not necessarily 'socialist' in the sense of the Labour Left at all. If there has to be list of 'symbols' to denote radical purity there are plenty of issues on which Liberals have taken a more 'left' line than the official Labour Party:

Prevention of Terrorism Act
Immigration Acts
'Sus' Laws

Freedom of Information Bill
Labour Government's 'Quota' system for overseas students
Nuclear energy
Co-operatives

Above all the commitment to human values and to the development of participation in, and access to the arts at all levels, seems to me to be the only truly radical answer to reactionary and destructive Conservative Government policies.

The battle between the Labour Party and its parliamentarians⁷⁴ has its counterpart in the Liberal Party but without rancour and without the same belief in its over-riding importance. This is not because the numbers are different but because Liberals have, firstly, a general acceptance that extra-parliamentary activity is both legitimate and worthwhile, and secondly, an acceptance that there is no possibility of a single party gaining an overall majority of votes and therefore, logically, the parliamentary arithmetic ought to reflect this. In this situation, where arrangements and coalitions are necessary, a clear view of where the party stands is crucial if pragmatism is not to replace progress towards longer term goals.

Is it not illogical for the Labour Left to espouse Party democracy in all its detail but to close its eyes to the extension of this to Parliament? Would it not be more logical to look more closely, without prejudice, at the whole political spectrum and the possibility of radical change in alternative ways?⁷⁵

I have tried, as objectively as possible, to demonstrate that the new ascendancy of the Left within the Labour Party is only strategically, as opposed to philosophically, new. It does not, in fact, take into account recent radical alternative thinking. Indeed, it dare not do so lest it raises questions as to the relevance and accuracy of the prescription which, it is felt, is determined by the analysis. It is, I believe, perfectly possible to accept the validity of the Marxist analysis of our present economic and social situation whilst rejecting the Marxist prescription as being too rigidly economic, and out of tune with the needs and desires of individual men and women.

The Labour Party believes that it can achieve power by a 'package' of support, including loyal working class voters who identify with their party, single issue activists who may feel able to ignore the rest of the Labour philosophy, and those who are fondly thought to be attracted by the left wing programme. Eric Hobsbawm's conclusion is very different:

"...millions will still stay loyal, come what may, but they will not be enough. We may also suppose that somewhere there is a vast, unknown, untapped reservoir of left votes. There is no good evidence for this view at present. Lastly, we may put our money on a breakdown of British capitalism and politics, leading to a crisis in which the masses will turn to the left. Since we are in such a crisis, in which British capitalism is breaking

down, and since traditional politics and the system of class rule are visibly unable to carry on in the old way, this is not an implausible scenario. But if this crisis has hitherto shown anything, it is that the masses have so far not turned to Labour or the left, or are likely to do so automatically.*76

Unlike the song, wishing will not make it so and it is vital for all those who care about the future, and who are appalled at the insensitivity and destructiveness of the Conservative Government, to go back to basics and to consider afresh where their allegiance lies and how their commitment can best be expressed. I hope that the case put in this booklet helps that consideration. Those of us who call ourselves radicals and who have worked through the Liberal Party for many years have not done it for masochistic reasons, nor from a reluctance to exercise power. We have consciously rejected the theories of the Labour Left as a sustainable alternative to Conservatism and have chosen the more difficult path to power.

We do not seek, nor deserve, halos for so doing: the strength of the Liberal movement is its sense of purpose - and of enjoyment. We do seek to involve those of like mind and of similar purpose. Time is short and the political scene is exceptionally volatile. It would be tragic if the present opportunity were to be missed through a lack of commitment rather than of sympathy.

July 1982

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