

Labour's Oxymoron: Revolutionary Social Democracy

TWO THINGS became abundantly clear at this year's Labour Party Conference. The party's left are now in full control of the organisation and can dictate its line of march – labourism, 'red in tooth and claw' is back. To herald its return Labour's rather modest social democracy is being dressed up as a revolutionary programme.

In language reminiscent of Tony Benn's desire for "a fundamental shift in the distribution of wealth and power", Jeremy Corbyn is promising root and branch reform of British capitalism.

While Paul Mason, together with the cheer leaders and cadres of Momentum, offer to "tear down the free market economy and replace it with one of social justice", Jeremy Corbyn is more cautious; he was a little cagey when he recently insisted on television that, "of course Labour would be running a mixed economy".

However, John McDonnell (who friends assure me can be relied on to support workers on every picket line), shored up the hopes of the revolutionaries by telling us that the party's leaders were now engaged in planning what they would do when the capitalist class – the investors, City moguls, and Whitehall mandarins – set about attempting to destabilise a Labour government the moment Corbyn enters Downing Street.

In echoes of Chris Mullin's 1982 novel, *A Very British Coup*, Labour's revolutionaries are planning for the worst. Of course, their hopes and fears are not imaginary and I have no doubt, that the election of Corbyn and McDonnell to office would provoke

something like panic in the executive suites and drawing rooms of the rich and powerful. This florid anxiety would be swiftly translated into currency speculation, the flight of capital, and turbulence amongst investors.

The effect of all this, amidst the frankly wacky chanting of “Oh, Jeremy Corbyn”, is to obscure, perhaps intentionally, what “more equality” or an “economy of social justice” might actually mean. This is because whatever these aspirations represent they do not amount to a programme for the overthrow capitalism.

What the Labour Party is actually offering is a plan to strengthen state intervention in the economy by borrowing to invest in industry, housing, and infrastructure, in the hope that the resulting expansion of economic activity will, at the very least, reduce the relative size of the national debt, and make the current account deficit much more manageable. On the face of it, it's a good plan and it is growing in popularity because most people have had enough of falling incomes, insecurity, and cuts in public spending.

In response, Corbyn and McDonnell have opted for a plan, which focuses upon attempting to role back the world that Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and Tony Blair, put in place. They want to restore the strength of the trade unions, renationalise public utilities, raise public sector pay, control private rents, and build more social housing for rent. These proposals, together with plans for regional development banks and greater infrastructure spending require not merely higher taxes for companies and the well-to-do, but much greater involvement of government in the direction and management of the economy, than the Tories would ever contemplate.

Whether arrangements of this sort can be called “socialism” is a matter of political taste and perspective. But whatever you call it, it does not amount to a plan for the abolition of the private ownership of capital, or of ordinary commercial and

industrial companies, or of the central role of the market and profit motive in our economy.

However, knock about arguments that depict a standoff between “the state” and “the market” rather miss the point. Commercial society from its inception relied heavily upon political control and state power. As capitalism developed the relationship between the state and private capital in contract law, bankruptcy, the regulation of trade, the provision of infrastructure, research and development, education and welfare, have become evermore intimate. There is a symbiotic relationship between private capital and the state without which capitalism would be inconceivable.

However, the argument between the Tories and Labour is an important one. Conservatives believe that company formation should be as easy as possible, and that labour markets should be organised in a way that favours the employer regarding pay and conditions, health, safety, hiring, and firing. This is because Conservatives believe that the welfare of everybody in society depends principally upon the success of private businesses and upon their capacity to generate sufficient profits to boost investment in up-to-date factories, shops, offices, warehouses, and adequate taxes to support public spending.

On the other hand Labour believe that the government should prioritise the welfare of working people who, after all, are the real source of all of society’s riches. Their concern is to ensure decent wages across the entire economy, and good benefits for those living on welfare or pensions. In this way Labour plans to narrow the gap between the highest and the lowest incomes and focus upon generating social solidarity rather than the division and inequality that are, they believe, the direct consequence of Tory policies.

This is why Corbyn gives such prominence to challenging inequality, and fighting for social justice. The mantra of “Hope”, long a staple of left wing rhetoric – from Raymond Williams’ “Journey of Hope”, and advocacy of “common sharing” in the fifties and

sixties, to today's "Another world is possible . . . For the Many, Not the Few" – *Hope always springs eternal*. These slogans and the aspirations that they encapsulate form the basis of Labour's enormous growth in membership and support. Its anti-capitalism in truth is merely rhetorical, but its desire for a fairer, more inclusive organisation of our market economy, is authentic and deeply felt among millions of our people.

This leaves us with a profound contradiction between the revolutionary promise made by John McDonnell and Momentum's cadres, and the reality of Corbyn's social democratic plan for the reform of British capitalism. No doubt many on the far left would welcome the economic and social crisis that the election of Jeremy Corbyn to government would provoke. Such circumstances, the revolutionaries believe, would give them the opportunity to drive the agenda, step-by-step towards a struggle for the root and branch overthrow of capitalism.

The most important aspect of this leftist plan is that it relies on leading millions of people inspired by the need for fairness and reform, unwittingly into a revolutionary crisis for which, in truth, they have no appetite. McDonnell and Momentum's leadership are engaged in engineering circumstances in which they hope to direct a revolutionary process from the top – a process in which "the masses" or "the multitude" will be "consulted", and their interests will be "served", but which will remain firmly in the hands of centralised institutions and a centralised leadership. It is this desire to lead the working class to the drinking trough of "common sharing" that provoke anachronistic charges of "Stalinist" and "Stalinism", when in truth the only connection between our far left and the ogre that haunts the Kremlin is a desire for socialism in one country, and the belief in the capacity of the state, directed by a dedicated band of revolutionaries, to orchestrate social revolution "on behalf of the working class."

For example, at the demonstration against the Tories in Manchester on October 1st, members of

Momentum's 'Red Bloc' were issued with a document marked on every page "CONFIDENTIAL" it contained the lyrics of the old favourites, *The Internationale*, *Solidarity Forever*, *The People's Flag*, and (I'm not making this up) the 1944 anthem of the Stalin's dictatorship, which includes the following verses:

United forever in friendship and labour,
 Our mighty republics will ever endure,
 The Great Soviet Union will live through the ages.
 The dream of the people their fortress secure.

Through days dark and stormy where Great Lenin led us,
 Our eyes saw the bright sun of freedom above,
 And Stalin our leader with faith in the people,
 Inspired us to build up the land that we love.

Plainly, this doesn't say much for the comrades' grasp of the past, but their faulty historiography makes plain the kind of future and the kind of socialism to which these people are committed.

This chilling nonsense does not sit well with the explicitly social democratic programme that they are advancing; hence, the 'confidentiality' and the desire to hide their light under a bushel. More importantly it explains their refusal to discuss the real structural problems that the implementation of a social democratic programme is likely to encounter. I'm not talking here about deliberate attacks by moneyed elites, but the international character of finance, investment, labour markets, manufacturing and many commercial transactions.

The inability of Labour to engage in straight talking about immigration and the free movement of labour, or the European Union, are indications of this refusal to engage in a discussion of the capacity of any single government to determine properly the terms of trade, manufacture, wages, and conditions in competitive labour markets. Jeremy Corbyn has boldly acknowledged that articles from kettles to computers and motorcars are assembled from partial assemblies, and from individual components, assembled and

manufactured in a host of different countries and circumstances. Strangely, the Labour leader does this without accepting that the British state, no matter who runs it, cannot control such processes.

The dramatic falls in shipping and transport costs has created a situation in which it is more profitable to deploy production and assembly across numerous different sites, and labour markets, scattered around the world. This, together with vast capital movements which now whizz through the Internet at dizzying speed, places conceptual and practical limitations upon Labour's 1980 style programme, which neither the party's covert revolutionaries or its upfront social democrats appear to be prepared to discuss.

This is of a piece with the strategic silences, duplicity, and lies, which have become the stock in trade of much of the left, whether we're talking about Putin's annexation of Crimea, Russia's war in Eastern Ukraine, support for Assad in Syria, or the Stop the War Coalition's attempt to discuss the mounting military crisis in East Asia without reference to the bellicose Workers Party of Korea. While Corbyn talks endlessly of the need for dialogue and peace much of his base, in and around the Labour Party canvases implicit support for anti-democratic forces throughout the world, as long as they hate Jewish nationalism and the United States.

While Jeremy lives, where he has always lived, on the moral high ground, the cadres and activists of Momentum, and the party's left more generally, are preparing for power in which they hope to drive the party and the country, after lengthy 'consultation', towards a perpetually receding future in which milk and honey will be on tap in a realm of harmony and 'common sharing'.

It's a moot point what will bring this nonsense to an end. There are two main possibilities. First, that the Tories will succeed in hanging on until 2022 and beyond, which would result in the left's histrionic enthusiasms running into the sand. Second, is the victory of Labour in a general election that put Jeremy

Corbyn in power. If this were to happen the collision between revolutionaries and the realities of managing a capitalist economy would dramatically undermine the party's coherence, and I suspect, result in the fairly rapid reassertion of British labourism's traditional commitment to bourgeois democratic *real politik*.

Consequently, it is abundantly clear that a politics of social solidarity could only be built by rejecting the shibboleths of both labourism and today's erstwhile Bolsheviks. Perhaps this "Oh, Jeremy Corbyn" foolishness simply has to run its course, but until a political current forms which can think and fight its way out of the contemporary left's politics of endless return to a bankrupt past, capital and corporations will reign supreme.