

## **Refounding the Labour Party**

I COLLIDED RATHER BADLY with a friend of mine last week. I had made the mistake of jeering at Jeremy Corbyn's paraphrase of Christ's parable of the Good Samaritan. Like Jeremy, my friend wants to help those "who've fallen amongst thieves", she wants the "fairer, more equal, kinder society" offered by Labour's new leader, and clearly thought I was, as usual, being a heartless bastard. However, our disagreement is not about aspiring for a better world, but whether you can get one by suspending harsh judgments about political realities.

Jeremy Corbyn is a thoroughly decent chap. The dung beetles of the bourgeoisie will not be able to lay a foreleg on him. This is because he shares with Arthur Scargill, Tony Benn, and Bob Crow, the quality of being incorruptible. There will be no scandals concerning sexual or financial impropriety. Jeremy is an open book. He will not need defending from the gutter press in any of these scandalous senses, nor will he betray or 'sell-out' those striving for the restoration of the Labour Party. This is because, like his shadow chancellor, John McDonnell, Jeremy is committed to an ethical cleanup of capitalism by rebalancing the relationship between the state and the free market.

There are those who see this new leadership as the saviour of the party. Even many who are not Corbynistas think something of the sort, because in their view Tony Blair and his acolytes placed the entire political ecology of the Labour Party in jeopardy by attempting to destroy the left, lock stock, and barrel. Blair did this by the rhetorical abolition of class conflict:

[F]or far too long it has left us defining ourselves as a nation, not by what unites us, but by what divides us: a class system, unequal and antiquated; a social fabric, tattered and torn; a politics where dogma so often drives out common sense; even an education system where one part of the nation is taught apart from the other; and where, if we do not change course now, we will have two classes of health service, two classes of state school, two Britains, one on welfare, the other paying for it.

He argued that Britain was:

A young country: no more bosses versus workers - partnership at the workplace; no more public versus private - cooperation to rebuild our nation's road, rail, inner cities and regions; no more boom and bust economics, but stability which businesses need to plan for the future; help for small businesses; a new relationship between public and private sector, measures to encourage long term investment.

What is now clear is that New Labour's drive to bring the party to a fulsome acceptance of globalisation, destroyed the symbiotic relationship between right and left, that had been the basis of the Labour Party's historic capacity to marginalise communists within the labour movement, and defeat fascism in society at large. Many, particularly those high in the trade unions, now want to see a healthy relationship between Labour's left and right restored, and if that means living with a 'Mark II' George Lansbury for a time, so be it.

This turn of events - the election of Jezza - will prove something of a challenge to the traditional socialist groups within the party. *Labour Briefing*, the Labour Representation Committee, Labour Party Marxists, and the like, including Jeremy Corbyn, have been as astonished as they are delighted by the

sudden eruption of mass support for their “straight talking, honest politics”. The difficulty will come when the older people returning to the socialist fold - those who’d been sent into exile by Blair and his cronies - and the buoyant youngsters, new to the struggle, encounter the trench warfare with the traditional right, which will inevitably commence in every ward and constituency, and in every forum of the Labour Party.

The restoration of the ‘proper balance’ between a dominant right and a minority - the party’s conscience on the left - will not be bloodless.

Some hotheads to the left of the leftwing will no doubt echo the Communist Party of Great Britain’s appeal:

Winning the Labour Party for democracy, the working class and Marxism necessarily involves a protracted struggle against the right wing. These careerists have no legitimate place in the labour movement. The pro-capitalist, pro-imperialist right must be driven out.

These rowdies, will in pressing for the de-selection of rightwing or centrist MPs and councillors, cause no end of trouble. Corbyn and the social democratic left will be forced to take up the cudgels against erstwhile comrades who they’ve worked with for years - the old style Trotskyists, and new style Stalin apologists - in an attempt to maintain their relationship with the right, which they regard as essential to both the stability and electoral appeal of the party.

The problem, which will rapidly emerge, is that this is not what the Corbynistas signed up for, not those older folks returning to Labour from political exile in front of the telly, or the youngsters exhilarated by the prospect of doing politics differently. They did not sign up for inner party strife with power brokers on the right, or for rustling about in the communist undergrowth attempting to upset the applecart. It is far more likely that they’ll be turned off, rather than enthused, by vitriolic infighting amongst leftwing groups or between

the left and the right of the party.

Most Corbynistas will not share the far-left's idea that the 'trade union bureaucracy' has somehow been grafted on to the Labour Party in order to prevent the working class from opting for a workers' republic. The truth is that the historic conservatism of the British Labour Party is deeply rooted in the suspicion widely held throughout the working class that communism - which is popularly understood as rule by decree and the regulation of society by police - cannot deliver the good life. By and large, whilst working people can on occasions see the benefit of having revolutionary militants defending their rights in the workplace, they have no intension of trusting them to run the country. The conservatism of the trade union bureaucracy and much of the Labour Party's apparatus has real and rather solid social foundations - it is not a conspiracy of officials simply committed to defending their high wages, jollies, and junkets. On the contrary these institutions are an expression of the widespread desire for continuity and stability.

The Labour Party is not, and will not become a congenial place for the furtherance of communist propaganda. The Corbynistas will succeed in pushing the party to the left, but they will not make the mistake of attempting to destroy the right within the party, or the trade unions. The Blairites sought a Carthaginian peace by wiping out all traces of socialism, class conflict, and popular participation in the Labour Party - this project was brought to a shuddering halt by the financial crash of 2008, and politically destroyed by two general election defeats, and the elevation of a social democrat to leadership of the party. The failure of Miliband's half-heartedness, and the four and a half per cent won by Liz Kendall in the leadership election was a clear signal that Labour's traditional rightwing have consigned Blairism to the demolition skip.

The left will avoid Miliband's timidity and learn from the New Labour debacle. I do not think that the Corbynistas will try to bury the right - they will not attempt to liquidate their opponents; a *modus vivendi*

will be established between the left and right, which will enable the party to fight the erosion of the welfare state and clip the wings of free marketeers by cracking down on privatisation and tax evasion, and by the promotion of state investment in housing, transport, and industry - all things that both the left and right will enthusiastically sign up to.

The overthrow of capitalism will not form part of this narrative, for the simple reason that the Labour Party is in its sinews and marrow an anti-communist party. It doesn't love capitalism, but it is committed to ducking and weaving, in order to wring the best deal it can from the businessmen and bankers who run the economy.

However, the long-term prospects for this social democratic prospectus are not good. We are teetering on the rim of yet another crash and it's anybody's guess how this next crisis will pan out, but we can be fairly certain that most working people, in the extremely uncertain times in which we live, will not want the Labour Party to be led by a pacifist. Consequently, Jeremy Corbyn will successfully restore the Labour Party's commitment to welfare and public investment, but he will not make it all the way to Downing Street, not without expressing unequivocal support for our armed forces and the defence of the realm. This is not because our people are in love with militarism or military adventures, but they do believe in the cautionary principle when it comes to matters of defence and security.

Entryism - the tactic pursued by communists like those in the Militant Tendency in the eighties, who joined the Labour Party in order to win it over to a revolutionary programme - has not been a great success historically. It is not likely to fare much better these days. It is true that some individual Corbynistas have joined the Labour Party with the intension of using their membership in order to swing their wards and constituency parties in a frankly revolutionary direction. Their position as individuals will be secure for a time, as long as they avoid setting up communist

groups, cabals, and caucuses within the party. The moment they attempt to move beyond the expression of individual opinion towards the development of coherent and more collective positions, witch hunts, suspensions, and expulsions will be mounted by the apparatus, muddying the waters and damaging all concerned.

Clearly Corbyn and the Corbynistas deserve the support of anybody who wants to strengthen welfare and public investment so communists and revolutionary socialists must work in solidarity with Labour Party members in the trade unions and in every popular campaign and struggle. However we need to be forthright in our criticism of those who give credence to 'responsible capitalism', and to the belief that capitalist society can be rendered in any reliable or thoroughgoing manner, fairer, kinder, or more equal. It cannot.

Consequently, we need to pay great attention to the fact that people opt for the fraudulent promises of Labour's halfway house because we communists have been such conspicuous failures in developing the idea of extending democracy from the sphere of politics into the democratic management of our places of work and of the popular planning of the economy as a whole. We have to face the fact that what we say about an entirely new way of living strikes most people as extraordinarily implausible - they just think that communism could not possibly work. Although they want a fairer, more equal, kinder society, in truth they cannot conceive of how to transform this sentiment, this aspiration, into a concrete reality. In the face of this profound scepticism we must use the opportunities which this leftist upsurge will provide to work with Corbynistas, and at the same time work hard to develop a thorough-going understanding of modern capitalist relations, and of much more credible and attractive ways in which capitalism may be superseded by cooperative institutions, the enhancement of social solidarity, and finally by social revolution.