

Off The cuff

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Ersatz Left



“LEFT WING” is an extremely vague phrase, which like “right wing” and “centre ground” can mean a great number of different and often contradictory things. Despite this, and considerable unease over the years, I always identified with ‘the left’ until my association with it started to come apart at the seams.

My original engagement with the left rested upon the idea that society should not take its priorities from commerce – that our economy and our life should not be founded upon commercial relations between workers and employers, or between citizens and the marketplace. I always believed (and still do), that some way must be found to organise society in a truly democratic manner in which the distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘economics’ is abolished, as the management of all large enterprises, and the economy itself, is brought under the popular democratic control of working people, rather than that of shareholders and bankers.

For many years, like all left-wingers apart from anarchists, I believed that the state should take pride of place in organising and supervising economic life. Despite the manifold catastrophes which have accompanied this outlook, I stuck fast to the view that Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Castro, Ho Chi Minh, Pol Pot, Kim Il-sung, and a host of other dictators in the so-called ‘people’s democracies’ were merely anomalies, the product of unpropitious circumstance, bureaucratic corruption, or ‘mistakes’.

Now, of course, most left-wingers in Britain did not share this frankly communist – Leninist, Stalinist, or Trotskyist, outlook. Most have always been wedded in one way or another to the Labour Party and have believed in nationalisation of the major utilities and industrial sectors, within a ‘mixed economy’ in which a fairly large space for capitalist commercial enterprise would continue to exist. So, despite the differences between Leninism, Stalinism and Trotskyism on the one side and Labourism on the other, both have always been unable to cut the umbilical cord between themselves and the state.

Belief in state-socialism is what unites the left. To be left-wing means that one believes that the state should have the commanding role in the supervision and management of the economy. Consequently, labour movement activists, trade union officials, Labour Party managers, and leftist politicians, will play a decisive role in how working life and the economy is managed and supervised in a ‘socialist future’.

This point of view has, over the years, resulted in a managerialist view of socialism in which society will be run, administered, and supervised, *in favour* of the ‘working class’ and *on behalf* of the many, not the few. The party, the trade unions, the state and local authorities, will work on behalf of the great majority of working people. The population at large will, of course, be consulted, their views will be canvassed, but control will rest with the institutions of the party and the state.

It is at this point that I begin to part company with ‘the left’. Following the collapse of communism in the counter revolutionary years, 1989-91, the left has failed to engage in any serious critique of state-socialism, its origins, or its inherent flaws. From Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, to Humberto Ortega, to Hugo Chávez and Nicolas Maduro, and on to Evo Morales, the left has traipsed behind one failed state after another – endorsing (or simply sympathising), with popular movements whose aim is to deploy state power in tandem with historic national mythologies in the interests of what they call socialism.

The failure of all these enterprises is always laid firmly at the door of the White House, the Élysée, or Downing Street, and the machinations of imperialism. Indeed, the enormous economic and military heft of the rich capitalist countries is routinely blamed for the failure of socialist regimes, and it has become the stock-in-trade of the left to blame everything that goes wrong in the world on ‘imperialism’ – on the reach and power of the wealthy, highly developed, countries. There is, no doubt that this approach has some merit, but it does not adequately explain the failure of socialism in one decade after another, in one country after another, any more than it accounts for the aggressions and crimes of ‘managed democracies’ (i.e. dictatorships with elections) like Russia, Iran, or Turkey.

The left’s failure to openly acknowledge or discuss the failure of state-socialism in all its forms increasingly results in Britain in reliance upon a bundle of prejudices that left-wing people use to situate themselves in relation to the Tories. The mantras used are those inspired by social justice; opposition to exploitation, and hatred of oppression. Consequently, people on the left think of themselves as possessors of lively social consciences, gifted with uniquely world-open anti-racist, and anti-sexist instincts, who are, perhaps inevitably, given to virtue signalling at every available opportunity. This results in absurd caricatures of those who disagree with them as bigots,

racists, and fascists, who like nothing better than grinding the faces of the poor and disadvantaged into the dust.

In line with this absurd view of the Tories and right-wingers, the left prides itself in speaking truth to power. It speaks always for the values of decency and fairness, and continues to trade, like Jeremy Corbyn, on always being on “the right side of history”. True, this does involve leaping over unpleasant facts and playing fast and loose with the actual historical record of the liberal bourgeoisie, but hey, everything is permissible in the struggle for the emancipation of humanity from the toils of capitalists and Tory bastards.

The more the left avoids a theoretical and practical showdown with the failure of state-socialism, the more it becomes reliant upon dubious ethical claims and moral assertions. The strategy of non-stop moralising gets it tangled up in the briars of personal identity, and in the defence of insupportable religious reaction.

As a consequence, it cannot determine exactly how its opposition to Zionism and the fact of Israel’s existence blends effortlessly into talk of ‘the Jewish Lobby’, the ‘Rothschilds’, and antisemitism. Similarly, its uncritical deployment of the concept of Islamophobia tends to treat every criticism of Muslim belief and practice as examples of racism. This is a strategy that has facilitated alliances with profoundly reactionary Islamic scholars and ‘community leaders’ – leaders who are every bit as reactionary on social questions as the Chief Rabbi and the British Board of Deputies.

In this muddle the left is demonstrably prepared to countenance an acceptance of, or at the very least, turn a ‘blind eye’, to traditional Roman Catholic and Islamic social teaching and prejudices, regardless of wider and manifestly contradictory commitments to equality. Issues of sex or sexuality are often quietly shelved or asked to take a back seat whenever the local social composition and political dynamic dictates

some electoral or campaigning advantage to soften commitments to homosexuals or to women's equality.

This can be seen in the passivity of the left regarding the strife at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham. The local Labour MP, Jess Phillips, distinguished herself in opposing the pickets mounted by Muslim protesters campaigning against the children being taught that not everybody or every family is heterosexual. She made a principled stand, but the left was missing in action. Just like the left has been missing in action about the sexual grooming of young girls by groups of Asians – mostly Muslim men – in a number of towns and cities.

This left wing passivity in the face of reaction and criminality issuing from Muslim communities has been a gift to the far right who are now able routinely to make racist hay out of the predominantly left-wing and Labour tendency to turn away from apportioning blame or pointing the finger at communities it sees as belonging to Labour's political sphere. The same can be said regarding the prominent involvement of Afro-Caribbean youth in drug dealing and knife crime throughout the country.

Anybody who makes these points is likely to be denounced as Islamophobic and racist, because increasingly the left finds itself bereft of any other response than accusations of bigotry aimed at its critics.

Similarly, one cannot criticise the NHS, the private nature of GP practices, the manner in which doctors and other medical staff profit handsomely from deploying skills and knowledge hard won at public expense in referrals to private practice, and private hospitals. One cannot criticise Network Rail, and Network Rail Infrastructure Ltd, a nationalised company, for poor service, for delays and cancellations due to faulty signalling, points failures, and downed power lines – the blame rightfully laid at the door of privately owned train operating companies for disastrous timetabling, low staffing levels and poor service, is deployed by a left-wing that chooses to

ignore wholly the failure of the nationalised track network responsible for most late arrivals and delays.

This is because, like those in the NHS, and many other parts of the public sector, trade unions have a particular interest in ensuring that they have to deal with single employers in each sector or enterprise. They have a built-in preference for dealing with a single public employer with whom they can arrange bargaining and compliance in ways favourable to their organisations. Trade unions always seek a situation in which both their lay representatives in the workplace, and their full-time paid officials, are furnished with facilities to conduct union business in the workplace, and in the firm's time. Unions prefer to back up the tight relationship between themselves and public employers, with the routine recruitment of all new staff to the union by employers during the hiring process, and the deduction of union dues from wages, at source, by the employers' payroll staff.

The demand for nationalisation and state control of utilities, transport, and major manufacturing enterprises, is aimed at increasing the control and influence of trade union bureaucrats and officials in line with the dictum "what's good for the union is good for the workers". This is sometimes true, but it is not necessarily true, and in practice it is not always the case – by and large the left is incapable of reflecting upon this problem because they, apart from the anarchists, are committed to state-socialism. They are bound hand and foot to the idea that institutions like trade union bureaucracies and the state should perform the lion's share in managing major enterprises and the economy as a whole.

This current leftist conception of socialism in which Labour, the state, and trade union bureaucracies are the prime movers, is the basis upon which the fake left masquerades as all things to all people:

- ‘open door immigration’ sits happily together with the idea of ‘fair immigration controls’;

- a two-state solution in Palestine, together with defending Arab demands to abolish the Jewish state by supporting the right of Palestinians to ‘return’ *en masse* to Israel;
- equality for homosexuals while conniving with the opponents of gay rights in neighbourhood churches and mosques;
- sterling, noisy, and unconditional opposition to bombing by Britain and the United States of our enemies, while remaining quiescent at best, and supportive at worst, of Putin’s bombing the people of Syria into compliance with Asaad’s dictatorship.
- opposition to imperialism while turning a blind eye to the behaviour of Russia, Turkey, and Iran in their annexations and military incursions.

And, so it goes on, people on the left routinely find themselves advocating profoundly contradictory policies because of their commitment to *realpolitik* rather than socialism. The ideals of socialism are pushed into a perpetually receding future while Labour politicians and the left bangs on about their ‘values’ regardless of their actual practice. This approach to futurity was and is the stock-in-trade of state-socialists everywhere and at all times.

The truth is that if the majority of working people are to be won to socialism – the replacement of commercial motives with wholly social goals in the provision of goods and services – then we must come up with fully developed, intellectually coherent, ideas concerning how to create popular institutions capable of enabling working people to plan and run their own enterprises. Inevitably, this effort must also involve well-developed ideas concerning the management of the economy as a whole, and its relationship to foreign workers and foreign trade.

This cannot be whipped up overnight in the back room of a pub, nor can it be produced by tiny groups of utopian thinkers. The truth is, that it cannot be done

while most socialists, entranced by the prejudices and unexamined foreconceptions that hold the fake left together, are entangled in nonsense like worrying about who's going to restore the fortunes of the Labour Party.

**See 'Unity at All Costs', 2008, at
<https://donmilligan.net/articles/p4?>**