

# Reviews

**BEVANISM** M Jenkins

Spokesman 1979 pp323 £12.50

**HUGH GAITSKELL** P Williams

Cape 1979 ppl007 £15.00

**FINAL TERM** H Wilson

Weidenfeld & Nicholson/Michael Joseph  
1979 pp336 £8.95



There is one God in politics and he is Janus. Nevertheless, he comes in many different shapes and sizes according to how he is perceived by thinkers, more or less profound, in distinct periods. All accounts of the Two-Faced One are grounded ultimately in a great fact about State Power: — its attempt at integrating diverse interests for the 'common good' even while simultaneously advancing and maintaining the interests of a few. And this is what is common to the notices that Janus has received from Tacitus to Machiavelli; from Walter Bagehot to Aneurin Bevan.

In the immediate aftermath of the Second Labour government, Bevan identified a crucial dilemma: the conditions which had to be satisfied if Labour was to *attain* office seemed inconsistent with those which had to be met if it was to *maintain* office. It could win only by arousing the expectations of the under-privileged, but to stay in 'power' it had to disappoint them. To avert a steep fall in investment and a corresponding rise in unemployment it would be tempted to restore 'business confidence': to go back on its promises instead of going beyond them.

The experience of the third Labour government tended to obscure the reality of this predicament. Without trying to draw the nerve of capitalist production, it presided over a new social settlement. This was marked by the virtual abolition of the reserve army of labour, the introduction of comprehensive social services and the creation of the mixed economy. The British working people experienced, not merely a great rise in their standard of life, but an immense improvement in the quality of it. Even more of them supported this administration in the hour of

its defeat than had rallied to it at the time of its initial victory. Yet the dilemma had not gone away. It had simply assumed new forms under which the demands of American generals appeared even more compelling than those of the American bankers twenty years earlier. Gaitskell, as Chancellor, complied with these demands. In vain did Plowden plead with Harriman to show more understanding and compassion else 'Bevan may capture the whole Labour Movement in opposition'.

Thus, far from being a defunct or discredited notion, 'Bevan's Dilemma' provides a valuable clue to interpreting the post-war history of Labour leadership. For Bevan, the inconsistent Marxist full of what Jenkins calls 'an energetic ambiguity', its signals flashed on and off. For Gaitskell, if it existed at all, the swing of the pendulum would be enough to carry him through its horns. (Alas! This Tarzan of the pendulum fell short of Jane by ever increasing distances). For Wilson, the Mike Yarwood of the Parliamentary Music Hall, it was not so much a difficulty to be confronted as a direction to be followed. He would cheat and cheat and cheat again for the Party he loved.

The great weakness of Philip Williams' over-praised hagiography is that it never confronts the question: — had Gaitskell no idea of what he was up against or was he simply not against it? Was the new Revisionism anything other than the ideology, 'the necessarily false consciousness', of Labour leaders in search of an easy and, of course, 'honourable' passage? After all, in the case of Gaitskell everything appears upside down 'as in a camera obscura'. It is the supposed threat to business wealth and power which makes Labour *unattractive* to the mass of the electorate and stops it from gaining office. The frustrated man of Government goes round — in one of Vicky's celebrated images — asking the electorate which Party they would most like Labour to resemble! Even a mere Radical Leader; even a mere champion of 'Conscience and Reform', never mind a Socialist, might have expected to pay more attention to *moulding* and less to *mirroring*: might have wondered whether it paid to appear so often as part of 'the conspiracy of gentlemen to keep the country on sound lines'.

Mr Williams is at his least convincing and his most strident when he is denouncing 'the myth of Butskellism'. He is at his least exploratory when he cites Harold Macmillan's remark that Gaitskell 'suits us pretty well'. He does not fathom the strange syndrome of this 'passionate moderate' who played hammer to the Left if to nothing else. Moreover, despite the immense length of his

book, Williams ignores Gaitskell's occasional concession to 'system thinking'. For example, the passage in *Socialism and the Future of Nationalisation* in which he cautioned his followers against proposing an ascendancy for the public sector possible only within 'another system' which they had no intention of adopting.

Despite the fact that Williams is almost totally absorbed in the up-close milieu of his hero and, in ignoring 'structural problems' such as Bevan's Dilemma, leaves himself little to bite on, his immense book is full of fascinating glimpses. For instance, we learn that Gaitskell, as Party Treasurer, was advised by the General Secretary of the TUC that the only way to get the money was to promise that the Labour Party machine would help against Communist candidates at union elections. This sort of tit-bit makes me regret that in my copy of *Hugh Gaitskell*, pages 45 to 76 are missing.

Alas! No pages are missing from Harold Wilson's *Final Term*. It is all there in all its nothingness. The titles of autobiographies frequently reveal more about the authors than the rest of the text. Consider for example, the associations of Harry Pollitt's *Serving My Time* — imprisonment: duty: historicism. Now, consider the associations of the latest offering from Gartered Sir — imprisonment: an old lag making promises to the Parole Board: a confusion between prime ministerial and presidential power'.

At a pre-election party in the United States Gaitskell was asked to select a Kennedy or a Nixon button. He declined and was invited to take one of each. He declined again — protesting that he would be mistaken for Harold Wilson! Certainly, there has been no more fervent worshipper than Wilson at the shrine of Janus. He had a good grasp of 'Bevan's Dilemma' and gave in to it willingly. It is by no means as certain as Philip Williams imagines that Gaitskell would have won in 1964: that the swing of the pendulum would have worked without all the cleverness about the 'white heat of technology'. At least Wilson has the decency to make no bones about how it all ended: 'The intervention of the International Monetary Fund Cheka in the autumn of 1976 put a strangle-hold on the Government's economic policies'.

*Bevanism* is an exceedingly well researched, thoughtful and important book. It is easily the most significant and serious of the three under review. Nobody who counts himself or herself part of the Left can afford to ignore it. If it does not directly confront the problems raised by 'Bevan's Dilemma' that is partly because it makes a legitimate distinction between Bevan and Bevanism just as one would expect to distinguish between

Owen and Owenism. Bevan is seen very personally — the inconsistent Marxist: the non-parliamentary parliamentarian: the enemy of Soviet totalitarianism who wanted to live with it. Bevanism on the other side, is the differentiating but of the most determined and Socialist element within Labour: 'the broadest, most popular labour current this century'. There could be, and there was, a Bevanism without Bevan. The stereotypes of the 'Milibandetti' are ruthlessly gunned down. Henceforth, no one will be able to maintain that Bevanism was a shallow affair: a mere matter of parliamentary manoeuvres which neglected industrial struggles and which had no trade union presence.

In a critically important chapter on *The Dimensions of Bevanism*, Jenkins brings us back once more to the inescapable figure of Janus. Labourism is not to be comprehended simply as the party of governmental super-structure: the apparatus. It is also the mass movement. 'The secret strength of the apparatus lies in the mystery that shrouds that boundary where the necessary *self-organisation* of the mass movement for the *propagation* of its struggles becomes transformed into the organisation of *the state* for the *accommodation* of these struggles (to the extent that they are capable of being resolved within the existing social order).

'The career of Aneurin Bevan is a graphic illustration of how a working class militant moved through this self-organisation net-

work only to find himself in the heart of the state machine. Yet the conflicts generated within the apparatus were of such intensity that they thrust him back into the arms of the movement. For the rest of his remarkable career Bevan oscillated between the two. At Morecambe he was the representative of the mass movement within the apparatus. At Brighton, finally, the representative of the apparatus within the mass movement...

'The Labour movement does not consist of a pure, undefiled mass presided over by a self-evidently alien party bureaucracy. Therefore we shall not attempt here to portray the Bevanites either as an expression of the movement's purity or merely as a dissident faction of the party bureaucracy. The mysterious boundary to which reference has been made is to be found *within every organ of the labour movement from top to bottom*. It even runs through the careers of Labour politicians as that of Aneurin Bevan himself. But at the top, at the level of the Cabinet the tensions are greatest for here the welded joint is clearly visible.'

For Jenkins, the great weakness of Bevanism was not its parliamentarianism or alleged want of cohesive organisation but its failure to make sense of the world of the 'two camps' — western imperialism and eastern Stalinism. The tragedy of Bevan at Brighton in 1957 proceeded from: 'incomprehension of the permanently and profoundly reactionary character of the Kremlin and its agencies in world politics, combined with a failure to

grasp the enormous scale and significance for socialists of class and national struggles in Eastern Europe, and their essential unity with western struggles . . . the closer Bevan approached to reconciliation with Gaitskell at Brighton, the closer he moved to the political positions advocated by the CPGB in foreign and defence policy'.

Mark Jenkins begs the question at several vital stages in his argument. For example, he calls for a consistent analysis of the condition of the Soviet-style states without supplying it or even pointing to where it can be found. However, the time has gone by when Communists themselves can beg the question by dismissing such a work as this as 'anti Communist' and 'anti Soviet'. (It is most decidedly both). Jenkins' charges that the Communists learned nothing and gained nothing from Bevanism: that they opposed Bevanism when it was in the ascendant; added to its confusion at its apogee and joined its defecting leader in its decline; have not just got the ring of truth to them: every one of these charges is extremely well documented.

The most significant and terrible tribute to Janus in our time is 'Marxism'. Behold the faces of method and ideology! Behold the emancipation of the proletariat and the Soviet style states! Behold the Socialist Revolution and the Industrial Revolution of the '20th Century secured upon the basis of the international transfer of an achieved technology under the conditions of imperialism. 'Marxism One' comes to unmask

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ideology. 'Marxism Two' constitutes it. Marxism today must choose between them. There is no room left for compromise nor for prevarication if the Marxist tradition is to be restored to the class whose interests it was meant to serve.

**Royden Harrison**