

Thatcherism - a new stage?

I

Ian Mackay



'The last election meant more than a change of party, more than a switch of political emphasis. It marks a fundamental change in the country's approach to its problems, a new perspective.

More owner-occupiers, fewer council tenants, a common sense view of what the Government should do, and what the people can do best for themselves.'

Mrs Thatcher speaking at the Tory Women's Conference in May).

Thatcher, it's clear, would quite willingly accept the epithet of an 'ism' after her name, and as we have witnessed, claims her policies and philosophy as a 'radical' new approach. Marxists however, I think, should be wary about how far we go along this road in our analysis of the Thatcher government, and in our attempt, correctly, to alert the movement to what is new in the Thatcher approach. We need careful examination of how, and for what reasons, they represent a departure from previous post-war Tory governments, and the dangers in this for the British people and labour movement. The present discussion in *Marxism Today* is making a valuable contribution to this.

The political resolution adopted by the last Congress of the Communist Party characterised the outcome of the last general election and the aims of the new Tory Government as 'a new and dangerous shift to the right in British politics, and a severe setback for the labour movement'. Some contributions to this discussion go further than this and consider that the Tory victory represented a fundamental change in British politics. I think, however, that this is a much too hasty conclusion. Whether it will or not become as fundamental has still to be

decided, and this will only be resolved in the course of the class struggle over the next year or so. The battle is well 'joined' already, and alongside our necessary and continuing analyses must go our input into that struggle to help determine the outcome.

In one of the contributions to this discussion the point was made that the Tories under Thatcher are the only parliamentary force who take the position that 'Things cannot go on in the old way', ie, post-war Britain. (That the Tories want to force us back to the last century is beside the point.)

This is certainly true with regards the Liberals. No matter Steele's efforts to find a new 'centre' position in British politics, they remain, at this stage at least, very much an anachronism. What is of greater concern is that it is also true of the position of Callaghan/Healey and right-wing Labour.

With the experience of the Wilson/Callaghan government still fresh in the minds of millions, it's clear that the success and strength of the Thatcher 'populist' approach to some considerable extent lies in the weakness and failure of the last right-wing Labour government. Thatcher's appeal, in other words, was able to penetrate the thinking of substantial sections of the working class, not only as a result of ruling class propaganda, but also via the reformist ideas of right-wing Labour and, where not from these ideas, from the lack of them — 'the theory of no theory'.

As Gordon McLennan said in his opening report to the last Communist Party Congress, 'The major responsibility for Labour's defeat in the last general election rests on right-wing Labour policy and leadership, especially in

the class collaboration policies of the Social Contract'.

Fluidity

Far from there being evidence of fundamental change which must mean of a lasting character, after a year of Tory rule, it's already becoming evident that the political situation in Britain remains as fluid as in the pre-Thatcher period. In their support for the Thatcher solution to Britain's crisis, monopoly capitalism is engaged in an enormous gamble which, far from creating a new perspective for the ruling class to continue its rule, could, and I think is, opening up further possibilities for left development in British politics of quite historic dimensions. This has been made all the more possible because certain lasting gains were made by the Left as a result of the campaign against the Social Contract policy for class collaboration. In that protracted battle great changes were brought about which have made the trade union leadership in particular more capable of conducting the political battle within the labour movement as a whole. Only clear recognition of this can explain the extraordinary importance of the fight that made the TUC's Day of Action on 14th May such a success. This could not have come about just as a reaction to the Tory policies' The basis for the political advance in the movement demonstrated by 14th May had been built up initially by the Communist Party's stand in the preceding years.

In any analysis of the political situation in Britain, it's always worthwhile reminding ourselves of the undemocratic character of the electoral system and that the present Government is a minority government

without the majority mandate of the British people, which the Tories misrepresent and try to make so much of. Ironically, the one majority mandate given by the electors in recent British political history was that given by the Scottish people last year in their vote of 51.3% for a devolved Assembly. Readers, however, will remember that that vote was declared to be 'insufficient' on such 'an important issue'. It is, I think, worth making the point in passing that in any analysis of the Thatcher victory of May 1979, the exceptional position in Scotland should be taken into account.

It should also be recognised that this is attributable in large measure to the role of the Communist Party and the Left in the first instance, through which the labour movement was won to identify with and lead the fight for the national and democratic aspirations of the Scottish people.

Not only is the Tory government a minority government, but, as has been pointed out in this discussion, its share of the vote in the last general election was smaller than in 1970, and much smaller than in the period 1951-1959.

A further indication of the fluidity of the present political situation was the outcome of the district elections on 1st May, the first major test of public opinion since the last general election.

In this election, the Tories suffered big losses and Labour's gains went further than just winning back the lost ground of the previous district elections. This does not mean that any credence should be given to ideas of complacency and the theory that 'given time, the Tories will defeat themselves', but neither should we be taken in by the predictable Tory response to the results, that 'it could have been much worse'.

These election results, alongside the rising tide of struggle against Tory policies, are heartening and positive features in the political situation. The effects on the people in real life of the present Tory policies is bringing more and more into the struggle against such policies, and this must include many who voted for them. Thatcher's determination to stick to the present course no matter the consequences, is only having the effect of creating the basis for a mass movement against the Tories, not through spontaneity, but by the step by step development of the struggle.

May 14

Stuart Hall, in his contribution to this discussion, emphasised the need for a counter-hegemonic strategy to match and counter the Tories.

This is a concept, I would presume, that

embodies the need to win mass support for the Left's alternative strategy. In order to achieve this, most are agreed that such policies need to be made more real and more readily understood among the masses of people, if they are to win greater support and their relevance become clearer to millions. In this the trade union movement has a crucial role to play, not, I agree, as a substitute for the development of left political organisation and action, but because the trade union movement is fundamental to the defence of the interests of the working class and to economic and social advance, and in the fight for socialism in Britain. In the period preceding 14th May, the Tories, backed by the mass media, rallied at the trade unions and trade unionists to 'stay out of politics', and condemned the Day of Action on 14th May as a political strike. There is of course nothing they fear more than the trade union movement of this country fulfilling its role of uniting the working class for left objectives. In different times, when the TUC was carrying through its leading role for right objectives, it was considered 'statesmanlike', now, today, it is 'irresponsible', 'out of touch with its members', etc.

This Tory and mass media attack on the trade unions, personally on Len Murray for carrying out his mandate, and the TUC itself, is consistent with their offensive against the trade unions since coming to office. They are, at the moment, pushing through Parliament their so-called Employment Bill to back their offensive by the use of the courts.

But with regard to 14th May, the attack on the unions reached unprecedented heights. Why?

Because here were the trade unions 'interfering with the democratic process', 'getting involved in politics', 'leading a political strike against the democratically elected government'.

The significance of the Day of Action was not lost on Callaghan, Healey and Co, who are aware that what the unions were fighting for against the Tory government could equally be used against a future Labour government that refused to carry out the policies of the movement. Little wonder Healey said he 'could not see the appropriateness of such action,' or that 'such actions would serve any useful purpose'. The truth is that mass action/class struggle is anathema to right-wing Labour. They basically preach the same concept of democracy as the Tories.

May 14th was important not only because it involved an estimated 2 million workers in strike action and brought hundreds of thousands of workers onto the streets in demonstrations, but, as I've already made clear, because of the character of the action

itself.

Millions of workers throughout the country were involved in meetings and discussions on 'their future', on the 'country's future', in a way we have not witnessed before. What was being discussed was the alternative to the Tories and their policies, not only the need for the defeat of the Tory government, but the need to replace them with a Labour government that will carry through the policies of the labour and trade union movement. The fight for the left alternative strategy in real life.

The challenge facing the Left now is to win a further development of what was represented by 14th May. Given that, a radical change can be brought about in the political situation in the interests of the Left.

The labour movement then is 'renewing itself as a political force', and is being 'revitalised'. This has been going on for some years now, as a result of advances made within it by the Left, and must be given further impetus by the development of the struggle against the Tories and Labour right-wing.

As the consequences of the Tory economic strategy make themselves more and more evident, the struggle will intensify and the ideological battle will sharpen considerably. The development of the process referred to above must be pressed forward with great urgency.

Labour Party Special Conference

I think it then of considerable importance that the NEC of the Labour Party is aware of the urgency of the present situation, and this is reflected in its decision to call a special conference, held on 31st May. The draft declaration *Peace, Jobs and Freedom*, endorsed emphatically by the conference, reflects the left advance that has taken place in the policy of the party over the last period.

The declaration adopted on 31st May is very positive in its sharp anti-Tory position, condemning Tory policies both in home and foreign affairs. The section on peace, especially in view of the present tense international situation, is extremely positive, recognising the increasing danger of world nuclear war, and stressing Britain's role in taking real steps for peace and detente.

The proposal to cut arms spending only to the level of 'our European allies', while releasing a substantial amount of money, leaves the level of arms spending at far too high a level, and the formulation itself perpetuates policy for Britain's continuing role in NATO.

Nonetheless, the great stress placed on the peace issue in the conference itself, and the decisions of the party to hold a national

demonstration on 22nd June, are additional indications of the advance of this vital issue that has been achieved.

Important also is the condemnation in the declaration of EEC policies and the understanding that if these are not reversed, the whole question of Britain's membership will need to be reviewed. Similarly, the commitment of the next Labour government to end mass unemployment; increase public ownership and public spending; repeal the Tory Employment Bill and strengthen democratic control in many areas of social and economic life.

While there are a number of weaknesses in the document, for example no clear pledge on import controls, and no mention of the Tory racist measures or the major democratic issue of devolved Assemblies for Scotland and Wales, by far the most crucial area of

weakness is on incomes policy and the disastrous consequences of such a policy pursued by the last Labour government.

Fundamental to the success of the left's alternative economic strategy — winning an understanding among the working class for this strategy — and dispelling the cynicism and disillusionment that arose from the failure of the last Labour government — is the crucial need for the whole movement to commit any future Labour government to reject incomes policy and pursue a policy of increasing the purchasing power of the people through higher wages as the key to the expansion of the economy.

The right-wing will fight tooth and nail on this issue (note Callaghan's speech at the special conference) and use it as a lever to divide the movement, and try to consolidate the dominance of their own position and hit

back at the Left's advance on policy and on party democracy.

The political developments in the movement over the last year make it clear that the aims of the right-wing can be defeated, but only through the further development of the mass movement against the Tories and the widest unity of all left and progressive forces at the heart of which must lie Labour/Communist unity.

This unity is growing, and will continue to grow in all the mass struggle ahead. It's expressed at this stage by those most active in the trade union and democratic organisations, rather than between organisations of the two parties. This will be increasingly necessary if the mass struggle is to gain greater power and perspective and take the next major stride along the road to socialism in Britain.

Thatcherism - a new stage?

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Sue Slipman



Many of the contributors have agreed that Thatcherism' has, 'fundamentally changed the political rules of the game', and that there will be no simple return to the stalemate of the Labour government. So far there has been little examination of the contribution made by the Left in creating the political climate for the rise of Thatcherism. Yet, it was our policies on battles over the social contract which eventually broke the stalemate, and, in particular, the priority given to wages battles. At its end the social contract had become a passive consensus in which people were asked to hold back. The wages offensive gave expression to the frustration felt with this static condition. The political solutions people chose, however, represented a different kind of 'freedom' from the one we proposed. Thatcher offered individual freedom. In destroying the social contract we helped give credence to the idea that individual freedom comes from the wage

packet. In doing this we helped to undermine people's perception of the value of the public services as part of a social wage.

The Tories effectively won the working class away from collectivist solutions to their problems. Any conception of social welfare is based upon collective responsibility for sharing resources. Even the 'tri-partite thrusts of modernism' have been based on a notion of collective responsibility. We have to ask whether the social contract at any stage offers a vehicle for this process of change. Could the working class have become the hegemonic political force within tri-partite modernism? Has the Left in refusing that opportunity opened up the path for the destruction of collectivist solutions and the turn to Thatcherism?

Our strategy was to 'smash the social contract' for an 'alternative economic strategy'. We succeeded in the former and failed in the latter. In return for the co-

operation of the working class we could have posed demands which opened up the extension of democracy in society and industry. But we never became involved in the policy issues and the social contract became a passive vehicle for imposed solutions. People rejected collective solutions and turned towards aggressive individualism. In the popular imagination socialism has been dubbed 'passive, coercive and corporatist' and as Stuart Hall points out, this is the vision of socialism adopted by many sections of the Left. He states that democracy is now central rather than peripheral. By this I take him to mean that our practice in achieving alliances around our demands must be as democratic as the demands themselves.

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and beyond era. There was, however, a parallel growth of movements with reactionary ideals which created a social fabric for Thatcherism. We did not involve ourselves at all adequately in the ideological debates on the nature and content of modernism. We concentrated on the question of resources and allowed space for reactionary forces to develop a hegemonic position. For example: in 1977-8 Shirley Williams, then Secretary of State for Education and Science, initiated the 'Great Education Debate'. The majority of the Left saw it as nothing more than a 'smokescreen for implementing cuts' and ignored it. The fact remained that there was a major ideological as well as resource crisis in

education. We lost the ideological battle and through it, ironically enough, helped to undermine a popular support for education and strengthened popular acceptance of cuts.

We need to ask why people do not value the public services. Stuart Hall comments in his article on the bureaucratic, corporatist nature of public services which are not accessible to the people they are supposed to serve. But our response has been for 'No cuts' and defensive battles rather than to try and examine the sort of services people would support. If defensive battles are to give us the space to create wider alliances for alternative policies we must allow a more creative approach. Only if our objective is not just to

save services but also to change the nature of the services through saving resources, can we create any democratic framework for participation and change.

For most people the Left's Alternative Economic Strategy remained an abstract goal to be obtained at some future date when alliances had been forged through wage militancy and defensive campaigns. The alternative was seen as a package and because people could not identify with its individual demands, they rejected it as such. Did our approach towards sectional battles help to achieve this? Many people have commented on the level of disunity that sectionalism has brought to the working class.

Sectional battles

It has been suggested that sectional battles allow identification with other causes. There seems to be little evidence to suggest this. Since the beginning of the big wages offensives of the past two years, women's pay has deteriorated in relation to men's and the low paid have remained low paid. Indeed, there was little support for the actions of the public service workers on low pay. I am suggesting that there is nothing inherent within sectional battles which will lead them on to identify with other people's problems. Indeed one of the results of these battles has been the break-up of class solidarity. There has certainly been a relationship between sectional demands for higher wages and a popular acceptance of cuts within the South East and Midlands.

If we can now finally accept that the militant wage campaigns have not led to an increase in political consciousness, then we need to examine why. Most people in the trade union movement recognise that we are not in a 1972-74 situation over the Government's new Employment Bill. The Government came to office with a 'mandate' to curb secondary picketing. There has been little recognition that this Bill is a rag bag of moves highly ideological in their nature which are openings for a coherent if radically different vision of society. The ending of maternity benefits for workers in small companies, the bureaucratising of the method of obtaining maternity leave, the ending of employment protection in small companies and changes within the laws governing trade union recognition, will affect all those people currently outside the large battalions of the trades unions ie, the low paid, women and immigrant workers. The Tories are working on the divisions already inherent within the trade union movement to produce a real conflict between organised and unorganised workers. The trade union movement by highlighting secondary picketing as the major issue within the Bill will be unable to generate the necessary solidarity within the movement to fight the Bill. It is time we examined our wages offensive. I am not meaning to suggest that struggles over wages are somehow wrong. What I do want to suggest is that when we fight these battles we should do so in relation to the social wage and alternative services, as a whole, and not simply on the basis of unequal power in the movement to achieve wage claims.

The abortion fight

The only area in which a wider alliance has been built is the public support for liberal abortion laws. This campaign managed to bring together the women's liberation move-

ment, the TUC, and many shades of left, liberal and centre opinion. Opinion polls indicated that up to 80% supported the 1967 Act and a significant proportion of people supported the concept of a 'Woman's right to choose'. The alliance has not been without its problems as the big TUC sponsored demonstration showed. When a number of women attempted to take over the march they were not simply being politically destructive. They were showing a level of deep seated hostility and resentment to the basis on which the organised labour movement was supporting their issue. Whilst the TUC had given needed support to the campaign it has failed to adopt feminism within its ideology or its organising structures. This means the trade union movement allowing space for women to operate within its ranks on their own terms, and women in turn connecting up to some of the wide objectives of the trade union movement. A broad democratic alliance must open up a new stage of consciousness, allowing separate movements to recognise not just the issue around which others are fighting, but to learn to understand their strategy within that fight and accordingly change their own objectives to accommodate it. The alliance needs to be built on a practice of mutual support and the role of the Left within all this should be to create the space necessary to enable people to make the connections.

The cuts

At present the Left is at best marginal politically and at worst is digging its own grave. We are answering a total if mad vision with simplistic demands for 'no change'. The best illustration of this comes within the cuts campaigns. There are sections of people who spontaneously respond against a proposal to cut services which directly affect them. But we cannot assume from this that they are opposed to a policy of cuts overall. A slogan of 'No cuts' is not at all helpful when people are dubious of the nature of the services we are defending. We need to re-build confidence in the services and this can only be done by opening up democratic participation within them, determining the nature of services on the basis of people's perceived needs.

Only if our defensive campaigns are built upon people's expression of their needs within the community will we win the broad political support to conserve those resources and redirect their use to meet changing needs. Campaigns of this nature, based upon maintaining resources, have the potential to grasp the imagination of people and to open up a collective vision. They also ensure a forum where sectionalism can be confronted as the conflicting opinions of various sections

can be discussed and challenged and fought through to a sharing of resources. To achieve these forms of alliance it may well be necessary to challenge certain areas of restrictive practices and authoritarianism within the trades unions and left political parties.

Alternative policies in practice

This approach towards defensive campaigns does at least have the potential to allow us to build our alternative policies in practice. It may give the space for people to begin to make the connection between immediate struggles and the Left's alternative economic strategy. On the other hand it may give us the space to question the validity of our alternative policies. There is a massive gulf not just between the organised trade union movement and other sections of the population, but also between 'advanced' sections of the labour movement in struggle for sectional objectives and other sections which do not have the 'industrial muscle' with which to fight.

We are in a period of choice about the future impact of the Left and its ability to present a coherent alternative. We also have major opportunities to grasp in founding this new alliance. It is true that as people recognise the impact of Tory policies on their life they seek a change, but they are not turning to the Left because, in reality, we have not shown ourselves to have much to offer. Our current alternative has not yet made sense to many people and we may well face a frightening future unless we can pool our experiences and skills in creating a viable alternative which goes beyond the increasingly narrow 'correctness' of political party lines.

We have all, at some stage, experienced the boorish nature of debates on the left. A democratic strategy requires a democratic and respectful method of debate, and we shall have to come to terms with the fact that the 'means' of our political practice are determining its 'ends'. This contribution to the debate is a plea for tentativeness. The experience of many people during this period of a return to fundamentalism is to find that they have no space within left political groupings. If it continues we shall lose some of the best and most committed people who feel their integrity can no longer cope. Any grouping which does not cherish and give space to its dissidents can only end by being repressive and self enclosed and reinforcing. We are at the cross roads of that choice.

We welcome Discussion contributions on articles appearing in the journal