

Reviews

POLITICS AND POWER 2

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The second volume of *Politics and Power* contains 14 essays on 'the problems confronting Labour Party politics and the process of construction and implementation of Labour policies', in the words of the Editorial Board.

Through interviews with leading figures in the Parliamentary Labour Party, book reviews and analytical articles a great deal of ground is covered, ranging from examination of strategies for achieving a Left Labour government (by Barry Hindess), tensions within the forces which supported Thatcher (by Phil Jones), ten years of Gay Liberation (by David Fernbach), replacement for Polaris (by Dan Smith), the mechanisms by which imperialist economic relations envelop less developed countries (by Sheila Smith) and workers plans (by Mike Rustin).

A welcome feature of this edition is material on social policy and Labour governments and socialism (an interview with Peter Townsend and an article by Nicholas Rose.) This is something which the Left often leave out. There are no articles on politics within the trade union movement, community politics or the women's movement.

However, through this interesting breadth two important themes emerge which I would like briefly to discuss.

The first is the view in the book, usually implicit, that the Left failed to capitalise on the openings alleged to exist in the period 1973/74. These cover the planning agreement, described here as an ambitious, original concept, whose importance subsequent degeneration should not obscure; the interventionist possibilities created by the NEB and Labour's policy; and the opportunities for involvement by shop stewards in wider decisions through the Bullock proposals.

This is an important question. The strategy of *The British Road to Socialism*, with

its emphasis on the forcing of victories which expand the possibilities of democratic control, as part of the revolutionary process through which politics and the working class movement can be transformed, will, if successful, create many openings into which the Left must resolutely plunge. Otherwise we are simply not serious about winning such advances and might as well opt for an insurrectionary approach.

However, was 1973/74 such an opening? I doubt it. The 1974 Labour government had a strategy, *incomes policy*, plus their industrial policy. You can't just leave the former out of the picture and pretend that the 'left' second half stands on its own. Given the impact of the radicalisation arising from the Industrial Relations Act struggles, the miners' strikes and the political work of the Communist Party and the *Morning Star*, how else would a predominantly right wing Labour Cabinet have sold incomes policy without the radical fringe?

The second major theme to emerge is one that is first raised by Barry Hindess, taken a little further by Donald Sassoon and pushed to its conclusion by Chris Nawrat and Geoff Roberts. This is the view that a political majority for the Left, variously described as 'a new bloc in which all the forces operating for an expansion of collective control and democracy negotiate freely their role and function, their demands and their aspirations' (Sassoon), and 'unity around a negotiated programme of social change achieved through political alliances' (Roberts and Nawrat), lies through routes other than a Left Labour government, left unity and the beginnings of Communist representation. In other words, it lies through a new, radical alliance which must challenge Labour electorally on a massive scale and elaborate a 'radical political pluralism' whereby single issue campaigns stand candidates wherever possible and the Communist Party sets itself the aim of replacing Labour as the main working class party.

While this argument recognises the limitations of the Labour Left, and correctly stresses the need for the labour movement to engage with a wide range of democratic forces if it is to raise its limited horizons, it is hopelessly abstract and unhistorical. There is not a 'Broad Democratic Alliance' political party in Britain. Political majorities do not form out of thin air. Alliances are not 'negotiated' in the abstract. They are built around concrete issues, and group around political forces with the vision and the clout to achieve them.

I do not believe it is possible to give the broad democratic alliance political expression without the aim of transforming the main

working class party with close organic links with the rest of the labour movement. Nor will this transformation be achieved without the Communist Party. No section of the Labour Party, or any other, has roots in labour, local or popular movements equivalent to the Communist Party's (the unparalleled role of communists in, say, the 'Yes' campaigns in Scotland, Women's TUC, CND, or Glasgow Community Councils are a few examples of this). The Labour Party has no equivalent to the CP's Communist Universities (run annually since 1968, and now regionally), to its Peoples' Festivals as live expressions of radical discussion and political celebration. No other party has the CP's tradition of Marxist thought and discussion reflected in the number of journals we have sustained (*Comment*, *Marxism Today*, *Medicine in Society*, *Red Letters*, *Scottish Marxist*, *Cyffro*, *Our History* to name a few). No other party has maintained an organic connection to a daily paper for 50 years, or is organised to conduct all round political struggle in industry and community with anything like the CP's degree of effectiveness.

Right at the end of *Politics and Power 2* is an absolute gem. Ernesto Laclau's review of Togliatti's book *On Gramsci and other writings*. Togliatti sees Leninism as the fundamental turning point in the Marxist tradition. Lenin's conception of the world as an imperialist chain is the decisive break with a 'stagist and economist' view of Marxism.

Since Lenin, the task of revolutionary leadership is not so much in defending sectional interest, but in giving leadership to the vast field of mass politics which the dislocation of imperialism's crisis give rise to. Thus for Lenin, Togliatti and Gramsci, the primacy of politics means rejecting 'submission to the dictates of the infrastructure'. Laclau makes the point that a 'limited reading of Leninism' would underestimate this concept of the working class giving leadership to these new fields of mass politics (national, democratic, etc.) ie, winning hegemony. But who is interested in a limited reading of Lenin?

Laclau makes the point that Gramsci and Togliatti, during the period of the resistance and the war of liberation in Italy, helped achieve a 'hegemonic synthesis', whereby there was a new link between national, popular and democratic identity with communism.

He also suggests that the 70s saw new contradictions in Italian society (eg, youth, women, and environmental) 'outside the domain of communist hegemony, and often against it'. Therefore it is necessary to go beyond Lenin, Gramsci, Togliatti, refusing

to be limited to a mechanical application of their ideas.

At a time when the crisis and Thatcherism are opening up new possibilities for mass politics among the working class, and when more people feel excited about the possibilities of change within the Labour Party, it is strange that *Politics and Power* is so pessimistic about the possibilities of a new political majority being built around a transformed labour movement.

The ideas of *The British Road to Socialism* provide the basis for a new 'hegemonic synthesis' in Britain, but as in Italy, this will be based around leading class and political forces, and not in the abstract way *Politics and Power* would have us believe.

Dave Cook