



**THE ROAD FROM THATCHERISM —  
THE ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC  
STRATEGY**

**Sam Aaronovitch**

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In the past five years or so the phrase 'alternative economic strategy' has gained wide currency in the labour movement; but just what is it? The reaction to that question depends on the political stance of the person responding. In his book, Sam Aaronovitch sets out some of the different - - and frequently contradictory — views that are expressed on the subject in the labour movement.

At one extreme are those right wing MPs and trade union leaders whose political objectives are limited to a return to the cautious path trod out by Wilson and Callaghan. These consider any advocacy of an alternative economic strategy to be a dangerously revolutionary position which must be vigorously opposed. In this view they are, of course, joined by that ill-assorted collection of individuals who had not huddled together under the umbrella of Social Democracy at the time Aaronovitch wrote his book.

At the other extreme are those such as the Socialist Workers' Party, the Militant

Tendency and a host of lesser organisations who change their titles almost as frequently as their shirts. These consider the pursuit of an alternative economic strategy to be a reformist aberration which must be resisted firmly lest it divert the movement from the ultimate objective of constructing a socialist society.

Spaced out between these two points is a variety of organisations and individuals — including the Tribune Group of Labour MPs, the Labour Co-ordinating Committee, the Communist Party and trade unionists — who are active proponents of an alternative economic strategy. But within this widely spread grouping there are many different interpretations of the strategy and equally as many differences of emphasis on the political application of such a policy.

These variations are understandable for, as Aaronovitch explains, particular aspects of the alternative economic strategy bear the hallmarks of the organisations which initiated it; and he gives examples. Some of the organisations will have been concerned with immediate and piecemeal proposals; others will have seen changes being initiated by government rather than developing out of the movement of people. And as a general point, the needs of some particular groups — ethnic minorities, women, young unemployed — do not find full expression.

But despite these differences and omissions, Aaronovitch argues that the common central feature is a recognition by all of the advocates of the alternative economic strategy that the deep seated economic and social problems of Britain cannot be resolved by using the methods of previous Labour and Tory governments. With the present Tory government attempting to cope with a declining British capitalism, trapped within a crisis of world capitalism, by applying Thatcherite policies of the radical Right, 'there must be a radical alternative to the policies of the radical Right', says Aaronovitch. And he sees the alternative economic strategy as 'an attempt, by different groups and sections who wish to challenge Toryism and the dominance of big business to formulate a *common programme*' (original emphasis).

The major part of the book is given over to an analysis of Britain's recent economic performance, and government economic policies, and an examination of the economic issues which need to be encompassed within any such common programme. But time and time again the crucial political considerations which inevitably arise from economic requirements intrude on the mind of the reader.

The massive increase in public expendi-

ture required as 'the most powerful and desirable way' to boost quick economic expansion; the state taking a major role in funding capital investment; the extension of public ownership to include key sectors of investment goods, high technology and the major financial institutions which channel internal and external flows of funds. These, and similar economic issues listed by Aaronovitch, immediately raise serious political considerations which must reflect in any common programme drawn up by the various groups and sections involved in the alternative economic strategy.

Two of these are: first, the need to develop a political campaign to secure the election of a Labour government firmly committed to the implementation of the alternative. Second, the need to be aware of—and prepare for—the possibility of organised resistance (to the point of economic sabotage) to such a committed Labour government by the capitalists and their political allies.

It therefore comes as something of a surprise to read in the last section of the book: 'the Alternative Economic Strategy is and must be a programme of radical reform. It does not and should not require those who support it to be committed to a socialist reconstruction of Britain. If we are not clear on this we shall abandon one of its main sources of strength, namely that it is a "common programme" being constructed by many groups and interests.'

It is true that Aaronovitch attempts to qualify this statement by explaining that in the campaign to win support for the alternative economic strategy 'a developing and lively discussion' is necessary between socialists and non-socialists during which the nature of capitalism and the need for a new social system is argued out. This, however, should not mean the dilution of the alternative economic strategy to the level of the lowest common political denominator in the hope of winning mass support — which is one conclusion that could be drawn from Aaronovitch's presentation, even though that may not be his intention.

The major task confronting socialists is the need to win the support of the labour movement for the alternative economic strategy on the basis that it presents the real possibility of establishing a beachhead from which the advance to socialism can be made. In the process it is inevitable that there will be many sharp exchanges as differing political ideas collide.

Aaronovitch has performed a useful service in marking out some of the major areas of debate that must be explored during the practical process of extending the support for the alternative economic strategy beyond its present limits. At the same time, however, he has demonstrated that the politics of the alternative economic strategy are a little more complex than they are sometimes presented.

Bernard Dix