

THE FUTURE OF SOCIALISM

Anthony Crosland

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FACE THE FUTURE

David Owen

Jonathan Cape 1981 £12.50

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POLITICS IS FOR PEOPLE

Shirley Williams

Allen Lane 1981 hb £8.50 (also Penguin pb)

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THE SOCIALIST AGENDA

Ed. David Lipsey & Dick Leonard

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The leftward surge in the Labour Party during the 1970s was due, so *The Times* 'conspiracy correspondent' and other less eminent scribes would claim, to the militants burrowing into the rotting party woodwork and only emerging into the daylight at Brighton or Blackpool to cheer yet another victory with either rapturous applause or raised clenched fists. Rather, it was due to the collapse of an ideology which had permeated

the higher echelons of the party since the 1950s. That ideology was revisionism.

Today it is worth re-reading the seminal work of revisionism, *The Future of Socialism*, first, in order to understand why revisionism collapsed and, second, to compare with the recent writings of the Social Democrats who would claim to be part of that same Croslandite tradition.

The basis of Crosland's revisionism was an analysis of contemporary capitalism and a consequent revising of socialist goals. One is struck by his all-pervading optimism in which private industry had become humanised and unemployment and poverty were features of the past. As a consequence the objective of socialism was not structural change but such values as equality, justice and freedom. Above all else the need for social equality is the theme of Crosland's writings and there is a radicalism about his work which contrasts with the contemporary Social Democrats.

But Crosland's revisionism collapsed in the face of economic decline and the re-emergence of a more ideological form of Conservatism. The revisionist vocabulary had deemed such words as capitalism, class and crisis to be defunct. Revisionist silence in the face of balance of payments' deficits,

devaluation and economic stagnation was striking and the vacuum was filled by Stuart Holland, Tony Benn and others. In parallel, the management of Labour's internal affairs to boost revisionist influence shifted in a manner which enabled traditional socialist beliefs to re-emerge as central to party opinion.

Now in the 1980s there has been an attempt to reassert an intellectual basis for a Social Democratic position which has its origins in the Croslandite tradition but in the intervening twenty five years has lost much of its radicalism. Crosland's egalitarianism has been drastically modified and there is an underlying conservative commitment to the existing economic structure.

David Owen's publisher claims that *Face the Future* is 'one of the most constructive contributions to the political debate in Britain'. But it bears no comparison with *The Future of Socialism* which did have a decisive impact upon political debate in the British labour movement. Whereas Crosland drew political conclusions from a popular synthesis of academic research in economics and sociology, Owen lacks such skills. He plods his way through 550 pages describing past events and developments, failing to examine in depth any of the major academic studies of contemporary capitalism (for example, Peter Townsend's important study of *Poverty in Britain* is given only perfunctory treatment), and offering the reader the benefit of Owen's ministerial experience (inevitably wise and responsible). My award for 'the most boring book of the 1970s' went with no hesitation to Harold Wilson for either of his books on Labour governments he led; and Owen is already a very strong contender for the 1980s award. Owen's style is a combination of *Hansard* and government White Paper.

In comparison Shirley Williams can at least write attractively and mercifully her book is half the size. But a good deal of the contents verge on the banal and trite. For example, she concludes:

'But the old politics is dying. The battle to decide what the new policies will be like is just beginning. It is possible, just possible, that it will be politics for people.'

This glib phraseology, which prevails throughout the book seems to have more relevance to Saatchi and Saatchi than to political debate. Williams has spent the past two years engaged in research at the Policy Studies Institute and Harvard University. One wonders what on earth she has been doing at these research institutes if all she has to say on incomes policy is that it should leave some room for local bargaining and that trade unions should become involved in bargaining about more than mere wages. She devotes

just three pages to the issue of industrial democracy and her thoughts on the subject are vague and of limited value. What of her own failure to introduce some form of industrial democracy when given that responsibility as Paymaster General in 1976? Some valuable lessons might have been drawn from that experience in order to devise some concrete proposals.

But to turn from theory to practice is to reveal the weaknesses of revisionists and ex-revisionist-turned-Social Democrats. Crosland, Roy Jenkins, Owen and Williams were all prominent members of past Labour governments. What happened in office to their commitment to equality? Crosland placed great emphasis upon the phasing out of private schools with first 25%, then 50%, then 75% and ultimately 100% of the places becoming free. Williams states that fee-paying should be prevented by law. But how far did either succeed in this objective when Ministers of Education? What happened to Jenkins' commitment to a wealth tax when he became Chancellor of the Exchequer? At least Owen displayed some commitment to equality during the pay-beds saga of the 1970s. Decentralisation is a vogue word for both Owen and Williams and I have no doubt that it will figure prominently in the next Social Democratic book to appear, written by Bill Rodgers. Yet Rodgers as a Minister attempted to curb local initiatives in passenger transport in South Yorkshire. Cheap bus fares was a local Labour Party commitment which secured considerable local electoral support yet Rodgers, the centraliser, put considerable financial pressures upon the local council.

'Actions speak louder than words' was the theme of a recent Conservative election manifesto but it is an appropriate commentary on the Social Democrats.

Jenkins, Owen, Williams and Rodgers are claimed to be people with considerable governing skills. But what is most striking is how *little* they achieved in government. Certainly their political careers and personal lives have been enhanced by the labour movement yet in return they have provided little for the people upon whom their bases have been established. Furthermore, they have undermined Labour's electoral base by attacking the trade unions and by failing to nourish its working class roots through political education.

Crosland, in comparison, displayed a much greater respect for the labour movement. That Croslandite tradition remains within the Labour Party and is reflected in some of the writings edited by David Lipsey and Dick Leonard. Here are people willing to think beyond the latest public relations cliché about incomes policy, participation or decentralisation. One of Crosland's last major political battles was in defence of public expenditure against the demands in Cabinet for cuts to satisfy the IMF and, more so, the Treasury. By 1976 Jenkins was claiming that increased public expenditure was a threat to liberal democracy but Crosland remained deeply concerned with the quality of working class life. Colin Crouch, loyal to this Croslandite tradition, raises some important questions in the Lipsey/Leonard book about the socialist nature of public expenditure which should stimulate further discussion in the labour movement. Labour's victory, if it is to be secured in 1984, will be based upon an economic programme well removed from Crosland's analysis and recommendations of the 1950s but it also needs to be rooted in a social programme close to the Croslandite tradition.

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