

Like the rest of the Left, the Communist Party has been seriously in decline. At root it is an identity crisis. Can it be resolved?

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Crossed Lines:

Communists in Search of an Identity

THE LAST NINE MONTHS has seen a lively, sharp and often passionate debate within the British Left and Labour movement. The debate has focused on the state of British politics after the re-election of the Conservative government and how the Left should respond to this situation. The dramatic slump in Labour's electoral fortunes indicated by the June 9 result has given an urgency and edge to these discussions.

The welcome recovery of electoral support for Labour shown by the opinion polls and the holding by Tony Benn of the Chesterfield seat in the face of concerted media attention does not lessen the necessity of this debate. For, in fact, June 9 expressed in stark form, the underlying longer term crisis of the Left and many of its ideas. This crisis, cautiously spotlighted in the discussions of the late 1970s around Eric Hobsbawm's article 'The Forward March of Labour Halted?'¹, has accelerated with the recession and the political onslaught of Thatcherism. The question mark of the initial article has become redundant. Thus while the present truce to Labour's internal struggles and the election of a charismatic leader are important, to overcome the broader crisis will require a more drastic, thorough-going process of renewal.

Trends within the Left and labour movement

The centre of gravity of the Labour Party has shifted over the past five years, accelerated by the breakaway of the hard Right to form the SDP. The deep economic crisis with mass unemployment and rapid de-industrialisation; the disillusion with the Wilson/Callaghan governments and the successful campaign for internal constitutional reforms, each contributed to a leftward shift in policy and leadership. By the early 1980s there were considerable differences amongst the Left as to how to proceed, while there were distinct signs of unease among sections of the trade union movement. The awful general election result has brought matters to a head. While the situation remains fluid three general political trends commonly characterised as the Centre-Right, the hard Left and the broad Left, are discernible. None of these trends are monolithic and rigid, with many positions, of both organisations and individuals, still evolving. What follows is intended to serve only as a general guideline.

The Centre-Right

They have responded to the election defeat by heading for the centre ground in the Labour Party. Hattersley and his supporters called for major changes in policy and approach during the leadership election campaign, but all those associated with him have been careful to call for unity and loyalty to the new leadership. The post-election shift to the right, which some feared, has not yet occurred. Partly this is because after the SDP defection, Labour's hard Right is now much weaker, while politicians such as Hattersley and Healey have shifted own their

stance, partly, but not only or even mainly, as a reaction to the SDP.

It is noticeable that the Centre-Right trend has been stronger in the trade union movement. Here it is important to note that a strong hard Right trend also exists, notably around the EEPTU and AUEW. The economic crisis and longer term shifts in the composition of the workforce has a more immediate and material impact on trade unions than the Labour Party. Sharp falls in union membership and weakening of organisation have occurred, while the non-manual unions, largely not affiliated to the Labour Party,

the Centre-Right trend has been stronger in the trade union movement

have gained in influence within the TUC. These factors, combined with the desertion of trade unionists from Labour's electoral ranks, were central to the TUC's shift to the right at its September 1983 Congress. The real danger of the TUC's much vaunted 'new realism' is that it represents an accommodation to new realities without any conception of struggle to change them. If this approach became dominant within the labour movement, it would enormously increase the likelihood of a significant retreat by the Labour Party.

The hard Left

This is the popular name for what can more accurately be described as a fundamentalist left trend. Amongst the elements embraced by this category are the several Trotskyist groups who have recently entered the Labour Party following the tactic long pursued by the Militant Group; those associated with *the Briefing* journal; and a section of Labour Party activists who identify with the editorial views of *Tribune*. It was this trend which supported Eric Heffer in the leadership election against Neil Kinnock. They exert greater sway and influence over the Left than Heffer's low vote would suggest.

The primary characteristic — and appeal — of the fundamentalists is their certainty and simplicity. The questions and queries which beset other socialists appear not to bother them. The changing character of working class; the Left's present range of policies; the nature of socialism; the position and role of women; all these and more beside present no problems. Provided correct leadership is offered, the people will respond.

Thus the fundamentalist Left has minimised the significance of the election defeat and Labour's longer term decline. It is generally resistant to any policy rethinking. Instead it concedes that improvements must be made in presentation (Eric Heffer *Marxism Today* Dec 1983). The primary cause of election defeat was

¹ *Marxism Today*, Sept, 1978.

sabotage by the 'Guilty Men' of the Right (*Tribune* 10 June 1983). Since the 1981 deputy leadership election, Tony Benn, in contrast to previously, appears to have drifted towards this trend and since the general election his views have in some respects coincided with it. Thus shortly after the election he wrote that Labour's vote of 8.5 million was 'a remarkable development by any standards and deserves some analysis'. What was remarkable in Benn's eyes was that Labour had 'won such a large vote' when 'for the first time since 1945' it had been arguing 'an openly socialist policy'.²

The broad Left

Wide sections of the Left, however, refused to see defeat turned into victory in this manner. Drawn from diverse parts of the labour, socialist and democratic movements, with varied concerns and emphases, this group now form a discernible broad Left response to the present political situation. Several common features are evident from this quarter. Firstly, and most importantly, there is a clear recognition of the gravity of the defeat suffered on 9 June. Secondly, there is agreement on the great danger presented by a second term of Thatcherite rule and that the movement's energy and attention must be channelled against this main threat. This requires unity within the labour movement and increased campaigning among the people to arouse popular opposition to government policies. Thirdly, successful campaigning will require the Left to address new issues of the 1980s and to promote a clearer, more relevant vision of a future socialist and democratic Britain.

There are a range of diverse indications of this trend. Kinnock and Robin Cook echoed some of these themes in the leadership campaign. Ron Todd is doing likewise in the TGWU election for general secretary. Ken Livingstone and the Labour GLC have adopted this broad approach in their imaginative battle to defend local democracy.

For the moment this trend appears to enjoy the backing of a majority swathe of Labour Party opinion. Yet, apart from the Labour Co-ordinating Committee, it lacks precise substance and on organising focus outside the Kinnock leadership. It is more of a mood, a response to the shock scale of electoral defeat and is neither stable nor cohesive. Its inability to command the same degree of support within the trade unions as it has in the Labour Party, along with dangers of electoral opportunism, make sections of this trend susceptible to a revived, social democratic modernism

CP Chairperson and Scots miners leader George Bolton with CP General Secretary Gordon McLennan on platform, National Congress. 1983



reminiscent of the early Wilson years. It remains to be seen whether the broad Left will resist this danger and instead attempt a renewal and modernisation of Labour's fortunes by articulating a coherent short and medium term strategy for shifting the balance of wealth and power to working people. One of the factors determining the outcome will be the influence and impact of the Communist Party.

One of the remarkable features of these debates has been the influence of the CP Articles by Communist writers such as Bob Rowthorn, Dave Priscott and, above all, Eric Hobsbawm have been crucial reference points to the debate. Over the past few years the party's theoretical journal, *Marxism Today*, has sponsored and encouraged crucial strategic discussions on Thatcherism, the labour movement's crisis and how to overcome them. In consequence a significant section of Labour and socialist activists have listened and related to Communist analysis. Kinnock's warm welcome for Hobsbawm's 'Labour's Lost Millions' article when he chaired a Fabian Society meeting addressed by Hobsbawm on the eve of the 1983 Labour Party Conference can be viewed as a recognition of the contribution to labour movement strategic thinking that *Marxism Today* and communists like Hobsbawm are making. It is a point that has been recognised by critics as well as friends (*Socialist Action* 17 February 1984).

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No chance occurrence

This is no chance occurrence. The Communist Party's capacity to do this is indicative of the power of an open, creative Marxism, when freed from a dogmatic straitjacket, to analyse specific situations and suggest responses to them. It is also a mistake to think this development is somehow just confined to 'intellectuals', who at times in these debates have been subjected to the type of prejudice which the socialist movement is meant to challenge and eradicate. The CP's 38th Congress last November made a significant contribution to this process. The main resolution spelled out the following perspective. 'The starting point must be the definition of the main enemy and identification of the combination of forces necessary to defeat it. That main enemy is the Tory government. . . Developing mass, class and democratic struggles, uniting the labour movement and seeking out allies in a broad anti-Tory fight is the way forward for the labour movement rather than taking a narrow, go-it-alone sectarian approach to its activity'. The resolution argued 'A more outward-looking Left, which makes involvement in mass struggle and mass, political ideological work its top priority is needed to prevent its isolation'. This approach is crucial to the task of defeating the Tories and laying the conditions for the election of Labour government. The extent to which that would be a Left government 'of a new type' will depend upon the success and popular impact of the Left over the next few years.

This view contrasts sharply with those on the Left who see the answer to Thatcherism as instant socialism. Within the Labour Party Eric Heffer has long been a prominent advocate of this position. His recent contribution to the debate on 'Labour's Lost Millions' in *Marxism Today* (Dec 83) was full of references to 'Labour's immediate socialist objectives' and 'socialist policies'. Since the election Tony Benn has openly adopted this perspective, calling for campaigning on an explicitly anti-capitalist basis: 'The real answer will be found next time round . . . in organising a real

socialist campaign' (*Socialist Action* 13 Jan 1984). These sentiments may strike a chord among committed activists but they do not correspond to any sober assessment of the present political balance of forces. A sense of different phases within the process of transition to socialism is completely absent.

The Communist Party

Historically the CP has been an influential if small component of the British Left. It has been a consistent source of socialist ideas and Marxist education for successive generations of militants and activists. It has sustained the *Daily Worker* and *Morning Star* since 1930. The party has always argued for and organised extra-parliamentary struggle both in industry and the community. Furthermore, it has brought internationalist perspectives into British politics, most notably and successfully in the anti-fascist period.

The party retains these qualities today. *Marxism Today* has established a widespread reputation for serious socialist analysis, reflected in its steadily growing sales. The 1981 Peoples March for Jobs was largely conceived by the party, whose organisation and enthusiasm were central to its success. Despite its depletion, the party retains the most extensive network of industrial organisation on the Left. Its work for nuclear disarmament is recognised by friend and foe alike, while it took the lead in mobilising opposition to the Falklands war. Yet despite these real achievements the party is deeply divided and in crisis. Membership has fallen from 29,943 in 1973 to 15,691 in 1983. Domestic *Morning Star* sales have fallen from more than 30,000 to less than 15,000 in the same period, while at the last general election the average Communist vote reached a post-war low. The depth of division has been dramatically spotlighted over the issue of the political control of the *Morning Star*, where the party has been condemned as 'a body outside the PPPS'³ interfering in the paper's affairs (*Morning Star* 3 June 1983). The run-up to the November Congress was exceedingly bitter and despite Congress support for Executive Committee positions, including on the *Morning Star*, opposition to Congress decisions continues. Inevitably this combination of decline and internal polarisation has partially debilitated the party and demoralised some members.

At root the CP is suffering from an unresolved dual crisis. Firstly it has been trying to come to terms with the enormous changes which have taken place in Britain since the end of the Second World War. In this respect, it faces a serious challenge similar to that confronting the Labour Party and trade union movement. Secondly, from its foundation, the CP has always been part of an international movement. Profound and, at times, seismic shocks have convulsed the international communist movement in the past four decades. The need to confront these questions had given the evolution of the CP a distinctive dynamic.

The international movement

The response to both these issues, especially in a theoretically-based party, was bound to provoke sharp controversy. It has been the international issues which have generated the greatest heat and passion. In the wake of the revelations of Stalin's crimes at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, followed by the Hungarian events, a sizeable minority left the party. Probably more significant in the longer term, it undermined the party's unshakeable faith in the Soviet Union. The leadership responded by inserting a substantial section on socialist democracy and civil rights into the party's programme and emphasising the national independence and sovereignty of each Communist Party.

The spell of infallibility was broken. But a minority for whom



Delegates to CP 38th National Congress, 1983

Stalin's mistakes were merely 'spots on the sun' were uneasy. When the party displayed its independence in practice—opposing the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968—unease turned to opposition. As the party continued to grapple with these issues (eg, John Gollan's article on socialist democracy in *Marxism Today*, January 1976), so it became clear that for a sizeable minority any criticism of the Soviet Union was unwelcome and the principles of socialist democracy expressed by the party were considered 'revisionist'. On these questions two very different voices began to be heard in public. With the events in Afghanistan and Poland the breach has widened yet more.

The British Road

The party's early response to the postwar situation was the adoption of a programme, the *British Road to Socialism*, which envisaged the establishment of socialism without civil war through the combination of mass extra-parliamentary activity and the election of a socialist, parliamentary majority. This contrasted sharply with the previous strategy for a Soviet Britain, yet the experience of the anti-fascist period in Britain and Europe confirmed the validity of the new approach in the view of most members. While two further editions in 1958 and 1968 updated it, the major modernisation of the programme occurred in 1977.

By the mid-1970s the country's social structure and character had altered considerably; new social forces had made their mark on politics; and regeneration of Marxist thought was challenging dogmatic and vulgarised features of Marxism. The new edition retained the basic outlook of the 1951 programme but importantly broke with some previous approaches. Firstly, the nature of capitalist rule and the exercise of ruling class hegemony, gained by consent as well as coercion, was much more carefully analysed. Here the ideas of the Italian communist Gramsci were influential. This break from economic reductionist explanations of politics, of 'the Tories do what the FBI tells them' variety, was soon to have vital political implications. When the Thatcher government consistently ignored CBI advice after 1979, it was this new theoretical framework that helped the Left come to terms with Thatcherism, its authoritarian populism and its appeal to sections of the working class in ways which those in the Left stuck in economic modes of thought were unable to grasp.

Secondly, the programme recognised that as well as the capital/labour contradiction, there were other contradictions in society. The programme emphasised the oppression of women. Their increased entry into the workplace and the enhanced capacity to control their own fertility had in many ways served to highlight their continued second-class status. To overcome

² *Guardian*, 20 June, 1983.

³ The People's Press Printing Society, the co-operative which owns the *Morning Star*.

oppression and achieve liberation required an autonomous movement taking up the whole spectrum of women's issues. The situation of women could neither be explained nor resolved simply in class terms. A similar analysis applied to other social forces — ethnic minorities, students, youth, senior citizens. The working class, which the programme saw as the lynchpin of the forces for change, intercepted and overlapped with these forces. They needed to be drawn into an alliance powerful enough to wrest power from the ruling class.

Previously, the party had characterised this as an anti-monopoly alliance, yet this had the severe drawback of pivoting the alliance solely on an economic basis. This narrowed the potential scope and appeal of the alliance, while it suggested a restrictive interpretation of working class struggle. The new edition replaced the idea with the concept of a broad democratic alliance. This encapsulated two advances. It posed the central political task as the democratisation of the economy, civil society and the state while its democratic theme was a more adequate conceptual basis on which to ally a wide range of forces around the working class. This democratic theme linked in to a third new feature of the programme: it conceived of the transition to socialism as a revolutionary process which would not occur all at once but would pass through different stages. This process would require majority backing in each phase. The pertinence of this point to present debates is clear, although the implications of this concept remain greatly under-explored.

They argue as if the working class will simply and readily respond to firm, socialist leadership

The opposition

After lengthy debate these changes were approved by large majorities at the 1977 Congress. Yet the application of new concepts proved difficult and met with resistance and opposition. Gradually two strands of opposition have crystallised. The group centred around the monthly journal *Straight Left* have their origins in disagreements with the party's international orientation. They call for unconditional support for the Soviet Communist Party and believe the party has followed a revisionist course since 1956, if not before. They deride 'bourgeois feminism' and other social movements; want to abandon the CP's electoral work in order to facilitate entering the Labour Party, and are a CP mirror-image of Militant. At the last Congress they had the support of one fifth of the delegates.

The second strand of oppositionists are a combination of some who originally opposed the 1977 *British Road* with conservative elements who nominally supported it. Gradually this combination has coalesced into a fundamentalist coalition with the *Morning Star* as its main base.

Their over-riding characteristic is a refusal to confront the changing realities of British and international politics. Three examples will illustrate this. Firstly, as with Labour's fundamentalists there is no recognition of the labour movement's crisis. They argue as if the working class will simply and readily respond to firm, socialist leadership. Thus a post-election *Morning Star* editorial declared that 'the problem facing the labour movement is not that the manifesto was too advanced. . . (rather) . . . it should be developing it further to the left' (19 July 1983). Those expressing concern at Labour's election defeat have been castigated for 'pessimistic navel gazing' (6 Oct 1983). Secondly the role of social forces and non-class issues is recognised but minimised. Their character is debased. Rejecting the analysis of

the 1977 *British Road* there is a return to simple economic formulations. It is argued that the 'broad democratic alliance' mobilises people 'in struggle against the capitalist monopolies' (Tony Chater, *Morning Star* 27 Feb 1984). Thirdly, this trend wants a moratorium on criticism of the socialist countries. Former industrial organiser Mick Costello clearly expressed this realignment in the pre-Congress discussion by demanding 'it is time we allied ourselves enthusiastically with all the forces for progress in the world, the socialist camp above all' (*Focus* No 9 Sept 1983).

At the November Congress this bloc commanded support from roughly one-sixth of the delegates. On all the key controversial issues — assessment of the general election; support for martial law in Poland; hostility to *Marxism Today*; opposition to the party view on the *Morning Star*; composition of the new executive — the two opposition trends joined forces. To give an indication of the voting pattern which this produced, on the *Morning Star* they were defeated by 155 votes to 92.

The future

The 38th Congress represented an important victory for the party in defeating a twofold sectarian challenge. Clearly to overcome internal paralysis this has to be followed up by a swift restoration of the traditional relationship between the party and the *Morning Star*. Yet, of itself, this will not be sufficient to generate a brighter future. How can the party overcome its identity crisis? How can it build a new sense of purpose and direction based on the application of its most positive traditions and perceptive innovations?

The first hallmark is one which has already been mentioned at length — the formulation of a realisable strategic perspective for the Left.

This is crucial to the achievement of the party's second hallmark as an initiator and practitioner of struggle. Here, as with the question of alliances, the party's Marxist outlook distinguishes it from the electoral preoccupations of left as well as right Labourism. The *British Road* recognises the importance of elections and the legitimacy given to the Left by electoral victory, yet it never substitutes this for a wider class analysis. The programme is based upon the traditional Marxist maxim that 'the masses make history.' This feature remains a distinctive and enduring strength of the CP. Undoubtedly the internal aggravation of the last few years has weakened this role.

Its reassertion is dependent on a firm commitment at national, regional and local level to the generation of struggle on the entire gamut of issues thrown up by Thatcherism. In particular, the party's extensive roots in the labour movement can help revitalise the movement and safeguard its political links currently threatened by the Tebbit/King legislation.

The party's third distinctive feature is its commitment to alliances. Its programme recognises that social movements arise from specific contradictions in society not reducible simply to class. The party welcomes and seeks to strengthen the women's liberation, anti-racist, environmental and nationalist movements. At the same time it tries to encourage these movements to have a close, mutual relationship with the working class movement, which for theoretical and political reasons the party rightly considers the fulcrum of an alliance for progress. The breadth of these movements and their autonomy must be respected. As peoples, rather than class-based, movements it is inappropriate to seek to attach them organisationally to the Labour Party. In this sense they are clearly different from trade unions. Socialists can work in a principled way in these movements neither cloaking their broader

political beliefs nor seeking to impose them. The CP has done this consistently in the peace movement, as Bruce Kent's recent statement testified. 'I have never known occasions when the Communist Party has attempted to achieve sectarian advantage out of CND.'⁴

Alliances

Fourthly the party should project itself more boldly as an indispensable think-tank of the Left. As a party based on a creative, open Marxism, it has a particular interest in generating and popularising socialist theory and strategy. This is particularly so as regards contemporary British society, where a creative Marxism must face up to the challenge of new movements and issues such as feminism, ecology and deindustrialisation. It is true to say that the party has a creditable record here. The development of its programme; the considerable — and painful — deliberations on socialist democracy; the contribution of *Marxism Today*; and the engagement with feminism represent four notable achievements. However, enormous scope for development exists. *Marxism Today* suggests that the party can be the fulcrum for key discussions on the Left. Furthermore, while socialism is not on the immediate political agenda, the need for discussion among socialists about the character and shape of a socialist Britain remains urgent, the Left cannot ignore the need to rekindle the vision of socialism and propagate its values in modern day terms.

These four hallmarks can give the CP a clear sense of identity and purpose. If presented imaginatively this approach would unify the bulk of party members for it offers an actual and potentially significant role within the British Left without lapsing into sectarian hostility to the Labour Party or retaining grandiose aspirations of replacing it. Certainly there are real limitations on

the party's capacity and shortcomings in its work not simply attributable to internal divisions. But the party can play an influential part in the reshaping and progress of the Left and the development of wider popular struggles.

The future of the CP is not just of concern to its members. The thrust of this article has been to suggest that it is very pertinent to the prospects for the left and democratic movements as a whole. Here it is important to reiterate the considerable rethinking required by the Left. The need for a genuinely transformative strategy rather than a technocratic modernism has already been cited. This applies equally to the Left's relations to the newer social movements. These cannot be seriously embraced without an alteration in many earlier perspectives and practices. The implications of feminism for the alternative economic strategy are one case in point. Furthermore, the Left must evolve political styles and forms appropriate to the world it is striving to create, ie, participative, egalitarian between the sexes, and multi-racial.

What is clear is that the successful implementation of the politics of *British Road to Socialism* would strengthen and reinforce all those anxious to shed narrow sectarian approaches. A clear assertion of the hegemony of the broad Left over the fundamentalist Left is crucial if left wing politics is to reach into the heart of the labour movement; approach new social movements in a spirit of dialogue; and engage with the millions of working people for whom politics is a low priority. Far from being 'right wing' or 'reformist' it is the strategy and style of the CP and broader Left which offers a road out from Toryism; an avoidance of centrist 'new realism', and an exit from sterile leftist rhetoric. The next three or four years will show whether the Left will take it.

Guest speech at 38th Congress CPGB.

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