

Full marks to the GLC. Here is a new kind of politics. There are ambiguities. There are limitations. But in the context of the wider struggle within the Left, it belongs on the side of renewal against born-again fundamentalism.

# POLITICS, Pyramids and People

Beatrix Campbell

about Irish nationalism and about sexual politics - and he's successful.

My criticisms are about his concept of alliances.

not without stern scrutiny  
from our godfathers

## The GLC's innovations

So, to the GLC: what's fascinating about the GLC and the changes in the Labour Party in London is the way in which it's popular; because it's done something apparently extraordinary which is to actually honour its promises to expand fairly basic services which are really very little to do with socialism, though they are associated with the long tradition of socialist municipalism in Britain. The GLC has secured a terrific bedrock of goodwill because people think 'ah well, they're honest and they will do what they say they'll do, they will cut the fares!' It doesn't have to be socialism to make us happy, a cut in the bus fares makes us happy. We all were, weren't we?

But there was another extraordinary moment in the early 80s when the GLC gathered support around its grants policy: redistributing resources to areas of the voluntary sector. There was this mighty GLC machine negotiating with people whose relationship to political institutions, and to town hall politics particularly, had historically been a relationship of disorganisation. And alienation. For feminism, and the black movement, the existence of the GLC and that grants strategy had a number of very important effects.

First of all, an army of poor political movements and groups servicing women and children found a relationship to institutional politics on a large scale with lots of money. That meant resources being allo-

ated to movements and organisations exiled from those institutions. So this was a real monument to Rudi Dutschke's notion of the long march through the institutions. More than that, this relationship was an expression of many people's dependence on the state which didn't suppress their disaffection and anxiety about statism and past bad practises. Functions were organised, carried out, by people themselves supported and resourced by the state machine. This policy empowered people to organise themselves because it provided the resources without taking away the experience of bargaining for resources, the skills of organising those functions themselves, organising services, workplaces, nurseries.

## A model for the future?

But is it a model for the future? In several senses, yes. Firstly, because it doesn't involve abandoning the local state, in the face of a central state offensive against both the local state and public provision as such. Secondly, because that policy married the voluntary sector the local state in a period of mass discontent with the welfare state - a discontent with the *form* of its organisation rather than the principle of public provision. That alliance between the voluntary sector (dependent on state funding) and the state sector, has proved to be critical in mobilising against abolition of the GLC and metropolitan authorities. Thirdly, this policy has extended the reach of the local state into the community, particularly among women, at a point when central government has been dedicated to its erosion.

Finally, the expansion of resources into the community has involved, in the case of the GLC, *empowering* people rather than taking away the skills of organisation from the clients. If the many groups whose functions are contingent on securing GLC funding are dependent, it is only as financial claimants. It is they who have brought to the GLC and to the community skills learned through years of political practice.

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Indeed, to secure the funds in the first place, they have had to verify their credentials. A plethora of skills, both 'practical' and 'political', have thus found their way into County Hall and out again.

We are talking about literally hundreds of organisations performing concrete services, making concrete products, which would have gone to the wall if they hadn't been bankrolled by the GLC. I speak from practical experience. I work for *City Limits*, a magazine which is successful, expanding and profitable. We tried exhaustively, and failed, to secure capital from capitalist institutions. Despite an exemplary track record, we failed. British capitalist institutions, despite Thatcherism's rhetoric about small businesses, just won't risk providing the money. The GLC did. So we thrive - though not without stern scrutiny from our godfathers.

But is it a model for parliamentary practice? No, or at least not yet. Because the lesson of local government is that it can make resources directly available in a way that parliament can't. If anything, the GLC experience has proved how local government is vital to the voluntary sector





Some of the 70 members of Left Alliance.

as a direct resource, and consequently illuminates a prospectus for local democracy which brings together the expertise of bureaucracy and community practitioners.

### The political inspiration of the project

Furthermore, the experiment is rooted in the history of the Labour administration at County Hall in the 80s. What happened was the Left reached ascendancy in the Labour Party before and immediately after the election which defeated the Tory Cutler regime. A *coup d'etat* took place. Which was great. The prelude to this was the political work done outside the Labour Party for a decade, which didn't necessarily find expression in the personnel of the Labour Party itself, but did find expression in the manifestos and policies of the party. It was there that the basis was constructed for this new relationship. What we have is a large miscellaneous non-aligned Left in London which has been beaver away for 10 or 15 years, not least because one of its problems has been the Labour Party. Many of their struggles, especially around housing, represented a popular feeling of crisis among many ordinary working class people in the inner city areas in their relationship to their party. That critique was affirmed to some extent in the new directions of the GLC. But the new relationship that was being struck as the money was negotiated was one between the Labour Party and that miscellany of non-aligned radicals and activists. They had fuelled some of the politics of the Labour Party itself, which - unlike them - had access to the state machine. So, many of these non-aligned constituencies now found an unpre-

cedented focus on state power and public resources. They found a focus, too, in the Labour Party, and the Labour Party found itself with a new political constituency - one that was organised, active, and radical, that was banging on the doors waiting to get in.

That tells us something else, then, about the nature of the GLC's popularity. On the one hand there is a huge passive and pacified body of loyal support for the GLC rekindled by the policies it has adopted. And on the other hand, active, radical political constituencies, which found a place in County Hall, and some of which have also found a place in the Labour Party. Some of these, it must be said, have been refugees from other bits - smaller bits - of the Left which have gone into decline since the 60s and early 70s. At the parliamentary level, the Labour Party has still not recuperated a confident, traditional loyalty. And it certainly has not given any authentic expression to the priorities and practices of the ever-expanding non-aligned Left in Britain.

## *empowering people rather than taking away the skills of organisation from the clients*

### The lost masses

Let's return, though, to the metropolitan level. The strength of the GLC's encounter with radicalism is that it has brought to the Labour Party initiatives beyond its own imagination and beyond its own doing. And it has brought to that encounter skills of administration, often very bold and creative, beyond the skills of local activists. They're in a symbiotic relationship to each other. Though both represent people

who are into organised politics. But they still barely touch the political - or depoliticised - existence of the mass of people in London who travel on buses and whose experience of the GLC begins and ends with the fare. They are, of course, touched by the kind of razzmatazz which controversy around the GLC has introduced into all our lives - it has changed the political universe in which Londoners live. The capital has been politicised. Consequently, Ken saying things like 'well, we're all bisexual aren't we?' may scandalise an awful lot of white heterosexual bewildered citizens, but at least it puts the issue on to their own political agenda. And it puts the cultural revolution happening in civil society into the political arena.

But what isn't achieved yet is a political space in which ordinary people are going to find themselves actually beginning to be *activists* as well. We have a Labour Party now dependent on the non-aligned Left, which is into sexual politics, the politics of race, radical housing and environmental politics, etc. And activists in those arenas have a conduit to the local state through a radicalised Labour Party. But there is still a pessimistic, demoralised and terribly isolated mass of the voting public. They may vote Labour, but how are they to find their way into *active* politics? And none of these people know where to find either of this lot I've been talking about. Save at County Hall. This matters. Because the Labour Party is their party, too. But is it a conduit for them?

This brings us to a more general problem for the Labour Party and the labour movement in their relationship with their own historic base. Housing is a useful example of that problem. I use it deliberately because housing is not something that the GLC has to worry about. The GLC was spared that responsibility by the previous regime removing it to the boroughs. It has thus been spared a lot of aggravation that would have tarnished its magnificent reputation if it were indeed in the same position as your average socialist municipality. Housing, indeed, is the clue to the difference. It's not just about the relative impoverishment of, say, Sheffield as against London. The crucial thing is what are the effects of their differential responsibilities? When we look at the other socialist eldorados we see the same old mess being reproduced, as ever was. The same kind of bad practice in relation to the people who these councils employ. Employees of Sheffield's housing department are out on strike at the moment. Nursery workers struck in Islington and they are on

strike in Bolton, too, - ie, they were being badly treated by a bad employer. None of them, including the socialist republic of Sheffield, have exemplary records as employers, nor as landlords.

### Spared the aggravation

Housing may be the one instance where the average person experiences politics. It may be the issue that brings them into contact with a councillor. But the average council tenant's experience of either a councillor or an official whether it's in crummy old Bermondsey or in socialist eldorado is much the same. Liverpool, now run by a left Labour administration, has dumped support for the city's extraordinary new-build housing co-ops and plans to throw up thousands of dwellings already suspected of being the slums of the future. Bad housing policies have corroded the whole principle of collective, public provision. What is going to happen to public housing in London? This is very important to an awful lot of working class people because it's not just a matter of need, it's a matter of a political argument about the collective and democratic provision of a basic need being won or lost. It is an argument that's rooted in ordinary people's direct experience of the undemocracy of the democratic institutions that are supposed to represent them. County Hall was spared all that aggravation because it isn't responsible for housing.

Back to the point. So, having created a new base for activists estranged from the traditions of Labourism, the GLC doesn't yet adequately represent the material

needs of people who are traditional Labour voters. Maybe that's not its fault. But other authorities have those responsibilities and they are culpable. There is another dimension to this argument. Is Labour in London following through the logic of the politics represented by the new social forces? The answer lies in concepts designed to describe the new alliance between them and the Labour Party.

## tawdry far left elitism dressed up as a kind of new popular intervention in politics

### The promiscuous alliance

To find some clues, let's refer to a new book, *Who's Afraid of Margaret Thatcher?* It was very interesting, no, it really wasn't very interesting, but it was very instructive. It is a series of interviews between Ken and Tariq Ali. I didn't want to read this book, I have to be honest. Ken says that was for sectarian reasons and he's absolutely right. The other reason I didn't want to read it was that I thought I would be bored. And I was. And the reason it was boring was because the things that make Livingstone interesting are not there. And they're not part of it for very good reasons, because the boring bits of Ken Livingstone is what's in this book. Not least because of this promiscuous alliance with Tariq Ali.

This is Tariq Ali's introduction to the book, after talking about 1968, which was of course his moment, 'What can be said

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with certainty is that a serious socialist project in Britain requires a fusion of the theoretical reach and grasp of a wide layer of Marxists (like myself, he means -BC) with the practical skills, abilities and courage of leaders able to communicate with millions such as Benn, Scargill and Livingstone'. The Three Musketeers. What this amounts to is tawdry far left elitism, dressed up as a kind of new popular intervention in politics. Actually, it's *New Left Review* coming out of its closet and muscling in on a successful act. Tariq Ali's injunction is really the rehabilitation of an old formula for political organisation. It was invented a long time ago, but a recent exponent was Ernest Mandel, who wrote a classic Trotskyist pamphlet about political parties, or *the party*.

It's a pyramid of course, vanguards always are, and at the top there are very, very few people. The praetorian guard of the vanguard party, who are schooled. In fact probably they went to the best schools. Underneath it you've got the next layer with whom it is vital, according to Mandel, for these top people to communicate. They don't think terribly well, they've got a good line in jokes and good colloquial quips in the idiom of the masses, but essentially they are not intellectuals. And these people, practical activists, like Ken, are 'leaders of men' who are to be the medium through which the praetorian guard communicates with the sleeping beauties, the masses awaiting their prince.

This notion of the vanguard goes against everything that I've just been talking about, against the very thing that is interesting about the GLC which is that it gave resources to poor bits of popular politics that were already engaged in changing the material conditions in which people lived. For instance, half the budget of the women's committee, several million pounds, is spent on nurseries for children. That changes something in the lives of millions of *women* in London in ways that the Three Musketeers and Mandel frankly haven't. Tariq Ali's cameo vision of a new relationship between the theoreticians, the brains, and the stars, the brawn, of the labour movement is hardly surprising. Much of the far Left has jumped ship from small vanguards to join a bigger one.

### Realignments on the Left

What I don't understand is why this



The creche.

conversation between Ali and Livingstone is happening at all, because what's at stake actually is that despite Ken's disavowal of sectarianism the book tries to recruit him to a deeply sectarian project. There is a new alliance being drawn on the Left, and it is one that deliberately undermines the kind of alliance I described at the beginning. If Ken and Ken's allies participate in the creation of this new alliance they will be implicated in it and in its consequences. What we're seeing is that the very *critique* of the old mainstreams of Labourist chauvinism embodied in that first alliance that I referred to, is being suppressed, and dissolved, in another alliance happening somewhere else, between the old Trotskyist far Left, the Labour Party hard Left, and sectarians within the Communist Party. Basically, they want to rehabilitate a view of politics and class struggle which is unreconstructed. Tony Chater put it rather brilliantly I thought in the *Morning Star* recently, it's about a broad democratic alliance with at its heart the industrial working class, meaning its industrial core. (Meaning men). I wouldn't mind so much if it involved an authentic feel for modern politics. But it doesn't. It is often a self-regarding and self-defensive refusal, by men with their hands on our political machine, to face the cultural revolutions happening in British politics and within the working class over recent decades.

Tony Chater manipulates the miners' strike to argue that it shows how 'no credibility can be given' to ideas he then misrepresents. 'Stressing the leading role of the organised working class is not meant to disparage or belittle the contribution of other movements', he says. I assume he's including the GLC. He's certainly including feminism and the peace movement. But before we're under any illusions, he reminds us that 'these various movements did not succeed in posing a serious and sustained challenge to the existence of the Tory government.'

The changing structure of employment, away from manufacturing and extractive industries is also beside the point, he says. The lads are still where it is at. There may be a majority of workers in services and the public sector, but the 'issue is not one of numbers, but position occupied in the economic system, the degree of trade union organisation and the extent of traditionally evolved class understanding.'

The miners' strike stymies any critique of the labour movement, he argues: there is no case for downgrading the leading role of its 'industrial core'. By which he means men. And his argument assumes, of

course, that by simply stating that peace is a *class* question, etc, then so it must be. The point is that 'class struggle' as we know it did not create the peace movement. And class exploitation cannot explain men's sexual subordination of women. Furthermore, he may think they are class questions, but much of the labour movement doesn't. And their legitimacy as progressive movements is not necessarily contained in the concept of class. I mention all this because the struggle taking place inside the Communist Party clarifies differences throughout the Left, and clarifies the *meaning* of the new, sectarian alliance which crosses the boundaries of the far Left, the Communist Party and the Labour Party.

### Alliance of the dispossessed

That kind of left born again fundamentalism is really about hanging on to a position of power in the broad socialist movement which is increasingly besieged. And it must feel wonderful actually for people like Kinnock to know that he has pals on the far Left and among Tribunitives and pals among the so-called 'Stalinists' who basically agree with him when it comes to feminism, blacks and queers. They share the same culture. They share the same way of life, they share the same assumptions about what the working class is, who and what is important within it. They are certainly not about reflecting on 'This Great Movement of Ours', or rather theirs, as part of our collective problem. And

## much of the far Left has jumped ship from small vanguards to join a bigger one

that's why I think that Ken's position has a duplicity in it, forgive me for saying so. On the one hand Ken honourably affirms what the cultural revolution of the last 15 years has been about, because it's what he's about too, and on the other hand remains silent about what the fundamentalists are up to. The fundamentalists are opposed to the changes in the balance of forces within and without the working class, within and without the socialist movement. And they are opposed to any notion of alliances which disturbs *their* power. Indeed the very idea of alliances confuses and disturbs them.

There is a concept which, I think, illustrates a problem, too, in the way that Ken thinks about alliances — the concept

of the alliance of the dispossessed. It's a very attractive concept, one that Ken's been associated with, and yet it's a problem. Why? First of all, who are the dispossessed? The term is intended to describe categories of people dispossessed of politics. But they are groups with different experiences. The feminist movement, for example, is learning the hard way that such a notion cannot suppress the differences experienced by black and white, able bodied and disabled, working class and middle class women. If they share something, it is that they have been excluded from the means of organisation, the machinery of politics, by the men's movement which has hijacked the labour movement. Our problem is that capital has seized the means of production and the men's movement has seized the means of organisation.

There's only maybe one thing that they share and that is that they are not like white, able bodied, heterosexual men. So what that description does is to immunise their experience from differences, and if you like, to immunise that white Western men there from this critique. What I'm driving at is that you can't have it both ways, you can't be silent about the problem of mainstream Labourism and affirm the interests of this thing called the alliance of the dispossessed. And although no doubt Ken would deny that that's what he's doing, he is participating in an alliance which is trying to rehabilitate very battered notions of what class struggle is. But even having said that, dispossession no longer adequately describes our condition. Having been denied the machinery of the mainstream, we have built our own movements. We are not absolutely powerless. It is precisely because we have assembled new political weight that we constitute a force to be reckoned with and we are contesting the possession of the labour movement. We want to re-possess politics. You can't have it both ways. You can't simply adopt movements like feminism without following the logic of their challenge.

Finally, alliances are not simply about arithmetic - aggregating groups of people, regarded as minorities, adding them up so that they become a majority. That view of alliances reduces politics to electoral arithmetic. Alliances are political processes which transform the constituent parts in their encounter with each other. They are political dialogues in which the constituent parts become both collective agents for change and also the subjects of change.

For many women, participation in poli-

deal parties is about access to politics as the condition of their own transformation from a subordinate sex to an insubordinate sex, just as class struggle is the means of working class people leaving their condition as a subordinate class. It is about intervening in life. But for many women, participation in political parties is also about an alliance with men in order to transform men and masculinity.

**The Labour Party and politics**

Alliances are about much more than electoral pacts, they are about making encounters in which we are changed. The Labour Party still seems unable to contemplate politics as anything other than electoral pacts. They aren't alone in this. But in the context of the Labour Party, discussion of alliances tends to be simply a modification of party chauvinism. The Labour Party wants all these movements to move on to their territory, they don't want to move on to other's territory. And we fall into this trap when we talk about the future of the Labour Party only by talking about the Labour Party - as if it were the only place where politics happens. Actually it is one of the places where not a lot of politics seems to have happened.

Even here, we affirm Labour Party

chauvinism, and indeed labour movement chauvinism which I'm certainly heir to, by talking about the Labour Party when we're talking about the future of the Labour Party. Maybe one of the things we also

**a self-regarding and self-defensive refusal, by men with their hands on our political machine**

need to do is imagine a future for the Labour Party which is about when it stops being a jealous god that hangs on to its right to speak for all of the working class. There is life after the Labour Party. It hasn't clocked the fact that all sorts of ingenious forms of politics have been created outside itself, which it depends on. It has to change its attitude to itself and to political forces outside itself. That is not to say that you abandon the mainstream, that you abandon men, and that you abandon the Labour Party. It is simply to say that different terms operate between the Labour Party and the rest of the Left now and must operate if socialism is to have any future at all in this society.

In the Tariq Ali book you share the

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fundamentalists' attack on Eric Hobsbawm's attempt to extend the debate about the renewal of socialism beyond the inner-party contest between the Right and the Left. I don't think he's got it entirely right, but Hobsbawm's opponents represent an assault not only on Hobsbawm's questions - which are *valid* - but on the efforts of people like you to renew the Left. Indeed, Ken, too, has agreed with Hobsbawm's critique of left sectarianism in the inner-party struggle.

Feminism is part of that movement for socialist renewal on new terms. We are describing new terms in the alliance between men and women. And the terms are: the reform of men and the men's movement. Our challenge is against the historic compromise between the class enemy and labouring men over women, against patriarchy and all the cross-class chauvinisms which have been the ruination of socialism. Ken can't have it both ways. He can't support us and enjoy our support of him and at the same time give aid to those men of the Left who oppose us - and him. D

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