

I WOULD LIKE to begin by thanking *Marxism Today* for opening up to people like me, who are not members of the Communist Party, the opportunity of joining in this discussion about what is happening, how we should look ahead and how we should plan. I would also like to be quite clear and plain that we are entering a new and critical era in British politics, a very harsh period of struggle to defend basic rights at a time when our economic and political system is, to a very large extent, in a process of disintegration and at a time when the realignment of the Left, far from being over, has only just begun.

I joined the Labour Party 42 years ago, I was elected to parliament 34 years ago, I was elected to the National Executive of the Labour Party 25 years ago, I have served as a Cabinet Minister for 11 years in five governments and I'll be 60 in six months' time and my conclusion is very simple: that what Britain needs now is a comprehensive, peaceful and democratic revolution. We need a fundamental change in our economic system, in our power structure, in our institutions, in our ideas, in our values, including changes of equal importance in the labour and trade union movement and a recovery in our morale and self confidence. The time has come when we should argue our case in our terms and not try to defend our case against arguments that are put in their terms. That, it seems to me, must be our starting point.

I also believe that unless we offer the prospect of a real change to the British people they will not support us, follow us, or elect us; and that unless, once elected, we begin to make fundamental changes we shall be swept out of office very rapidly. There will not be time allowed to us to go round the Wilson and Callaghan course in the leisurely way that we did from 1964-1970 or again from 1974-1979. And, unless we start preparing now, as Labour local authorities and the miners are doing in their own struggles, we shan't know what to do when we get there and we shan't make any advances until we get there. There is a danger that we could always be talking about what will happen after the next election instead of discussing what we should do now. Politics is about what *we* do *here* and *now* and not what *they* do *there* and *then* when somehow they've got into parliament.

In saying this I hope you will acquit me of any complacency about the present situation or the magnitude of our defeat. Some people came up to me after the 1983 election and said 'Tony, you don't seem to

The Left is facing a serious crisis. We must put aside our differences and look to our strengths in facing future struggles.

Who Dares Wins

Tony Benn



realise how badly we were beaten'. Well as I lost my own seat after 33 years in the Commons, I didn't really need to be reminded of the extent of our defeat in 1983. Indeed, my conviction is that the origins of our defeat go back far further than 1979, probably to 1951 when Labour began to evacuate ideological and moral territory that had been won for socialism in earlier years and that the electoral defeats in 1979 and 1983 only represented the opportunity for the troops of the other side to move across the frontier into territory that we had already, long ago, abandoned to them. Therefore, far from thinking the situation is easier as some might argue, I believe it's a much more formidable and deep-seated crisis than many people yet realise.

The self-deception of Thatcherism

The greatest self deception to be found inside the labour movement is practised by those who pretend that the problem is one that can be described in terms of Thatcher and Thatcherism and that to replace her and substitute an anti-Thatcherite government would itself be an adequate response to what we face. If Thatcher was, in truth, the real problem the Brighton bombers might have solved it for us, yet all of us know that had she been the victim of an assassin as Mrs Ghandi was, all our investment in building up Thatcher and Thatcherism would have been wasted. We would have had Tebbit and Tebbitism or Pym and Pymism and we would have squandered our effort by trying to focus our criticism against an individual. Moreover,

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if we believe that an 'anti-Thatcherite government' would be the answer, we must remember that there are plenty of people queuing up to form such a government, including Frances Pym, David Owen, David Steel and Frank Field with his rainbow coalition which is supposed to open up a new era. There is no answer to this crisis by seeking electoral arrangements. The only electoral change that would be relevant, and I've long believed we should look at it again, is the Chartist demand for an annual parliament because if people had the vote more often that would offer a better way of controlling those who are in power.

I believe therefore that all this talk of Thatcher and Thatcherism is a diversion and that, as socialists, we must be more analytical than that. For what is really happening is much more deep-seated. A decaying British capitalism is being forced by its own internal pressures, or contradictions, to withdraw the gains that it could afford to concede to working people during the post-war boom. The present attack upon the trade unions, upon our public services, upon local democracy, upon civil liberties, upon women, upon the black community, upon the gay community and upon the Irish is a part of that process. And we have got to see this in real terms and recognise that the old liberal, middle class, I suppose best represented, by the *Guardian*, which went along with the Attlee consensus is now deeply frightened. It doesn't like the present cabinet but it fears change even more, and the power base of that once great liberal establishment - if ever it was either great or liberal - is in the civil service and the mass media which now exercise enormous power over the minds of our own people.

Next, we must understand that the EEC, which was designed to give capitalism a fresh lease of life in a wider Europe, now has as its main purpose to protect business and finance from any threat to their free market operations that might emerge through the agency of progressive governments, democratically elected through the ballot box, by the states which compose the Common Market. My own experience of the EEC, on whose council of ministers I served for five years, and of which I was once President, was that if ever you tried to use your power as an elected government in any way to interfere with market forces you had one, two or three commissioners round your neck threatening to take you to court.

We must also surely see that NATO has developed into an international military axis under American hegemony to protect western economic and political influence in the Third World and to be a cover to build up huge, unaccountable, military machines inside each country, which - if the truth were known - are more anxious and concerned at the prospect of domestic unrest than they are at any prospect of foreign invasion.

Finally, we cannot avoid admitting that we have a long-running war in Ireland where the real motive is not to protect the Protestant minority, but to maintain a NATO presence on that island. Because since the Republic is a neutral country any

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reunification of Ireland under the Irish constitution would mean that Ireland was no longer a member of NATO. The second reason why Britain remains in the north is that it is a convenient place to prepare for domestic repression in Britain with the plastic bullets and all the measures that have been adopted there.

Abuse of institutions

Those are some of the real problems we face and we are handicapped by having inherited institutions that have become so corrupted that some of them are now barely usable as instruments by a labour movement that wants to make real change. I start with the widespread abuse of the crown prerogative by ministers. One example is the secret building of the atom bomb by Attlee who told neither cabinet nor parliament; another, the signature of the Treaty of Accession to the Common Market when it hadn't even been published under the royal prerogative of treaty making. The launching of the Falklands war was done without seeking a vote in parliament on the grounds that war-making was a royal prerogative. The abolition of the trade unions at Cheltenham was upheld by the courts on the grounds that if the crown says that questions of national security are at stake then no human rights are left that can be tested in the courts. Another aspect of the abuse of crown

powers is the widely corrupting use of patronage under which a prime minister appoints and sacks ministers, appoints peers, makes judges, makes bishops, appoints the chairman of the BBC, the chairman of the IB A, the chairman of the nationalised industries. That is a power no American president has and no medieval monarch in Britain exercised.

Secondly, we have the problem of the Lords which we somehow accept as inevitable, meaning that we are only allowed to elect half a parliament and that when there is a Labour landslide we control one house out of two and when there is a Tory landslide they control both houses. There is, too, a wider danger to democracy that comes from a tendency for parliamentary democracy which the Chartists and the Suffragettes fought to establish, to decline into a weak type of 'elected parliamentarianism' where members of parliament seem to be content to be excluded from real power by the executive working behind official secrecy that leaves Labour backbenchers out of any knowledge of what is happening even when we are in power; and by an intense dislike of accountability which has expressed itself in recent debates within the Labour Party.

Next, we have a misuse of the police and the security services, the unaccountable power of the mandarins, the media, the pollsters, the magistrates and the judges who have become, and allowed themselves to become, naked instruments of class power as has emerged so clearly during the miners' strike. And, if I am listing what is wrong, we have a defective educational system designed, through O-levels and A-levels, to set up hurdles that keep working-class people down and pave the way for a managerial elite reinforced by a few bright working-class kids to go on into top positions, and ultimately to retire at 60 on half pay, index-linked, when others have to struggle on to 65, if they are lucky enough not to be made redundant before that time comes. We also have an economic system that excludes any democratic control whatever from those who work in private industry. Then there is institutionalised sexism and racism throughout society and an artificially induced nationalism built upon a fear and distrust that is deliberately stimulated to inhibit - for political purposes - any action that might correct it.

If I have learned one lesson from a lifetime in politics, and a lot of it in what you would call the top of politics, it is that

we cannot use the institutions and cultures devised by another class, in another period, for another purpose, to meet our needs in our age for our purposes and we have got to be more fundamental in our approach. Just ask yourself whether having Joe Gormley in the House of Lords is more powerful than having Arthur Scargill on the picket line, and see which institutions best assist us in our purpose. We must create much more democratic and open institutions and our own culture if we are to win.

This whole superstructure was designed and is operated to control us, to divide us, to confuse us and to demoralise us and hence to preserve the status quo by pretending that there is no alternative. One of the greatest failures of the British labour movement, which is one of the strongest and best in the world, is that throughout its history and even in its periods of parliamentary power, it has done practically nothing whatsoever to change power relationships in the state. Thus the argument about revolution versus reform is almost irrelevant in that we haven't even had reform in Britain. We have had people talking about reform but not reforming and hence a fundamental change is now called for.

A clear stand

Our task, it seems to me, is to liberate people, to unite people, to clarify the issues, to encourage people, to prepare and to organise for the change we know is necessary. If we look at the practical steps that this requires we must begin with the real situation that actually faces us. We must support the miners in their struggle, in terms of cash, in terms of organisation, and in terms of political argument. We must also protect other unions in struggle, support actively the women's demands which have not been met, to support the ethnic communities, to support the pensioners, many of whom will die this winter of hypothermia for lack of coal the miners could dig if they were not just about to be sacked. We must fight for the young unemployed who leave school in Liverpool and six years later have no prospect of work. We must support the peace movement and the Irish in their demand for reunification. And we have to connect these struggles, one with another, because one of the cleverest things the establishment does is to keep us in watertight compartments, and some trade union leaders have gone along with it for years by saying 'we're in an industrial struggle, it's not political'. You've only got to say a

strike is 'political' and everybody holds up their hands. You've got to connect all struggles and unite all struggles and we've got to encourage a socialist dialogue. We now have a lot of historical experience of socialism, not only in the Soviet Union and the Eastern countries but in Yugoslavia, in Cuba, in Nicaragua, and there is a lot of political argument going on amongst socialists. Perhaps you'll allow me to say that it is time we buried the old family quarrel between Stalin and Trotsky and listened to what is said by all types of socialists in the debate. If you don't agree with them, out-argue them - but don't exile them and expel them and hope that in that way you can avoid difficult questions.

The labour movement has now got to formulate clear demands. We must use the energy released by the miners' strike which is phenomenal in those areas, with the women's action groups and so on.

we have forgotten the power of moral argument

We've got a whole range of hitherto unknown capacities and have had a tremendous morale boost. Now we've got to use all that talent and put it behind clear demands upon the system - all of which are well within our capacity as a rich industrial country. We must demand useful work, and that will probably mean a huge expansion of the public services. We must demand lifelong education for all so you can go in and out of school and college as now you go in and out of a library to learn what you want to learn, when you want to learn it, and come out when you've learned it without all these absurd barriers set up by the colleges. We must have a comprehensive health service so that you don't need to wait until you are ill before you go to the doctor. You should go on a regular basis for a check-up and health care must be extended into legal barriers against pollution which causes so much ill health, or the use of chemicals in food that is a danger.

And, if Mrs Thatcher doesn't nationalise the banks within the next few months, which is quite possible, if the Third World debt crisis causes a financial collapse - as Mussolini did in the 1920s - if she doesn't do it, we've got to do it. We have also got to go for non-alignment and break with the NATO arrangement for the reasons that I gave earlier on. We've got to go for a planned economy that allows to this country, in conjunction with other countries,

freedom from the Treaty of Rome. And we've got to move to a united Ireland by terminating our jurisdiction in Ireland and then help bring together our comrades and colleagues from across the water, towards class politics in Ireland.

Class structure and political support

The final question is 'can we win support for these ideas?' Has some subtle and irreversible shift in the class structure taken place that has deprived us of our historic opportunity? Is it true that all we're left to do is to have a private talk with somebody from another party to see if we could cook up an alternative to the present cabinet? Is it really true that because there are fewer blue collar workers we can't do any of these things? That because computer operators have bought their council houses and got a new brass knocker and are upwardly mobile, we can't do any of these things? Is it true that because the TUC, which was never strong at its strongest, have adopted the 'new realism' we shall never be able to do these things?

I don't believe it. First of all because when we did have a classic class structure of a kind that would have made every Marxist go to sleep happily at night, we always had a Tory government. We never had socialism in the 19th century when there was great oppression, enormous poverty, or in the 30s when millions of people were organised in unions in their overalls, we never had socialism. We cannot build our future on the idea that we must rely upon mechanistic Labourist loyalties not based on any serious thought. And may I put another point to you: industrialisation is very new in Britain, it's only been going for 200 years. We were a Third World country until the middle of the 18th century, and in the Third World socialism has made far greater advances than it has in many industrialised countries. I think Marx himself would have been amazed to discover that it wasn't Germany that was the first country to go socialist followed by Britain, it's the Third World countries that have gone socialist. Countries that have never even had the industrial class structure whose departure has caused such anxiety to so many socialist intellectuals. And let me say something else. We have forgotten the power of moral argument: the idea that some things are right and some things are wrong. The real strengths of socialism lie in the non-economic values that we advocate, the rejection of economics even if we can manipulate them in our favour. Even if we could produce theories or figures that

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show that every pit was profitable, that's not what it's about at all. Look, for example, at Latin America where the liberation theologians have begun to join with the Marxists so that priests are Marxists and Marxists are priests, and you can get an idea of its strength. Nor should we forget that common sense is on our side.

Popular support, not electoral deals

I believe that the road to victory lies in accepting one or two ideas before we start. Firstly, we should understand the enormous dangers that face us, including the drift to fascism without being a little bit frightened of any of them. But we must understand that they are there. Secondly, we must have the courage to speak up and fight because all the experiences of 1984 have shown that if you fight you win, and if you fudge you fail. That has been proved by the miners, by the Liverpool councillors who were also denounced and, dare I

say it, by the thousands of people from the Labour Party and the Communist Party who came into Chesterfield. There we put forward a principled socialist position and beat the media that spent a million pounds and sent 25 film units and endless pollsters and all the Fleet Street hacks into that town. The fact that we beat them, is an indication there is nothing to be afraid of if you say what you mean and mean what you say, and people believe it.

Our road to victory does not lie in coaxing back half a dozen *Guardian* readers from their flirtation with the SDP, but in mobilising the 10 million people who don't vote but who are our natural constituents because they are the ones, more than any other, who are repressed by our society. I do not believe that we will win by disconnected theorising, or electoral manoeuvring. We shall win by practical socialist arguments that begin with the experience of ordinary men and women. We

must be there when they need us, and then assist them, as best we can, to learn from their experience and make something of it so that socialism and the vision that we have, and the revolution that we need, is constructed by the people, for the people, and not one that drips down from above - to be imposed whether they like it or not.

I am an optimist. I confess it is a terrifying period if you look at it one way. But if you look at it in another way there is more buoyancy, more hope, more activity and more confidence now than I've known at any time in my political life and I was born in 1925. Whatever we say, and whatever arguments we have, and however we disagree we must do nothing that would discourage that hope from realising itself in action. Socialists must provide that unifying thread that connects all these struggles together. Then there is really nothing we cannot achieve and we can resuscitate that old long-forgotten slogan 'Socialism in our time'.