

The balance of forces doesn't look promising for the Left. In spite of everything the Right continues to hold the political initiative, while the Left has barely begun the vital work of renewing and transforming its project.

Faith, Hope or Clarity

Stuart Hall

LET ME START by saying that I regard this not as a debate in which one tries to score easy points - the issues at stake are too important for that - but as a serious discussion about the current prospects for socialism and the Left. I have long admired Tony Benn for some of the courageous positions he has taken in the labour movement. Nevertheless, I differ substantially from the main thrust of what he has just said in one respect in particular, which however is of fundamental importance.

I do not differ substantially from the characterisation of the state of the country under the Thatcher government which he has offered. Nor do I find myself in disagreement about the broad direction of change which he argues is historically now required in this society. But the argument is not about these questions. The argument between us resolves itself principally into a *strategic* question which, may I add, *Marxism Today* has played the key role in placing on the political agenda. The question is: what is the balance of forces in

Britain at this present moment? How are the forces for and against the Left disposed? When one looks at the political situation, can one say that the balance of political forces is such as to suggest that the immediate prospects for socialism look favourable? Do the broad political forces which are necessary for any decisive turn to the left in Britain look stronger, better organised, on the offensive on a broad range of fronts and more in command of the initiative than they did two or five years ago? Does the Left look like the kind of alliance capable of putting socialism as a political project back on the agenda - and doing so in a way which is capable of winning mass majority popular support in the country? I do not believe that any serious analyst of politics can answer these strategic questions in the affirmative. And *that* is the issue on which I substantially differ from Tony Benn.

An assessment of the current balance of forces resolves itself into basically two aspects. The first has to do with the character and relative strength of the Right; the second has to do with the strength, unity and prospects for the Left. Everything that I want to say can really be largely resumed under those two headings.

But let me first, as an aside, respond to Tony Benn's charge of 'pessimism'. It will undoubtedly emerge, as I go on, that I am



Stuart Hall and Tony Benn at the Left A live conference, 1984.

quite pessimistic about the current political climate. I am sorry about that. I don't enjoy it. Pessimism is not my natural temperament or state of mind. In fact, in my view the question of pessimism is neither here nor there. The issue is not whether I am pessimistic or not, but whether I am correct in my analysis of the current situation. I am not here to engage in a trade off with anyone as to which of us can best rally the troops. Rallying the troops has its place in politics, but this is not such an occasion. The question is, rather, being realistic about what there is for the troops to be optimistic about. And this thought, awkward as it is, leads me to speak, briefly, of another: the responsibilities of intellectuals.

Ours remains a deeply anti-intellectual movement. Of course, intellectuals have much to atone for in the labour movement: their lack of involvement in the struggle, their lack of centrality in active politics, often, their divorce from the experiences and aspirations of ordinary working people. Nevertheless, in addition to duties, intellectuals also have responsibilities to the movement. And their prime responsibility is to analyse in depth the situation which confronts us so that our analysis may inform political action and strategy, and prepare people to be better armed intellectually, theoretically, politically, in the struggle that lies ahead. Intellectuals can only discharge that duty if they are prepared to speak of the situation as hon-

estly and ruthlessly as they find it. 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will': that was Gramsci's watchword and I do not hesitate to say that it will do for me too.

The concept of Thatcherism

Now we can briefly start with the Right. I have used the term Thatcherism and I insist on it. It is ludicrous to suggest that by doing so, one over-personalises the Right. Just as Stalinism is not attributable to Stalin alone, so Thatcherism, as a political formation, is not limited to the person of the prime minister. One uses it in order to insist on the specific and distinct character of the new Right as a political formation. The description of this session in the programme for the weekend spoke about the major blow to the labour movement and the Left represented by the 1983 general election. Of course. It was a massive, major defeat inflicted on the whole of the Left by this new political formation. The only question is, why was it unexpected? The trend has been perfectly clear for all optimists to see since 1979. Anybody who really understands British politics, and who is not bemused by the idiotic psephology which passes for political analysis these days, knows that 1979 was not simply an electoral reverse, it was a profound and damaging political reversal. As is always the case in British politics, the electoral landslide of 1983 was not the cause but the result, the symptom, of a much deeper political reversal which be-

gan, not with Mrs Thatcher's overwhelming majority in 1983, but with the ultimate collapse and disintegration of the Callaghan government in the mid-70s and the haemorrhaging of popular support to the Right which followed.

Why, then, insist on the distinctive character of Thatcherism? The first reason is that, of course, although Thatcherism as a political and ideological force owes a great deal to traditions which have been active in the ruling class, on the Right and in the Conservative Party for a very long period of time, we have not seen that kind of political engagement, right across the political spectrum, by a political force on the Right at any time since the war. Secondly, as a political force, the new Right combines new and old elements. It draws on the old lexicon of organic, patriotic Toryism, but it combines this with a virulent brand of neo-liberal economics and an aggressive religion of the market. It is this novel combination which has established a kind of popular bridgehead in the community at large. Of course, there have been popular Conservative governments before - right through the 19th and 20th centuries. But what is particularly novel is that the new Right succeeded in its effort to establish *itself* as the radical political force, the political force that was going to change things. One of the most astonishing signs of the reversal in the 1979 election was to hear Mr Callaghan complain that the radical Right meant to tear the old

'Prospects for the Left' Debate

system up by the roots. And we had been foolish enough to imagine that tearing society up by the roots was what *socialism* was about!

The harsh, uncomfortable fact is that the Right was able sufficiently to identify itself as a kind of populist political force, able to connect its message with some of the actual, real discontents which people were experiencing under Labour. Further, the evidence is clear that, however temporarily, the new Right made an effective penetration into the very heartland of the traditional support for the Left and the labour movement. It displaced reformist politics from the centre of the political stage and began to swing people: to provide people with the terms, not necessarily with the profound conviction, but with plausible reason enough to win to its side important sectors of the community. The new Right *was* able to disorganise the Left, to deepen the unpopularity of the unions and anti-union sentiment, to attack directly those elements of the postwar consensus which, though of course they did not constitute socialism, must inevitably constitute the basis and groundwork in Britain for the socialist case. If you cannot, in a country like ours, with its deep divisions of class and its massive inequalities, sustain intact the popular case for welfare socialism, what is the evidence that the transition to socialism proper is at hand?

A political defeat

And now, in spite of massive unemployment, the extensive deindustrialisation of the British economy, despite the fact that the Right now propagates an explicitly class view of society, where it is planned to off-load the costs of the recession on to the backs of the working class, the Left still cannot generate the broad, sweeping, emergent movement of opposition and resistance; the electorate do not regard Labour as a credible political alternative. In my view, despite its many disasters and the mobilisation around the miners' strike, the Right is *still* in place as the leading political force in society. Certainly, Thatcherism is not universally popular. It cannot resolve the basic problems of the society and the economy. Thatcherism has never commanded universal assent on the political scene. But that is not what political leadership is about. It's impossible in a society like ours. The question is: can it lead the key sectors? Can it win the strategic engagements? Can it stay in front when challenged? The awkward fact is that

so far the Left cannot prevent the massive privatisation going on in industry, has succeeded, where the defence of the welfare state is concerned, with staving off massive cuts only in the National Health Service, cannot prevent the dismantling of the GLC and the metropolitan boroughs, has not so far reversed the widespread unpopularity of the unions, and has no way of guaranteeing the kind of success for the miners which was achieved in 1972 and 1974.

Now I think what I have been describing is a political defeat, a political throwback, a reversal of a very profound kind. I have no investment in the term Thatcherism itself, but I think it undermines our understanding of how profound the political reversal is simply to say there is nothing new, the

Just as Stalinism is not attributable to Stalin alone, so Thatcherism. . . is not limited to the person of the prime minister

new Right is just the old class enemy in a new disguise. If you say it's just the old enemy, apart from misreading its particular political complexion, you might be tempted to believe that the Left can fight it in just the old ways. Its political programme and ideas are represented as simply 'their' ideology, nothing whatsoever to do with us: the Left can go on its sweet way, addressing its own supporters in its own, old tried ways. I have to say that I think that way of understanding how political ideas find root in the actual experience of people is absolutely incorrect.

It represents a kind of automatism on the Left. The ruling class has *its* ideas, and the working class has the expected revolutionary consciousness: all you have to do is to present the latter with the correct slogans and policies. Or, their fathers and grandfathers voted Labour and they are going to go on doing so till the end of time. Or, because people have a particular socio-economic position somehow they are going to have the correct thoughts at the correct moment. Again and again, the Left has operated with an analysis which leads it to expect the working class to turn up in an already united form, in its appropriate place in the frame, so to speak. And when it fails to do so, instead of going back and trying ruthlessly to examine why it is, why

under particular historical circumstances things have not worked out in the predicted way, we have comforted ourselves with predictions about the ever rising tempo of class struggle, or fallen back on conspiracy theories - all would be well if the movement were not misled by what Tariq Ali charmingly called the 'pink professors'. There is no need to engage in struggle for that difficult terrain where 'hearts and minds' are won and lost. The band of the faithful will do it. Now I am in favour of faith, especially when it moves mountains. But, not being religious, I am dubious about faith without some other visible means of support. On its own, faith has never created socialism.

Why is it that the Right has been able to exercise political authority in this way? In part it has to do with the relationship between the different political forces and the whole society. One disastrous aspect of the Left's response to the 1979 and 1983 elections is the idea that the Left can, as it were, mount a resistance when it is required and generate the kind of popular solidarity and support which is needed to halt the Right's advance, by rallying the already converted, from within itself alone. This is the view that Tony Benn came close to justifying, that by organising and consolidating its own already committed ranks, by strengthening and deepening those forces which are already mobilised, that that will be sufficient to win the struggle.

Class - reality not rhetoric

Now my own view is that, although organising around existing left forces and the organised labour movement is an absolute prerequisite of an effective fightback, it is not enough to displace the new Right. The Left must also be able, on its own programme, with its own project, to engage the society as a whole, to become representative of society as a whole, to generalise itself throughout society, to bring over strategic popular majorities on the key issues, to win converts, first of all among those sectors of its own class and those who can come into alliance with it, but who have in recent years not supported it. But secondly, to make converts to its cause, to carry the case to a widening set of constituencies, to polarise the society in new ways towards the left, to connect with new experiences in society, to engage with its increasing complexity and in that way to make socialism grow in relevance to the emerging experiences as well as the tradi-

tional experiences of our time.

There may be historical scenarios when socialism can and has to be built without becoming the politics of the popular majorities of society, but the precedents for it are not good, and in any case Britain is not at the moment a place where such a scenario has the slightest credibility. But that means coming out of our own, self-imposed ghetto, whether that ghetto is the labour movement, or the trade union movement, or the Labour Party: coming out and engaging with society as a whole. It doesn't only mean engaging with the new sectors, new issues and new movements on the Left. It also means engaging with the many positions and aspects of class experience which are not currently touched by or reflected in the ways in which socialism is defined. Let us not allow ourselves here to be confused by rhetorical appeals on this question of class. I am afraid I think Tony Benn grossly misrepresented the question

of that kind does exist, but it is a strange historical construct and has precious little to do with Marxist analysis or socialist politics. What we are talking about are the real changes which are going on in the working class: not just political changes, but changes in the way in which the class is constituted, how classes themselves and their relationships are always made and remade in a crisis. If we know anything from our historical past, it is that crises are periods of reconstruction as well as deconstruction. Changes move and accelerate more rapidly when the normal defences are weakened and the normal operations of society are suspended, in a crisis.

What one is saying is: look at the social, economic, cultural forces which are constantly remaking and revolutionising the society, including its class dynamic. Look at how class constantly reworks other issues and contradictions in society. Unless the Left can develop political prog-

disorganise their previous commitments to the labour movement and the Left.

The state of the Left

Now I don't think that we can frame an adequate project or strategy for the revival of socialism and the Left unless and until we have come to terms with the dimension of the problem: that is to say, with the novelty of the new Right and its capacity to develop, between 1975 and 1984, a form of hegemonic politics, that is to say, a form of politics which, while not universally popular, was able to fight and establish its position on one front after another. The new Right was able to generate a notion of what the whole society was or should be about; it gave people a picture of what 'a whole way of life' was about. The fact that we find that picture degrading does not undermine the fact that Thatcherism presented people with a philosophy of life, of what the whole society was like. By contrast, who can say with confidence what a socialist Britain would be like to live in?

This brings us to the other side of the equation - the Left. It seems clear that the Right used the negative experience of social democracy in the 60s and 70s to establish their own case. A counter philosophy or image of the society of that kind does not at present exist on the Left and all of Tony Benn's heroic efforts to conjure one out of the past, important though that recovery of socialist tradition is, cannot replace the need for a picture of socialism in the 21st century.

How do we assess the current strength and unity of the forces of the Left? Undoubtedly the miners' strike has released enormous confidence and energy on the Left. But our political futures are unlikely to be decided by any single engagement, however strategic. Let us look across the board at how the Left has faced up to the undermining of some of its basic positions and support since Labour gave up all semblance of reformism in the mid-70s and itself opened up the pathway into monetarism and 'economic realism'.

The growth of the Left in constituency Labour Parties is obviously of crucial importance here: such a change in political tempo inside the party itself obviously has important consequences in terms of preparing socialist positions, and so on. But it is clear from the last two elections that the socialist response to the new Right cannot be built from inside the Labour Party alone. Secondly, what is happening is more a capturing of positions and initiatives inside the party by the resolute Left. It does not - with some important excep-



of class by caricaturing our argument as if we had advanced some notion that class is disappearing or the class system has been abolished, and with it the basis of the socialist case. No one could seriously sustain such a case.

What is being debated, and *has* to be, is what the real composition of the working class in advanced industrial capitalist societies is today. Do its experiences, aspirations and agendas remain what they have always been, untouched by time and history? A sentimentalised version of class

rammes which are adequate to this shifting reality, which adequately reflect the actual variety of social experiences, it is perfectly possible for the Left to lose its purchase on the political imagination of the masses and for the Right to develop forms of address, language and appeal which, while lacking the capacity really to transform their existence, nevertheless present people with plausible ways of making sense of their experience; ways which bend them towards political support for the Right or which, at the very least, undermine and

'Prospects for the Left' Debate

tions - involve a real popular surge of socialist feeling inside the Labour Party of a kind which looks capable of convincing the population as a whole that Labour is a credible political alternative to the Right.

I think there are two problems here. One has to do with the nature of the Labour Party itself, and the Left's conception of the party's relationship to society. The Left seems to think somehow that if it is able to change the tempo, the commitment, the vitality of political work, inside the constituency parties, it will thereby inevitably change society. It's a curious way which people in the Labour Party have of identifying the party with the world. The fact is, of course, that the political fightback against the new Right has happened as effectively outside of the traditional echelons and organisation of the Labour Party as it has inside. And unless one looks at the broad and varied fronts of struggle which have brought numbers of people into activity, one wouldn't be giving an adequate account of it. But then, one has to ask, what is the relationship of the Labour Party to all those different forces that are in struggle and actually compose 'the Left' on the ground? The traditional view is that although the Labour Party welcomes single-issue campaigns, on the whole it continues to act as if, in the end, it will be capable of incorporating and subordinating all those other struggles and of doing so without fundamentally transforming its own internal structure, political character and project. Even though Tony Benn always scrupulously acknowledges the role of the new social movements, I detect precisely this absorbative approach in his project too. I personally don't believe it's possible.

I think the only way in which Labour, or any other political party on the Left for that matter, should function is by recognising the fundamentally diverse character of this thing which is called 'the Left'. It is impossible to foresee a point when all those struggles and movements come into line inside the already established hierarchy of social forces that constitute the existing labour movement, settle their differences and resolve in the great scheme of things to take their appointed place in the line and wait in turn, women behind men, blacks behind women, gays behind everybody. Waiting their turn. As a political project that seems to be absolutely dead: and yet I see little evidence that the Labour Party in general is able to construct any new kind of

relationship with those new social forces which are at once also, in the main, part of the working class. The one thing I am sure of is that the problem cannot be resolved without the construction of a major set of alliances around the labour movement and that in turn cannot develop without transforming the nature of socialist organisation on the Left and indeed redefining the socialist project itself. It can't be done by evolving the Left stronger but in essentially the same form in which it already exists. It cannot be done without a rupture and change of relationships inside the labour movement. The labour movement is going to have to change the nature of its organisation, the nature of its hierarchies and its culture in order to reflect more accurately the actual range of forces and experiences which constitute 'the Left'. Until this internal transformation in the labour movement occurs you will not have an instrument that is capable of generalising the struggle for socialism to the working class on *all* the sites on which exploitation occurs, and indeed expanding it to the society as a whole.

the fundamentally diverse character of this thing which is called 'the Left'

I am not sanguine about the capacity of the Left to face up to the kind of fundamental reappraisal I believe to be necessary. Of course I am immensely strengthened by particular events - forms of resistance, both planned and unplanned, both in the formal labour movement and outside it, which have resisted or set limits to the encroachments of Thatcherism over the last three or four years. Of course, we have to find ways of building on those initiatives. But if you ask me to make a sober assessment of whether the popular reception of Labour's programme in 1983 represented an overwhelming vote of confidence by the majority of the population for a socialist programme - the claim which Tony Benn has recently made - I cannot tell you that this corresponds to my reading of the evidence. I certainly believe that people can be won for the socialist case, but it seems to me extremely dangerous in this respect to confuse what one would like to happen with what is happening.

I think, for example, that the failure of the Labour Party to be able to politicise

and *generalise* the miners' strike, winning converts to this fundamental socialist case in all sectors of society, is one of the most crippling defeats that has already happened inside the labour movement. Because the political case for the miners has to be a case not confined to miners and mining communities only, or indeed to the trade unions, or indeed to the working class. It has to be a case which unites the cause of the class with the sense of justice and fairness to the communities with a wholly different conception of economic need and with a broader policy for energy. Precisely, it is an example of where, to win the class argument, class and society wide issues have to be constructed together into a broad, popular strategy, advancing and winning converts on several fronts at once. To fight it as a narrow, sectional, class issue is to lose its class content - and all the heroism which has sustained the strike, and the extraordinary new, emergent elements surfacing within it - the linkage of class and feminist activity, for example - will be of no avail if the right kind of politics cannot be developed, which is commensurate to the issue, and fights it in a way relevant to the current disposition of forces in society. For example, how could the miners 'win' unless by a politics which won back legitimacy for the trade unions and did something to reverse the tide of unpopularity which not only made the Right able to legislate against the unions with popular support, but resulted in a deep division of loyalty within the class itself?

How is a political case of this order to be built? It can only be built by the right kind of political leadership - a leadership *aware* of the hostile context in which it is operating. But, so far, all the politics of the Labour Party has been able to inject into the miners' strike is the delicate work of damage prevention, looking over its shoulder to make sure that the fall-out on the leadership was not too great. Now if that looks to you like a party with enough political imagination and 'feel' for the current situation to put itself at the head of the different forms of struggle and to take that struggle, not just into its own organisations, but out into society and to generalise the case for socialism on the basis of it, then I would yield to a more optimistic version of events. I honour Tony Benn's courageous efforts to 'gloss' the current situation in this way, but I regret to say that, on this issue, I believe he is whistling in the dark.