



JOHN FOSTER Moving the Goalposts

Hindsight is the interpretation of the past in the light of the subjective needs of the present, and this is precisely what Dave Cook has given us in his article 'No Private Drama' (*Marxism Today* February).

The stated intent of Cook's contribution is to explain why the Communist Party is so deeply divided, and, in doing so, demonstrate the wider relevance of this drama to the Left in general. He begins his explanation with a question. Why, he asks, did these differences only come to light in 1982-5, and not in 1968, 1977 or 1980?

The gist of his answer is that it took the full impact of 'Thatcherism' and the accompanying 'crisis of the labour movement' to bring out the true meaning of the 1977 edition of the *British Road to Socialism*.

It was, Cook claims, the application of our programme to this new challenge, principally through the pages of *Marxism Today*, that finally flushed out those conservative elements in the party who had only nominally support the *British Road* in 1977 and who in response 'hijacked' the *Morning Star*.

This caricature of events is highly dangerous. For it attempts to give the status of historical fact to a perspective which, if unchallenged, will be actively liquidationist in our party.

It seeks, directly and organisationally, to promote confrontation. It congratulates the January Executive Committee meeting on its 'long overdue' action in bringing 'the conflict' into the open and making it 'explicit'.

But under the cover of defending the *British Road* it seeks to transform the whole basis for legitimate discussion within the party. Cook defines his 'theoretical battleground' almost entirely in terms of the new orthodoxy established in the pages of *Marxism Today*. Those whose loyalty is

now in question are those disputing 'the long term decline of the labour movement', who cannot accept the Hall-Jacques line on 'Thatcherism' and who argue against a concept of alliance that separates out 'social' and 'class' elements. These are the new 'fundamentalists'.

Political memories are often conveniently short. But anyone who cares to remember 1977 and the years immediately after cannot fail to notice that Cook has managed to turn the political goalposts almost full circle. In 1977 it was precisely such interpretations of the *British Road* which were ruled out of order in the Congress debate.

Jack Woddis sharply rejected the arguments of those, like myself, who claimed that the new text contained ambiguities that could permit a reformist interpretation. But at the same time he repudiated a definition of 'alliance' from Sue Slipman that was in essence no different from that now proposed by Dave Cook.

Jack Woddis stressed that the broad democratic alliance always had to be seen as directed *against* monopoly. It was precisely because state monopoly capitalism was the specific form of class rule of our time, and inherently anti-democratic, that the working class had, in a new way, to become the champion of all oppressed sections. It could never be a simple matter of assembling a series of autonomous groups, however interactive, into a political majority.

Yet today Cook's division of the broad democratic alliance into 'social' and 'class' elements does just that. It is not that it asserts primacy for the social elements. What is so damaging is the fact that this formulation abstracts them from the class character of our society and thereby changes their ultimate relationship to the working class as a revolutionary class.

Only two years after the *British Road* debate it was, of course, Dave Cook who was the main exponent of the minority

report on inner-party democracy. This sought to alter dramatically the internal structure of the party, and effectively end it as a party organised to conduct class struggle. Dave Priscott, in arguing against it, warned that it would, if carried, transform the *British Road* from a revolutionary to a reformist programme.

The 1979 Congress rejected the minority report, and its implicit reinterpretation of the *British Road*. But its supporters continued their offensive, and two years later, in 1981, some of them, notably Bea Campbell, were publicly campaigning for a new relationship between the *Morning Star* and the democratic movement and for an end to the editorial link with the Communist Party.

At the 1981 Congress Cook did not advance this position but was the mover of a resolution that was sharply critical of the existing content and direction of the *Morning Star*. This resolution was only accepted by Congress with specific reservations. It was these reservations, subsequently lost from view in the Executive Committee, that became the technical origin of the breakdown in relations between the Executive Committee and the PPPS.

If, therefore, we are looking for an explanation of why the 'conflict' only began in the last few years, there is a much simpler answer than that given by Cook. It is not that Chater, Costello and Ramelson, to name but a few, finally came into the open as enemies of the *British Road*.

On the contrary, these comrades were those most identified, practically as well as theoretically, with the creative development of strategy in the 1970s. It was precisely in this period that the working class, and in particular the shop stewards' movement, opened up crucial new areas of struggle and alliance.

The key shift of the last few years has been one that has taken place within the Executive Committee and which has taken it a long way towards those formulations

rejected in 1977. As Cook notes, the principal origin of these ideas has been *Marxism Today*. This is the real 'hijacking'.

By turning history on its head, Cook has attempted to legitimise an infinitely divisive call for the exclusion of just those comrades who have always defended and still defend the revolutionary content of the *British Road*.

This is indeed a matter of concern to all on the Left. The working class currently faces ferocious attack. The wrong response, and particularly one that demobilises the Communist Party, would be disastrous for the labour movement and the wider cause of democracy.