



VIEWPOINT

ALAN HUNT The drama unfolds

John Foster (*MT*, March), in seeking to reply to Dave Cook (*MT*, February), manages to score two most revealing 'own goals'.

First he accuses Dave Cook of wanting 'the exclusion of just those comrades who have always defended and still defend the revolutionary content of the *British Road*'. Since he makes clear that he does not regard the programme as a whole as 'revolutionary', he must mean something else. What he means is that it is legitimate to defend those *parts* of the programme that pass the Foster test of being 'revolutionary'. And it is equally proper to oppose or jettison those parts of the programme of which he disapproves.

So what Foster offers is a defence of the Stalinists (Chater, Costello, etc) because they have defended the revolutionary *parts* of the *British Road* against the 'revisionists' (Cook, Jacques, etc). Two questions immediately arise.

First, who gave Chater and Costello, while a part of the elected leadership, the right to defend some parts of the programme and to reject other parts?

Second, in what way is it permissible to challenge key elements of the programme? I support John Foster's right to write in *Marxism Today* and to move amendments at Congress. But what he blurs is the divisions within the Stalinist opposition between those, like John himself, who seek to claim that they are the faithful guardians of the *British Road*, and those who are prepared to go outside the rules, to breach their democratic responsibilities and to organise factions to overthrow the whole programme.

By remaining silent on this question he is condoning the view that there is some 'higher principle' than the democratic rules which justifies using any means to secure a political objective.

It is precisely this arrogant and anti-democratic aspect of Stalinism which makes it such a dangerous phenomenon. It should be clear that the preparedness of the Stalinists to cast aside the democratic rules today is exactly the same 'higher principle' which Stalin used to justify his murder of the majority of the members of the Central Committee and the subsequent death and disappearance of millions of Soviet citizens. Foster, by his silence about the means employed by Chater, Costello, etc, is himself guilty by omission.

If only one thing emerges from the current controversies inside the Communist Party, my hope is that it will draw a clear and firm line between those who believe in the fullest and most open discussion of political differences but within a framework of democratically agreed rules, and those for whom democratic rules are a mere formality to be brushed aside to suit their personal or political convenience. There is no higher principle than democracy. To admit any exceptions is the first step on the downward slope to authoritarianism.

Foster's second own goal is scored in the course of his disagreements with Cook's interpretation of the recent history of the Communist Party. Cook is accused of distorting what happened at the 1977 Congress by reading into it the political positions which Cook approves of. But it is Foster who perpetrates an extraordinary falsification of what happened.

One of the key disagreements is between the programme which was adopted which proposes a political 'broad democratic alliance' and those who oppose it who propose a narrow economic 'anti-monopoly alliance'. Foster devotes much of his contribution to arguing that there is no difference between these formulations and that Congress rejected Cook's position. What John does not reveal is that he actually spoke in favour of an amendment to delete 'broad democratic alliance' and replace it by 'anti-monopoly alliance'

which was heavily *defeated*.

Foster's account of the Congresses of 77, 79, and 81 is for a professional historian remarkably static. If we take a longer historical perspective we can see that successive versions of the *British Road* have been influenced by and express a clash between two political and theoretical traditions. While labels never capture the full content, I suggest we can identify these positions as a contest between a Gramscian position and an economic position.

During the 50s and 60s the economic position (of which Foster approves) was dominant, but from the late 60s the Gramscian trend became both more visible and increasingly influential. The 1977 version of the *British Road* was significant precisely because it marked a major shift towards the Gramscian position.

But Congresses are always frozen records. They record the balance of forces at a given moment and almost unavoidably involve significant compromises or, quite frequently, the text will simply fudge or avoid some of the issues between the different trends. Thus on the central question of the form of alliance which is to be the strategic basis for political advance Congress *did* (despite John Foster) adopt a commitment to the 'broad democratic alliance'.

But it is clear on re-reading the *British Road* that elsewhere some of the formulations are reminiscent of the economic view of alliances that were present in earlier versions. I suggest that one of the main sources of contradictory elements in the programme was that for too long the leadership were not providing leadership but were intent on trying to patch up differences between the two increasingly divergent political trends within the party.

The outcome of the special Congress in May 1985 should settle a number of outstanding issues in a more definitive way than has been the case over the last few Congresses. We can be certain that if the Stalinists, whether 'soft' or 'hard', win a



majority they will not defend the existing version of the *British Road*. It will rapidly revert to a pre-1977 version. If some of them have their way we would witness a return to the 1930s and '*for a Soviet Britain*'.

On the other hand, if Congress upholds, as I hope it will, the current leadership, it will similarly have major implications. First it will mean that democratic rules will apply to all. Those who do not accept that democratically agreed rules are binding on all will, I hope, have the courage of their convictions and resign.

The second major development should be that at an early date there should be an opportunity to thoroughly revise the *British Road* to remove those ambiguities which allow Foster to present himself as a defender of those parts of the programme which accord with his narrow economistic vision. So many major developments have occurred since 1977 which need to be assessed and reflected in the programme that in its present version it is seriously outdated.

Not only have there been major changes in the general political and economic situation, but there has also been the profound crisis within the Communist Party that will make possible the presentation of a much more coherent and persuasive case for the democratic road to socialism.