

# DENIS HEALEY



Photo: Tony Stone

## Denis Healey, Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary and former Chancellor of the Exchequer, is interviewed by Jonathan Steele.

*The slight improvement in US/Soviet relations at the Geneva Summit in November now seems to be evaporating fast. Which side now must take the major blame?*

The main responsibility lies with the Americans. President Reagan made it clear he thought that it was possible to reach an agreement on intermediate range missiles following the summit, at least an interim agreement which would involve some sort of freeze. And the Russian proposal in this area has been much more far-reaching than anybody in the West ever expected. It involves putting NATO in a more favourable position as regards intermediate range missiles than it's been in since the early 60s. But the Americans seem reluctant to accept this. On the other hand, I think the failure to make progress on the confidence-building measures in the Stockholm negotiations and the mutual and balanced force reductions in Vienna is mainly because the Russians haven't so far followed through in the formal arms negotiations on Mr Gorbachev's offer of much more far-reaching verification measures, including on-site inspections made in his speeches in January and at the party congress. But I've no doubt this is partly a problem of adjusting the lines of communication between the new leadership, which is changing almost day-by-day in Moscow, and the negotiators on the spot.

*Do you think Mr Gorbachev really represents something new in the Soviet Union?*

By far the most important thing which Gorbachev said in his speech in the congress, though little commented on in the Western press, was when he went out of his way to revise the doctrine of the two camps - the belief that the struggle between the capitalist and what they call the socialist world was a permanent feature of the world and would end in the victory of socialism by peaceful means, unless the capitalists chose to fight it. In his speech Gorbachev said that changes which have taken place in the world mean that the confrontation of opposites in effect must lead to a new synthesis, that we're now moving step by step, groping in the dark as it were, words that are rather uncharacteristic ones for a Soviet leader, towards an interdependent world, an integral world as he put it. Global problems cannot be solved by groups of states but only on a global basis. Now this is an extremely dramatic change in the Soviet position. And of course he's absolutely right. Many of us in the West have come to feel that the development of technology in the military and economic fields has produced a single world in which the central problems, both military and economic, are going to require co-operation between the two camps rather than continued confrontation and competition.

*Do you think this shift is partly because the Russians have come to realise that they are, in a sense, excluded from the world system because of their economic weakness, and the fact that the big institutions like the IMF and World Bank are out of their control. Are they trying to find a new way of getting back into things?*

One of the Soviet intellectual leaders is reported to have said in the last 12 months that if Russia doesn't watch out, it'll end the century still one of the world's two superpowers from the military point of view, but not even a great power by any other

standard. I think Gorbachev's speeches have all been warning his people of this fact. But the other important thing is that the Russians have come to realise, as any sensible person must, that the arms race in itself now has become a major threat to world peace, that it is moving into areas which will be very destabilising of the so-called balance, which has existed between the superpowers for the last 40 years. And that dramatic steps must be taken to stop the arms race and to prevent it from going into space.

The other fact which it is important to recognise is that, in 1945, when the United Nations was set up, the Soviet Union was not prepared to join most of its functional organisations. Similarly although the Marshall plan was open to participation by the communist countries, the Soviet Union refused to join and also prevented the Czech government from participating. It's a very different world today. A number of communist countries have joined the IMF and the World Bank. The Soviet government is deeply involved in the financial side of the



**Neil Kinnock and I have been to Moscow, and in effect we've done a little negotiation ourselves about Polaris with Mr Chernenko**

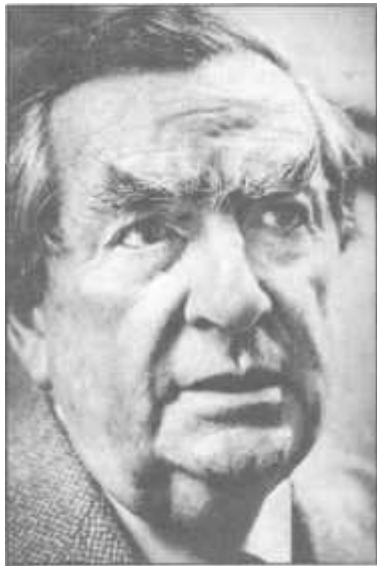
international economy. Indeed the Soviet government, and the Hungarian government, have recently said they would like to make their currencies fully convertible, which means of course accepting the disciplines of Western markets. The Russians have also come to realise that many aspects of their economy are deeply dependent on the prosperity of the West. So on the economic as well as the military side, the countries in the Soviet bloc have come to realise that they belong to a global economy.

*I wonder what the policy consequences are of that change for Britain and Western Europe? We're always told that NATO exists because of the Soviet threat. You yourself have said repeatedly that there never has been a real possibility of an all-out invasion of Western Europe since 1945, so what is the Soviet threat?*

I've said that there's no evidence that the Russians have ever planned an attack on Western Europe from a standing start in the central front, which is one of the scenarios which NATO worries about, but I've always believed that there was a risk of fighting developing between the Warsaw Pact and NATO

countries as a result of an explosion in Eastern Europe, like East Berlin in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and of course the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army and other forces in 1968. The possibility of conflicts spreading West from some such explosions is always there; it was one of the factors which led the Russians to be extremely cautious in their handling of the Polish situation in 1981. The other area from which fighting between the Soviet Union and the West could develop is Third World conflicts, which are not controlled by either of the superpowers but which are thought by one or both of them to involve their vital interests. The most obvious case of course is the Middle East/Mediterranean area where the Soviet involvement with Syria is very deep. There are Soviet missiles, some say staffed by Soviet forces in Syria. I know that there was deep worry in Moscow as well as Washington a couple of years ago, when it

the *Ostpolitik* removed one of the major obstacles from other European countries establishing better relations with Eastern Europe



looked as if the Gulf war might lead to an American intervention to which the Russians would respond, and then there's no saying how fast a fire would spread.

What we do know from studying Soviet writing about war in Europe is that while they have no intention of starting a war if they can help it, if war does start, they've every intention of winning it very fast, and winning it so fast that the West wouldn't have time to decide to use its nuclear weapons. And this is a contingency which it's only prudent to guard against, because we've learned from Afghanistan that if the Soviet government thinks it can solve a problem by military force without great risk to itself, it may take that as the easier option.

*And what about Eastern Europe? Will the new Soviet approach you have described see greater latitude there?*

I think they've accepted divergence as a necessary feature of the socialist camp. As I understand it, they half-legitimised Eurocommunism at their recent congress and they've accepted that different countries in Eastern Europe may approach their goals by different methods. East Germany and Hungary, which are the two most successful economies in Eastern Europe have very different systems.

*On the other hand, we've had the experience of Solidarity in Poland and the way that was squashed. Do you really see this change as*

*having policy consequences for Eastern Europeans in the sense that there will be a greater independence for governments there?*

I found when I was recently in Budapest and East Berlin that this question is one of major concern, as you'd expect, to the local political leaders. The Russians are clearly determined not only to maintain the Warsaw Pact, but also to give it more meaning through greater consultation. And the fact remains that the Warsaw Pact's function is as much to maintain the solidarity of the East European buffer zone as to deal with a potential threat from NATO. What is certainly happening is that the Eastern European countries are exploring new techniques to improve their economies. My impression is they believe they will get a good deal of latitude in this field on condition they don't in any way challenge Soviet leadership of the Warsaw Pact, and least of all threaten to leave the Warsaw Pact, which was probably the fear which led the Russians finally to intervene in Czechoslovakia. Certainly it was the major factor in the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956.

I also feel that the East European governments want to develop their own bilateral relationships with West European governments. Don't forget that the German Democratic Republic has much closer economic relations with West Germany than with any country in the Soviet bloc. Hungary has much better political relations with Austria than it has with Rumania. The ruling circles in Eastern Europe are as anxious to develop relations with West European countries as many West European countries, notably the Germans, are with Eastern Europe. One good thing which the Conservative government has done in Britain, and Mrs Thatcher personally, has been to encourage this kind of bilateral relationship. As you know, she visited Hungary, the first British prime minister to visit any East European country since the war.

*Is there not a paradox though that in the period when the Labour government was in office in the mid 60s and so on, Britain actually had much worse relations with the Soviet Union than either the French or the West Germans? We always seem to be the last people to get there.*

The late-60s, when I was Defence Secretary, was a very difficult period because we had the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

*But in spite of that, you had Willy Brandt's Ostpolitik starting in 1969...*

That was the late 60s. Labour left power in 1970. Moreover the *Ostpolitik* removed one of the major obstacles for other European countries establishing better relations with Eastern Europe because under the Hallstein doctrine, which Willy Brandt got rid of, the allies of West Germany were not allowed any relations with East Germany whatever. It was Willy Brandt's courage and imagination in reversing that position which opened the door to better relations between West and East European countries.

I also think there was another element in it which it's worth mentioning. When Ernest Bevin became Britain's Foreign Secretary, I think he really believed that Left could speak to Left. But I think his contacts with Soviet diplomats like Molotov reminded him so poignantly of his battles with the British Communists in his own trade union, that in the end there was some truth in the old saying that he thought the Soviet Union was a breakaway from the Transport and General Workers

Union! The Labour party attitude towards Eastern Europe was also inevitably influenced by the fact that the East European communists had forcibly destroyed the socialist parties in their countries, with whom we'd had very close links in the post-war years. And of course the rise of Solidarity, again, had much more sympathy on the Left in Britain than it did on the Right, and its suppression is still seen as a bigger obstacle to good relations between the Labour party and the present Polish government than it is to better relations between the Conservative government and the present Polish government. So this ideological factor played a rather negative role, I think.

*But wouldn't the same ideological factors have worked in the case of the German SPD and the French Socialists?*

The West Germans had a tremendous guilt feeling about the Poles which I think was dramatically symbolised by that superb gesture of Willy Brandt in kneeling in the Warsaw ghetto, one of the great images of 20th century politics. Moreover the essence of the *Ostpolitik* was improving relations with East Germany and reversing the Hallstein doctrine, and this struck a very fundamental chord. Remember you have an enormous refugee population in West Germany which has been growing continuously. Detente meant much more in practical terms for the West Germans than it did for anybody else. Now a factor in French relations with Eastern Europe was an attempt to rebuild, if you like, the prewar alliance against Germany. Their relations with the East Germans haven't been very good, but they have tried to develop the sort of relations they had before the war with East Germany's neighbours. Whereas Britain's tradition has always been to keep out of all continental entanglements. One of the problems in the prewar period was that we wanted a balance of power in Europe between France and Germany. An active policy in Europe has never been a very British thing unless we were forced into it. I regard that as a great mistake and, as you know, I believe we should have an active policy now.

*Isn't it also to do with the relationship with the United States? In a sense the relationships with the Soviet Union and the United States are two sides of the same coin. The British Labour party, compared again with the SPD and the French Socialists, has always been much more atlanticist, much more persuaded that somehow it can influence Washington by quiet diplomacy...*

This is true.

*But has that really worked? I mean looking back on the history of your time as Defence Secretary and so on, do you really think that Britain has ever changed US policy?*

I know we have, on issues which you may not regard as very important, but then I don't expect to change fundamental American policy because that's determined by American views of American interests. But we did shift American policy on a number of strategic issues. For example during the 60s, when I was Defence Secretary I got the nuclear planning group set up in order to be able to influence American nuclear strategy. And we did to a large extent. The strategy adopted by NATO in 1966 was a compromise between the American and European positions in which we acted really as the broker between the two sides. We set up a Euro group inside NATO which worked quite well when the British government was interested. Unfortunately

they lost interest after Labour left power in 1970.

The Americans have a very active presence and policy in every single part of the world and if we broke with them, we would lose any possibility of influencing them. They would go in for global unilateralism, and the world would be a more dangerous place. I criticise the Thatcher government, and have repeatedly criticised it, for giving in to the Americans on many issues when it's been against Britain's interest to do so. One of the things that troubles me most at this moment is that we are not, as we should be, a member of the group of three countries involved in negotiating a comprehensive test ban treaty. We haven't acceded to the demand of all the members of the non-proliferation treaty to get those negotiations going again. We've been totally silent on the matter. Of course the real obstacle is the American determination under the Reagan administration to continue testing whatever happens.

*Let's turn now to British nuclear weapons. Many people would say one of the reasons why Labour was defeated in the last general election was the confusion in public over what the policy was on Polaris.*

The reason we were defeated, in so far as defence played a role, is that people believed we were in favour of unilaterally disarming ourselves. It wasn't the confusion, it was the unilateralism that was the damaging thing. And all the opinion polls have shown that.

*But that was the party policy at the time.*

No, the party policy at the time was to negotiate Polaris away. That was the policy on which we fought the election.



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*But if you put it into the negotiations, the assumption is that if negotiations fail, you keep Polaris.*

The misfortune was that agreement wasn't reached inside the party at that time on what would happen if negotiations failed, and different things were said about what would happen according to people's underlying views and this was damaging to the party. But I remember vividly the very first election meeting I went to. It was at Allerton Bywater Colliery just outside Leeds,

which incidentally stayed loyal right through the miners' strike without any defection whatever. I was torn to shreds in the miners' canteen by miners saying to me, 'we're never going to vote for a party which is in favour of unilaterally disarming Britain'.

*Well, unilateral nuclear disarmament of Britain is the policy of the party now.*

It's in favour of a non-nuclear defence strategy for NATO, in favour of sending the Cruise missiles home, of not going ahead with Trident, and of, this is the big question, do we unilaterally get rid of Polaris whatever happens, or do we accept the Soviet proposal to negotiate about its future in the second stage of the arms negotiations? And this will have to be resolved before the election.

*With respect, I thought the party policy said that a Labour government would decommission...*

Yes, but as I say a lot has happened since then. We've had the disarmament talks between the Soviet and American governments in which the Polaris system has figured very largely. Neil Kinnock and I have been to Moscow, and in effect we've done a little negotiation ourselves about Polaris with Mr Chernenko, who agreed that they would get rid of the equivalent medium range missiles. Since then Mr Gorbachev has put Polaris into the strategic list and plans to reach an agreement on medium range missiles which leaves Polaris untouched, providing we don't build it up, I think that is the phrase used. And this produces a situation which we can't ignore and which I'm sure we will address in a satisfactory way before the election comes.

*And do you think that is better than what you personally negotiated with Chernenko?*

That's out of date in any case now, because Chernenko was talking about reducing the number of SS20s by the number of Polaris missiles. Now the Russians are saying they'll get rid of the SS20s in the European theatre entirely if the Americans get rid of Cruise and Pershing. We want to get rid of Cruise anyway. And I know the German SPD wants to get rid of Pershing.

*Well, coming on to Cruise, the Labour party's most recent defence statement says, and I'm quoting, 'The party is committed to the unconditional removal of all US nuclear weapons and nuclear bases from British soil and British waters. Suppose the Americans simply say we don't want to remove Cruise missiles from Britain?'*

They can't say that. We're getting rid of them. We've said that. We've made that absolutely clear. Even when we were in office we never agreed to have them, contrary to some of the things that have been said. We made it clear we opposed the putting of them here, I spoke in the debate myself, and that we would send them back as soon as we won the election and that we shall do. One of the things I liked very much about the victory of the Spanish prime minister in his referendum is that it was on the basis that Spain was free to choose what bits of NATO she wanted to join in and what bits she didn't. It was NATO *a la carte* to quote Lord Carrington's own phrase. They have said they are not going to have nuclear weapons there, they're not going to be in NATO's integrated military structure, which is

not something we want to get out of, and they also want to cut the number of American forces in Spain, and they will.

*What about the other US nuclear weapons based in Britain, which again the party is committed to unconditionally removing. How do you define what a nuclear base is?*

This is something we haven't yet addressed ourselves too adequately, in my personal opinion.

*Shouldn't you be doing that in opposition?*

We are beginning to do that, yes. But we shall do it on our own and not in public - least of all in *Marxism Today!*

*Do you expect to produce some kind of list for the electorate to see before the election?*

No, I shouldn't think we'll do that, we'd be crazy to get down to that degree of detail in a general election. The plain fact is that in so far as defence played a role in the last election, it was one which was very negative for the Labour party because people thought we wanted to see Britain undefended, not unilateral nuclear disarmament.

*You have long been considered to be one of the most pro-American members of the party, but recently you've been criticising them on many issues, from Star Wars to Central America.*

You must draw a distinction between the Americans and the Reagan administration. I've always criticised American policy when I've disagreed with it. Just as I've criticised British policy. I was violently anti-Suez and pro-American in 1956, just as I was violently anti-Soviet on the invasion of Hungary which took place at the same time. But I disagree fundamentally with the Reagan administration's approach to Third World problems, notably of course Southern Africa, the Middle East and Central America, and I disagree very strongly with this administration's view of how to negotiate with the Soviet Union. But don't forget that my criticism of Star Wars has been echoed by the last three American presidents and the last six American defence secretaries. I'm not anti-American. I'm against the Reagan administration's policies.

*Your criticism of American policy towards Nicaragua, in a statement I read recently, was that aiding the Contras was counter-productive, it wouldn't work, it would impede the forces which wanted to make Nicaragua a more pluralistic society. Isn't that a rather pragmatic argument?*

I wouldn't accept that as a description of my position. I've used many arguments against America's present policy in Nicaragua. The most fundamental one is that it's a direct violation of the United Nations charter. But I also attack it because Central America is undergoing a social and political revolution against a century of colonial influence and local landowning or military dictatorships, and they must be allowed to settle down. I also believe, and argue this with Americans, that the policy is making America hated throughout Central America. America's policies in Nicaragua are opposed by every single one of the Central American governments, even that of El Salvador.

*Many of your allies, and friends over a long period of years, have left the party and joined the SDP. Why have you stayed behind?*

First of all, right-wing splinter groups from left-wing parties always weaken the party they leave without creating anything of value themselves, and this has proved to be the case with the SDP. Secondly, I was convinced that the Labour party would emerge from the very black period during which it was fighting itself rather than fighting the Conservatives. It's taken us longer to emerge because those people left the Labour Party, but we have emerged and we shall win the next election in consequence.

*// there was a hung parliament after the next election, would you be arguing in favour of a coalition with the Alliance?*

Well I don't want to enter into these domestic disputes inside the British Communist party, that would really be a great mistake.

*Labour held office for 11 years between 1964 and 1979, and you were a prominent member of these governments. We've ended up with the most right-wing government since the war and with Labour fighting to survive as the main opposition party. What went wrong?*

Very simple. I think what went wrong in the Callaghan government was that all of us were a little bit too infected by *hubris*. We'd had a very successful four years following the first year of getting unemployment and inflation falling simultaneously. In 1978 there was a 7½% increase in real personal disposable income. And a great mistake was to believe that the unions would accept a 5% pay limit although it was quite clear in retrospect there was no chance of that happening. If we'd settled for single figures, we wouldn't have had the winter of discontent, we'd have had a much better inflation outcome and we'd still be in power. That was the major reason we lost. The second time, of course, it was the madness into which the party fell following that defeat, when we had the continuous in-fighting on irrelevant issues, or issues which were not as important as the issues we should have been fighting on against the Conservatives, which meant that the British people including the bulk of workers did

not feel that we were fit to be a government.

*What would you say your own objectives are? Would you call yourself a socialist? What do you mean by socialism?*

Socialism to me is establishing social control of power in society, and where that differs from liberalism for example which aims at a similar situation in some respects, is we think you can only establish control over power by changing the structure and distribution of power, notably economic power. In the international field, I think you have to try and build some social tissue between various parts of the world. I like an untidy proliferation of overlapping organisations, as I hope I've demonstrated in my approach to European problems. But trying to create a sense of common interest does involve getting people actually to work together on common problems. It can't be created by law, that's why I disagree with the liberal approach because it's essentially a lawyer's approach. Nor can it be done by engineering, which is why I disagree with the marxist approach. The gardener's approach is the one that makes sense, in which you respect the nature of the soil, you're prepared for the climate to be worse or better than you expected, and you sow the right seeds in the right bits of soil.

*// the Labour party comes back to power, with an overall majority, and it lasts its course for five years, what's the best case scenario for how it could really change Britain?*

The most important single thing will be to improve our relative economic performance. Otherwise we'll be slipping back into the Soviet situation, except in our case we won't be a superpower militarily, though we may have one or two cultural interests to peddle. When I started in politics, I thought that your duty as a reformer was to produce heaven on earth the week after the election. Or at worst a fortnight. Now it's quite a reasonable objective to prevent hell on earth. And, belonging to a generation which was born in the first world war, had to endure the second world war and is living under the cloud of a third, I think if we can make a major contribution to peace, we shall deserve our place in the history books. •

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