

Defence of the Faith?

Hilary Wainwright, one of the key figures in the Chesterfield conference, responds to Rosalind Brunt's criticisms of it in the last issue.

Reading the responses of party journals - for example those of *Marxism Today* and *Socialist Worker Review* - to the socialist conference in Chesterfield reminded me of the kind of essay topic I used to get in the philosophy of knowledge: 'Here we have two entirely opposite descriptions of the same event; the descriptions tell us as much about the people doing the describing as the event itself. Discuss.'

For *Marxism Today* Chesterfield was dogmatic, 'all or nothing', fundamentalist, and intimidating in style. For the Socialist Workers Party, it was not sufficiently decisive, wishy washy on fundamental issues, and its organisers were too obsessed with tone. In their different ways they are both putting up 'warning' signs: *Marxism Today* says: 'beware bulls', *Socialist Worker Review* says: 'Don't sink into this swamp'. They reveal, from different points of view, a common conservatism about a development on the Left - which they do not lead and which contains political forces with whom they have had historical divisions.

A degree of caution about an event like the Chesterfield conference is understandable and in some ways necessary. Political enthusiasms can wax and wane with remarkable speed. Cautious analysis is one thing, however, involving one might expect a sense of the different forces at work, the contradictions involved, the issues raised; but self-justifying polemic is another. I felt Rosalind Brunt's article, 'The Left's Hallelujah Chorus' was more the latter than the former.

First consider Rosalind's basic argument, that the politics at Chesterfield was simply a return to fundamental positions and a restatement of first principles. Certainly, one of the intentions behind the conference was that it should reassert and seek to popularise socialist principles, contrary to the tendency of the Labour leadership to chase the moonbeams of popular consensus. The very fact of such a large gathering of socialists was itself something of a reassertion. As Rosalind implies, many people gained an important sense of solidarity and confidence from this. The work of the conference itself, however, was intended to stimulate, in the words of the conference briefing papers, 'the serious thinking which is required if we are to see socialist ideas become dominant again. The challenge to socialist ideas requires us to grow.'

The briefing papers themselves reflected some of the serious thinking that has gone on in sections of the Left in recent years: on public ownership, on Europe - East and West - on international finance, on technology, on cultural industries, on working time, on parliamentary democracy and on more besides. Not definitive texts, more like work in progress to stimulate debate. This is exactly what they did, though not in perhaps the tidy structured way that many of us organisers would have preferred - but how can things be tidy when twice as many people turn up as expected?

The most vocal fundamentalism came from speakers debating with some of the arguments in the briefing papers. Arthur Scargill, for instance, wrote a six-page paper spelling out his criticisms of the paper on Europe and of the one on public ownership. Eric Hoffer too weighed in with his arguments. Isn't this debate to be welcomed? Where else could it happen? Rosalind did not even report it as the debate it was. She reported one set of voices - as it happened some of the loudest but not the most numerous - at the

expense of others less easy to label and package, more awkward for her polemic.

Rosalind's analysis almost denies there *could* be a follow up. She says the conference was 'demobilising'. My information gives a more complicated picture. Some people undoubtedly were frustrated, especially those who left after Saturday when sectarianism and failures of communication had been most evident. Even on the Saturday, however, many of those attending the workshops gained enough energy to want to carry on, and do so with the socialist conference. They were not a marginal minority, as Rosalind implies.

The most notable were those at the green socialism workshop. Since the conference, participants in the workshop - socialist members of the Green Party, of the Socialist Environment and Resources Association, of the Labour Party and of the Socialist Society - have come together to organise a conference on green politics and socialism, one of whose several purposes would be to feed ideas back to the recall socialist conference. As with many workshops, the one on green socialism benefited from the unusually wide regional and social spread of participants. For once, here was a conference, warts and all, representing a lot more than the middle-class metropolitan Left. Not a good market for the *Marxism Today* cred card perhaps, but a good network for the socialist movement that we need to build.

It has always been a principle of socialist feminism to listen to the variety of voices, not just those that shout loudest. I was taken aback by the one sided character of Rosalind Brunt's report.

Style is vital to our ability to communicate, but Rosalind grossly exaggerates the presence of an authoritarian style, ignoring more democratic and egalitarian approaches influencing the conference and the methods of the organising group. She does this to such an extent that her article avoids any

discussion of the political significance of the event.

I offer in summary my own analysis. It was the outcome of several different political moves. First developments on the Labour Left. I think the involvement of the Campaign Group and large numbers of constituency activists stems in part from a realisation on the Labour Left of the full extent of their defeat in the struggle for power over the party's national direction. Moreover, through their involvement in the support movement for the miners' strike they had gained vital experience of sustained campaigning activity beyond the familiar world of caucuses, resolutions and factional slates. There is a strong recognition of the need to recharge their intellectual and visionary batteries and a willingness to work with socialists outside the party to do so.

On the other hand, amongst the independent Left, such as the Socialist Society, Conference of Socialist Economists, trade unionists like the supporters of *Flashlight*, or groups like Woman Against Pit Closures, there has been a feeling of isolation and a desire for a wider, more public, platform, through which to develop their ideas. It is no wonder that the first gathering of these and other varied political forces should contain contradictory and sometimes explosive elements.

An accurate report would describe and weigh them up in order to understand how to strengthen the developments favoured. A sectarian report gives only a reverse mirror image of the party's own self-image in order to confirm itself.

I cannot guarantee the outcome of a process which will be exciting as well as frustrating. But I guarantee that if readers of *Marxism Today* believe in the need, in the face of the strength of Thatcherism and the weakness of Labourism, for a socialist movement independent of any one political party, but involving members of several, then their contribution will be very welcome. •