

Dangerous Liaisons

The movement against the poll tax has been the broadest since 1979. Yet the organised movement against it has been appropriated by the ultra Left. **Beatrix Campbell** explains why

Eighty-five per cent of the population - that means most of any category you want to think of, from Tories to prisoners, from accountants to vegetarians - are passionately opposed to the poll tax. They organise their dissent in a thousand different ways - complaining to strangers at the bus stop about the fate of family and friends, shouting at the television, failing to fill in the forms, failing to post the filled-in forms, signing petitions, marching, lobbying, looting....

It's a movement, of sorts, and it has de-stabilised the government for the first time in a decade - perhaps because it has provoked the first Tory rank-and-file revolt against its hitherto most triumphant regime. But this movement-of-sorts is, of course, much bigger than the Movement that claims to represent it. It's hard to recall a relationship of such infidelity. The movement-of-sorts and the Movement aren't on speaking terms, they don't even speak the same language.

What makes the resistance in England to the poll tax so remarkable is that it is so strongly sourced in popular feeling and yet so utterly unresourced by the straight, aka sensible, Left.

At the level of national initiative, the sensible Left has gone Awol, when it would once have hitched its horse to a national network and a national project. It has evacuated the terrain and left it free for Militant, the Socialist Workers Party and the young anarchist Class War to field a posse of headbangers who raid and wreck the movement-of-sorts, producing polarisation where there are compelling conditions for co-operation. And when the movement takes to the streets, the sectarian samurai poke their spears at police and loot the Body Shop. It's been enough to give rioting a bad name. What we've seen over the poll-tax spring hasn't been serious rioting so much as macho recidivism that

has learned nothing and forgotten everything about our repertoire of creative, rather than destructive, direct action. It's like comparing a lager lout to Ho Chi Minh.

Nonetheless, judging by opinion polls, resistance to the poll tax seems resilient enough to have survived the cult of violence which bled all over that last weekend of March when Strangeways and Trafalgar Square combusted together. And it seems to have survived, too, the worst efforts of Labour and Tory leaders to convert the conversation from political strategy to law and order.

So why the absence of the sensible Left from the national campaign? While thousands of rank-and-file socialists and communists are active in poll tax resistance locally, how do we explain the abstention of their parties, as national parties, from the creation of any national initiative, and from that initiative once the Federation of Poll Tax Unions filled the vacuum? It is partly an English problem - in Scotland, where the prototype for the poll tax has already been imposed, and resisted, there's still life in the traditional Left. The readiness to resist is infused by Scots' cultural elan, which is where class consciousness, civil liberty and the quest for nationhood meet.

Under the aegis of the STUC, all the political parties in Scotland except the Tories gathered to launch a united campaign against the poll tax. This was rudely disrupted by interminable competition between the Scottish Nationalists and the Labour Party, but nonetheless a kind of coalition survived their worst party chauvinisms on the one hand and the movement's rather old-fashioned format on the other. The point is, however, that Scottish institutions, ranging from the Communist Party to the Catholic Church, organised resistance.

Why no equivalent in England? The answer lies in the different drifts of the Labour Party and the Communist Party. These have been instrumental formations since the war. They haven't been the only ones on the Left, of course, but they have often enough been decisive. Now we see the Communist Party in exponential decline, nay disintegration, leaving it paralysed, while by contrast Labour is constrained by its renaissance, which has been engineered by an impressive discipline directed towards one objective - the electoral defeat of Thatcherism. Labour by tradition tends to see activism and activists as jeopardising its electoral success. The thought of office always exiles Labour from popular politics. The CP has always seen itself as a generator of movement, and despite its distinct political project, often lived in the same political habitat as the Labour Party and the labour movement. Once party initiatives ricocheted around the labour movement. Now there's no smoking gun.

In five years' time the Communist Party may not exist. And in five years' time the Labour Party, having failed to expand its membership base to anywhere near the 1m it needed to match the Conservative Party, may drift in the direction of some European socialist parties - taking the form of a central opinion-forming caucus rather than a mass movement. The Communist Party's demise means much more than the end of an era, an era born in the Bolshevik big bang of 1917 and dead or dying in 1989. Without doubt the Communist Party is exhausted by its dialogue with its own history. Maybe that's because that's what 20th-century communism has become - history. But the party's crisis has been greater than its critique of its own past and Stalinism, for it is a crisis it shares more generally with leftism and even labourism, a crisis lodged in man-made traditions of class and craft, in the artificial distinctions between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary action, between state and civil society, between private and public, production and consumption, between oral versus televisual communication, between the cultural versus the political,

British communism's creativity of late has been precisely where it challenged its own tradition. But Little Red Riding Hood, who has been bright and brave as she delved deep in the forest, has huffed and puffed and blown the house down. Little Red Riding Hood can't live on critique alone. The last refuge of a communist, a sense of identity, has also disappeared. Party cards aren't passports and parties aren't life and soul. The critique of communism may produce decent communists, but nowhere, no longer, does it produce decent communist parties.

Many communist activists put their renewable energy elsewhere, outside the party, in the informal world of civil society, the practical pains and pleasures of politics that make a difference,

both in lived life and in the imagination. Nonetheless, they longed to be elsewhere, too - in the Political Domain, inside the institutions. Where Labour tends to live in the institutions of the state, Western communists tend to live in the institutions of the movement, often making the fatal mistake of conflating the movement with the people. What that can sometimes mean is that communists are good on tactics and strategy and not so good on deciphering the political moods of the people. The communist tradition of public politicking is typically expressed in the popular front and the cult of 'unity is strength', a cult which lived in dread of difference. The popular front has had its honourable moments, but at worst it relies on the conservative common sense of the lowest common denominator. And it sought typically to centralise control of ready-made constituencies or interests. By contrast the Labour Party's traditional anxiety about activism, not least because activism may suggest autonomous interests outside the party, is reinforced by the British electoral system, which encourages Labourism's jealous guardianship of its right to represent us all.

More recently, the dominance of ultra-leftism in the Labour Party in the early 1980s prompted the purge by the new leader. Parties, he could argue, are as much about discipline as they are about democracy. And he set about disciplining, as well as democratising, his own party. But trotskyism came to be synonymous with struggle, with any activism, in the minds of the new party managers.

Like all European social-democratic parties, Labour has had to re-make itself. The failure of the recent recruitment campaign suggests that Labour is behaving like, if not actually becoming, a party more in the mould of those European parties, in extremis the Spanish PSOE and the Greek Pasok, which are parties of opinion rather than parties of movement. Clearly, the Labour Party is more akin to the older European mass parties, like the German SPD, the Italian PCI, with strong roots in communities and unions. But all are having to root themselves in new, mobile constituencies, producing politics around issues rather than self-evident interests.

British Labourism has emerged from the turmoil of the 1980s - impressively, it must be said - with a tightly policed party, but also a party mesmerised by one moment - the general election. Everything is subordinated to that project. Problems - like the poll tax - are to be solved by voting Labour.

This is where electoralism becomes absenteeism and inertia. A terror of stepping outside the state institutions, which are the house in which Labourism lives, produces results like that deadly vote but narrow majority (14-13) on Labour's national executive committee opposing participation in a national poll tax demonstration. David Blunkett and

Bryan Gould on the party's national executive promoted support and had the tentative backing of their party leader - but Roy Hattersley opposed it. And that was that. The old Right, it seems, sometimes still rules. It is a reminder of the hybrid that is the new model Labour Party with old-style structures, traditions that live on from the past, together with modernisers who are the voices of new times, for sure, with their eyes and ears plugged into the video screens and opinion polls, but who are often alienated from activism, whether it's the poll tax unions or Comic Relief or women's aid.

As a party, Labour still won't take responsibility for mobilising old-fashioned popular fronts, never mind contemporary coalitions of resistance, because it collapses its interests as an autonomous political party with the interests of the state. Home affairs spokesperson Brian Wilson, a bright lad going places, exemplified the confusion when he recently reaffirmed his rebuke to non-payers of the poll tax, by insisting that they'd damage local government. Labour, in its role as the state, can't be doing with Labour in its role as an autonomous party. That's what prompted Hackney council to barricade its town hall and call in police reinforcements before an anti-poll tax demonstration. And according to one anti-poll tax campaigner in the home counties, it's the same attitude which has prompted the Labour council to treat their anti-poll tax unions with rude hostility. 'We tried to encourage councillors not to punish people who don't pay their tax, we tried to do this in a questionnaire. Not one filled it in. They accused us of trying to make trouble, so they banned us from community halls etc. We've been banned from our facilities.'

And here we come to the poll-tax crisis - that vacuum left by the Communist Party and the Labour Party has been filled by the ultra Left, for whom the campaign is subordinate to their self-interest. 'Militant and the SWP stand by our stall with *their* magazines and stuff. We feel it's not fair, but we can't stop them. It's a real struggle to work with them,' says a non-aligned anarchist in a home counties town where several groups are active against the poll tax.

They appropriate the campaign and polarise its politics. And yet the poll tax is the paradigmatic political problem for the whole of the Left. It exposes that old culture of popular frontism, whether defined by Militant, the SWP, Labourism or the CP, as incipiently totalitarian, because it reduces all interests to a single slogan, and subordinates all interests to the good of whichever party pulls off the popular front. By contrast, Greenham on the one hand, and Live Aid and Comic Relief, to take a few exemplars, on the other, succeeded precisely because they were defined by a different discipline - the discipline of service. The movement serviced the

issues. They worked because they not only encouraged participation, they encouraged people to select their own priorities and possibilities. At Greenham, you could set up camp, break into the fence, get arrested, go away for the weekend, or you could appropriate the fence by transforming it, or you could simply support by bearing witness. In Comic Relief, you could wear a red nose - even on your radiator. Has a campaign ever taken to the road so successfully? Collect money by running for it, laughing for it, playing music for it. You could participate simply by bearing witness. It exemplified a new politics of spectacle which emerged in the late 80s in which stars took the lead in aligning popular culture to radical and generous politics. In their different ways, the successful movements have both enabled people to do something, and formulated direct action that is worth watching, worth celebrating, that produces pride and pleasure rather than reproducing pain and misery. Don't pay - Don't Collect. Simple slogan. Seems good. If you don't do it, you're bad. However, the campaign against the poll tax calls out for a politics that isn't simple or singular, but which derives from diversity - one that supports the refuseniks, those who can't or won't pay, one that plans how to protect them when their crunch comes, one that marches, petitions, too, one that encourages local authorities to enter into dialogue with community resistance rather than policing it. The biggest category, though, is those who will pay and are very opposed to the tax. In other words, it calls out for a strategy based on differential needs, abilities and dispositions, on coping with conflicts of interest rather than suppressing them.

What we don't need is the fetishism of the single slogan or strategy. Don't pay may not mean much in scores of impoverished working-class communities where not paying is part of their survival strategy. In Kirby, for example, thousands of citizens already can't pay their bills. Non-payment may constitute a radical departure, however, in Basingstoke. Either way, payers and non-payers alike need more than a single slogan or demand to sustain their resistance. But that won't be delivered either by the deferred gratification of a Labour victory at the next general election, or by a popular front politics, that mode of public politicking which deemed unity to be strength and which dreaded the key word of contemporary life - diversity.

If the campaign against the poll tax is to belong to new times, if it is to welcome all those people, millions of them, conservatives, socialists, poor people, affluent people, brave people, timid people, who want to do something about it, then it must exemplify a new culture of solidarity, a culture that abandons the totalitarianism of 'unity is strength'. It needs a culture of co-operation instead of control, and diversity instead of domination.

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