

Can we have a Neutral Britain ?

The foreign policy of this country appears to bear two characteristics which are unique in recent British history. Never, even at the time of Munich, has there been a smaller body of public opinion behind the Government. And never has a British Government committed itself to a course of action embodying such profound risks for the nation as a whole. This is true of Britain, and it is true in varying degrees of the other members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. It is setting up powerful political tensions within these countries and between them. It is producing its crop of revelations and informed criticism from within the Establishments. The Gaither Report in the U.S. and the Reith Lectures delivered by George F. Kennan for the B.B.C. last November were both symptoms of an increasing malaise which has been creeping over those who make or have helped to make Western policy, as that policy drives itself further and further into the ground, and what Mr. Kennan called " a great political cramp " seizes Europe. We are in a situation of appalling risk and even those like Mr. Kennan who are clear-sighted enough to be able to tear Western policy to pieces are unable to put anything constructive and hopeful in its place.

On the Left we have to some extent become prisoners of a number of facile slogans which served well enough in the earlier agitational days of political irresponsibility when the Left was not called upon, and knew it wouldn't be called upon, either to influence national policy or to take over control itself. But the trouble with Left-sounding slogans which reduce the complexities of foreign policy to the stature of cure-alls which can be inscribed on the average six-foot banner is that their appeal is largely limited to the converted and they may very often foster harmful illusions which can be shattered with demoralising effect.

Thus, the time is here for a reassessment. What should be the foreign policy of the revolutionary Left in Britain? It would not be too difficult to lay down the broad lines of a foreign policy for a Socialist Britain. What is more difficult and far more important is to work out a foreign policy which can be imposed upon the government of a capitalist Britain and, under approximately the world conditions we have today, can *work*.

It is no use boiling everything down to the old familiar slogans : "Free Britain from U.S. domination." " More trade with the Socialist countries!" "Support the Soviet Union's fight for peace!"

"Down with the American warmongers!" These slogans beg almost every available question. They have little popular appeal. They come not from the head but the bowels. We can and must begin to do better than that.

What has been the theory behind these slogans and the similar simplifications which preceeded them? It has been based upon Lenin's teachings on the nature of capitalism and the manner in which its unequal development and the contradictions inherent within it breed wars for the division and redivision of the world. This is a process of history the general truth of which is largely beyond dispute. And from it springs the corollary; that Socialist societies have nothing to gain from war, and that it is therefore in the nature of a Socialist State to desire peace and pursue a policy designed to secure it. This also is a truth of historic scope.

But what is historically true is not always and necessarily true of an immediate situation. Capitalism may bear within it the seeds of war but in specific circumstances and for more or less lengthy periods a capitalist State, or group of States, may need peace and its rulers may be aware of it and striving to avert war. Or the balance of forces may be such as to make war impossible. If this were not so, all effort to prevent disaster would be a waste of time. It is not pre-ordained by any immutable historical process that the only thing standing between all of us and atomic dust is time.

But if what is historically true of capitalist States may not apply to every given situation, so what is true in the case of Socialist States may equally not apply in every case. This is not to say necessarily that Socialist States have moments of bellicose frenzy; it does mean, however, that the fundamental interest of a Socialist State in peace does not of itself guarantee that at every turning point of every international situation the policy of that State will in fact be the one best calculated to ensure peace. Historical tendencies do not impart infallibility to statesmen and do not justify the suspension of all critical faculties in favour of the quasi-religious proposition: all Socialist countries need peace; this is a Socialist country; therefore it needs peace; therefore its rulers want peace and are working for peace in the most effective way possible.

It may even be that for comparatively lengthy periods, human fallibility, or distortions and stresses within the political life of the Socialist State, can impose a foreign policy which is ill-advised, unrealistic or adventurist. Stalin's treatment of Yugoslavia is an obvious case in point; and there are other features of Soviet post-war policies which may have made the task of the extreme Republicans in the U.S.A. easier than it should have been. And if the entire Marxist movement is committed at such moments to the proposition that

these policies are by definition beyond criticism, then the Marxist parties run the risk of cutting themselves off from their own people and discrediting themselves as national parties with political capacities of their own.

No man of goodwill on the Left will dispute the need to ensure the survival of the Soviet Union. But it simply is not true that the Communist parties in other countries can only play their part by erecting every Soviet foreign policy move and every Soviet pronouncement or new emphasis into the dogma for the day. More harm has resulted from the repeated attempts to do so than ever could be done by taking the other course. The practice may have denied to the opponents of Communism any opening to exploit differences within the Communist camp, but in many countries it kept the Communist parties so small that the achievement was without value, and in others it has been a millstone round the necks of massive Communist parties which could and should be making a far greater impact upon the affairs of their country than they now make.

Thus, in entering discussion of a Socialist foreign policy for Britain it seems essential to get rid of all *a priori* thinking and to discard slogans which, however attractive in their all-embracing simplicity, may not coincide with the situation as it really is, and may simply be not-very-free adaptations of things originally said elsewhere for reasons which are sometimes obscure and even open to question.

This, of course, is not a one-way proposition. If the Left sometimes imprisons itself within obsolete and unrealistic slogans, so does the Right. And it is a cardinal virtue of Mr. Kennan's Reith Lectures that he went some way towards spelling out what these slogans are, and then demonstrating their falseness.

Mr. Kennan believes that both sides have got themselves into unnatural and unnecessarily dangerous frames of mind about each other. "What we are confronted with here" he says of the Russian attitude, "is not just misunderstanding, not just honest error, but a habit of mind, an induced state, a condition." And of the West; "We must get over this obsession that the Russians are yearning to attack and occupy Western Europe." It is this obsession, of course, which underpins N.A.T.O., the race for the I.C.B.M.'s and the Cold War itself. And though Mr. Kennan draws distinctions between the various kinds of people who support official Western policy to-day - distinctions which are certainly valid - it is not these distinctions which concern us here.

It is not difficult for Mr. Kennan, or indeed anyone else, to expose Western policy for the dangerous nonsense that it is. Reduced to its essentials, it is a policy which staggers from one ultimate weapon to the next, from deterrent to deterrent, with no end in view but a world

torn permanently asunder and bristling with atomic warheads of unimagined destructiveness. Mr. Kennan sees the German problem as a central cause of tension, and he believes that by insisting that a united Germany should be free to join (as she *would* join) the Western Powers, we are guaranteeing the failure of all negotiations and thus prolonging the existence of a major flashpoint in Europe.

On all of this Mr. Kennan has much good sense to offer. But on two major questions he is less helpful. The first is the problem of the colonies and under-developed countries - areas which he rightly sees as further sources of tension between the Great Powers. The second is N.A.T.O. itself.

Mr. Kennan's misconceptions about colonialism are gross in the extreme and quite unworthy of an observer of his calibre. He believes that the anti-Western animus in such areas as the Middle East is "primarily subjective in origin" and that far from having any moral feelings about colonialism (which he thinks is now dead and buried anyway), we should regard it as "simply a stage of history." He grants the colonial Powers some "mistakes," but he believes, or says he believes, that more often than not the colonising process was achieved with the support and encouragement of the local populations.

Because he misunderstands the nature of the problem, Mr. Kennan has no political answer to the dangers which arise from colonialism. He offers a little industrial psychology and he couples it with a plea for relaxation and patience. It is true that in the Middle East he believes that our task is to prevent the unsettled state of the area from leading to world war. But admirable as this sentiment may be, it is scarcely enough. The British Labour Movement has a long tradition of anti-colonialism behind it, however, and the Left has never been in doubt about where it stands on the question of imperialism and how it should be fought. For this reason we are not dwelling upon the matter here.

When we turn to N.A.T.O. we find that Mr. Kennan's shortcomings are far more serious in their implications, because the problem of N.A.T.O. and what it stands for is at the heart of the world crisis. Mr. Kennan is quite admirable in his assessment of N.A.T.O. and the effects of its policy. He demonstrates that however strong the alliance becomes - however many megaton bombs and I.C.B.M.'s it stockpiles - it cannot change Soviet policy by one iota in the direction that its controllers desire. This is so because what Mr. Dulles wants cuts directly across the fundamental national interests of the Soviet Union and would be tantamount to the abandonment of every political and strategic advantage that the Russians were able to acquire from their immense sacrifices in the war.

All that N.A.T.O. is able to achieve, therefore, is the freezing of Europe into an aggressive and highly dangerous posture, with the worst arms race in history condemning her peoples to the evils of galloping inflation and jeopardising the very existence of future generations.

"None of us dreamed," says Mr. Kennan of the early days of N.A.T.O. (in which he played a policy-making role of some significance), "that the constructive impulses of this enterprise . . . would be overtaken and swallowed up in the space of a mere two or three years by programmes of military assistance based on a wholly different concept of the Soviet threat and Europe's need." No? One is astonished that Mr. Kennan could be so *naïf*, and that he could so have under-rated the depth of anti-Soviet prejudice in leading Western circles and so misunderstood the simple dynamics of the kind of political and military action that the N.A.T.O. Powers were undertaking.

But that is history. The important question is what can be done now that N.A.T.O. has turned out so differently from what Mr. Kennan had hoped. When we seek an answer from Mr. Kennan we do not get very far.

He believes that the strengthening of N.A.T.O. cannot be a substitute for negotiation and that negotiation can best be carried on by individual Governments. Very good. He further believes that the N.A.T.O. Powers should never have taken up postures which prevent negotiation, and he cites German policy as a clear example of just this. Very good again. If this means anything at all, it means that U.S. rocket bases should not be established on the territory of the N.A.T.O. Powers, and the feasibility of the Rapacki proposals and any other proposals designed to limit armaments, establish neutral zones or create a system of security pacts, should be most speedily and seriously examined in the West, as they would be, we believe, in the East.

So far, so good. But then Mr. Kennan goes on to say that since the real fight against Communism must be spiritual and economic rather than military, efforts must be made for further co-operation and maybe integration between the Western Powers. Why not, he suggests, have the same kind of closer relationship between Great Britain, Canada and the U.S., as the West European States are developing among themselves on the Continent? And why not tighten our belts and make the economic sacrifices which are certainly necessary if we are to build strong economies which will be proof against the blandishments of Communism.

There are two ideas here which call for separate reply, and of the two, the first is the more important.

Closer association between Britain, Canada and the U.S.? Common policies? But whose policies would they be? Would this triumvirate act as a brake upon Mr. Dulles and the considerable forces of the American bourgeoisie who support him? Or would it simply give Mr. Dulles's policy extra weight? Would the British economy have better hopes of defending itself against the inroads of American imperialism within such an association - or would we find that to be in the lion's cage is on the whole more dangerous than to be sitting just outside it? Does Mr. Kennan believe that in the present condition of American political life, and with the present characteristics of the American economy, such an association could be achieved on terms acceptable to Britain and Canada? The question is a vital one, for we are not dealing with some future American Government which is more moderate and more sober than the Eisenhower administration. We are dealing with the present American Government, and to judge from Mr. Dean Acheson on Mr. Kennan, and Mr. Adlai Stevenson on N.A.T.O., it would be foolhardy in the extreme for Britain to take any action which was predicated upon anticipated changes in U.S. policy, increased U.S. goodwill to one and all, or profound changes in the nature of U.S. imperialism once the Democrats return to the White House.

As for the conception that Communism must be fought with the spirit and a four-pound loaf, no one will deny to those who support capitalism the right to try to make capitalism/work if they can. It is, after all, what Mr. Khrushchov means by peaceful competition. One can only ask in reply that capitalism should hurry up with the bounty that its left hand is to dispense before the weapon in its right hand destroys us all.

But the problem of Western policy - the problem of N.A.T.O. - remains. How can we break the deadlock? How can we ease Europe's cramp? How can we retreat from Mr. Dulles's brink? What should we do? Mr. Kennan does not know, though he presents most cogently his gloomy list of things that the N.A.T.O. Powers are doing and should *not* do.

Surely, if we can begin to break up the very alliance upon which the dangerous military arrangements of the Western Powers are based, we will be taking an important, and maybe a decisive, step in the right direction. And who, better than Britain, can start to do this? For a small N.A.T.O. country to move towards neutrality would be a political and propaganda defeat for Mr. Dulles; but it would not seriously affect the fabric of his policy. For Turkey to do so would be both surprising and, in any event, extremely difficult. France and Italy are better possibilities, but they lack the strength for effective action of this kind. But Britain is still a Power of major

importance. She is the closest associate of the U.S.A. in Europe. Her co-operation in N.A.T.O. is vital if N.A.T.O. is to have the scope and stature that its supporters require. But could Britain go it alone? On the face of it, one would think that she could. What would happen if Britain left N.A.T.O.? What could the U.S. Congress and the U.S. Administration do about it? And would what they did hurt Britain in any decisive way?

It would be argued by some - including some men of goodwill in the Labour Movement - that the Western Powers cannot be expected to liquidate their military alliance while the Warsaw Pact, which is the military alliance of the Socialist Powers, remains intact. Why, they would ask, should *we* move first? Why not the Russians?

The answer is two fold. Firstly, if Mr. Kennan, and Mr. Dennis Healey of the Labour Party, are right, the Soviet desire to attack Western Europe is a myth. Furthermore, the Russians themselves know perfectly well that any military move in Europe must provoke world war. And since world war would now be full-scale atomic war - or at any rate would very *possibly* be atomic - this would be tantamount to saying that the Russian leaders are crazy enough to commit national suicide for the sake of conquest in Europe. No one but an unredeemable bigot can believe that they would do anything of the kind. Thus, since the Warsaw Pact is not aggressive in character, there can be no risk to Britain in taking the first step to liquidate N.A.T.O.

Secondly, there is a world of difference between the significance of N.A.T.O. and of the Warsaw Pact. In geographical terms, N.A.T.O. consists of a ring of bases surrounding the Soviet Union. Its very physical set-up is a menace to Russia, whereas the same cannot possibly be said of the Warsaw arrangements - which were entered into as a defensive retaliation to N.A.T.O. The other characteristic of N.A.T.O. which distinguished it from the Warsaw Pact is the presence of the U.S.A. as the decisive partner. For this introduces American power into Europe, as near to Russia's doorstep as it can get, and it is unthinkable that tension can be relaxed in Europe while this unnatural phenomenon persists. Would anyone seriously believe that a normal political situation could be maintained on the American Continent if the U.S.A. itself were girdled with Russian bases, established on the territory of her neighbours?

The further question therefore poses itself: can any solution be sound which is based upon the continuation of N.A.T.O.? Do we not have to get to the heart of the problem - the very existence of N.A.T.O. itself? Do we not have to say that the presence in Europe of the Americans - politically and strategically - is a fundamental cause of tension which cannot be palliated but must be removed?

These, surely, are the key questions for the British Labour Movement. They involve a fresh appraisal of our economic position *vis a vis* the U.S. and the rest of Europe; a new examination of the pattern of our foreign trade and the possibility of increasing our trade with the Socialist countries; a close, fresh look at Britain's military commitments overseas.

Certainly, public support for a policy of neutrality would not be lacking. And is it altogether wishful thinking to claim that ruling circles in Britain would not have the same systematic objection to such a shift in policy as their French or Italian counterparts would have? For the latter, the American alliance spells survival in the face of revolution. They need U.S. guns, or the promise of U.S. guns, and U.S. economic benevolence. Such a situation does not exist in Britain, and thus the powerful impulse to accept U.S. policy at any price which conditions all political action by the French and Italian bourgeoisie does not apply here. It would therefore seem, if we are able to give the right kinds of answers to the economic and political questions raised by neutrality, that neutrality is a policy which capitalist Britain *could* pursue and yet survive. And thus it would be a policy which the Left in the Labour Movement could impose upon the Labour leadership or the Tories, or both.

As for the fundamental social questions - they are a connected, but a separate matter. Here we are concerned with survival. And survival, after all, is a basic premise of social change.

These then, are some of the problems which have to be examined, even while the direct campaign against nuclear weapons is being fought. There is no time to think first and act afterwards; the two must go hand in hand. But to restrict ourselves to attacking the Bomb, abusing the Americans and demanding cuts in military expenditure is a makeshift which falls a long way short of what the Labour Movement needs. The real need is for a thesis on Neutrality for Britain. This thesis needs to demonstrate three basic propositions. Firstly that neutrality for Britain is compatible with the elementary needs of the present society, even though it may weaken British capitalism in the long run. In short, that the British bourgeoisie can permit itself to be constrained to accept neutrality - even in certain respects to like it. Secondly, that neutrality is economically viable and accords with British national interests as they present themselves in relation to the national interests of other Powers, particularly the U.S.A. And thirdly, that British neutrality would ease the cramp of Europe and contribute towards a *detente* and towards peace.

With this issue, the *New Reasoner* opens the debate.