

# Towards Democratic Socialism



by Eric S. Hefferman

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# Towards Democratic Socialism

*by Eric S. Heffer MP*

Nye Bevan's contribution to socialism cannot and should not be underestimated; much of what he said is very relevant today when the Labour Party is at an important milestone in its existence. Although the Labour Party is only 80 years old, it is obvious that a renewal of Party ideas and organisation is on the agenda. Every important organisation, political and religious, that has a historical role to play reviews itself from time to time. This is such a period for Labour. It is essential for us to look again at our basic socialist concepts, to examine the society in which we live, to see precisely where we as a Party are going and what our objectives should be.

## *The Labour Party*

The first point I would like to make is that despite its often middle-class leadership and parliamentary orientation the Labour Party is essentially a working-class party. I do not mean by that that its entire membership is working-class or that it should be — it must attract members and supporters from every section of society — but it has to be recognised that the party is firmly based on the organised working-class movement. It was formed as the result of a TUC Resolution passed in 1899, and continues to express working-class interests; but that does not mean a minority Party with a restricted outlook. The Labour Party is in fact the only genuinely national party in Britain because the working people are the majority in society, and class attitudes cut across all national and religious barriers. It does not follow, however, that because we are socialists we preach class hatred; on the contrary, to do so would be counter-productive and wrong because as socialists we aim to eliminate all class barriers and to build a classless society. On the other hand, it is essential to recognise that we in Britain in particular live in a class divided society, with a small powerful and privileged class owning most of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and if we are to transform society and build a really democratic egalitarian society, the power and privileges of that small class must be ended once and for all.

Keir Hardie, in his small book, *From Serfdom to Socialism*, published at the turn of the century, outlined Labour's moral outlook, when he said, "Socialism implies brotherhood, and brotherhood implies a living recognition of the fact that the duty of the strong is not to hold the weak in subjection, but to assist them to rise higher and ever higher in the scale of humanity, and that this cannot be done by trampling upon and exploiting their weakness but by caring for them and showing them the better way".

Again, to quote Keir Hardie, "Socialism does not propose to abolish land or capital. Only a genius could have thought of this as an objection to Socialism. Socialism proposes to abolish capitalism and landlordism". It is the ownership of land and capital, and its utilisation that is at stake, not its existence.

Although socialism could only emerge out of capitalism just as capitalism itself emerged from the feudal system, there were always some thinkers in society who believed that common ownership was the best way to organise society.

One of these was St. Ambrose, an early Father of the Church. He said, "The soil was given to rich and poor in common. Wherefore, oh, ye rich! do you unjustly claim it for yourselves alone? . . . nature gave all things in common for the use of all, usurption created private right".

It was St. Paul who enunciated the doctrine that he who does not work neither should he eat, and he was not talking like modern Tories do of the unemployed, but of those who were rich by living off their fellow men.

### *Common Ownership*

The Labour Party is a socialist party and the core of its socialism is summed up in Clause IV of the Party Constitution which says — and it is clearly printed on our membership cards — "To secure for the workers by hand or brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service."

The important thing to recognise is that the clause refers to the "common ownership of the means of production". It does not say nationalisation as such, or any other particular form of state ownership. Certainly, nationalisation can be one form of common ownership, but not exclusively so, and not necessarily the best form. Nationalisation can be a form of bureaucratic state capitalism, as remote from democratic control as is a big corporation.

We have to recognise that nationalisation in itself does not solve the problems of production, or necessarily give security of employment, or mean that the industries so nationalised are more democratic and that workers have greater rights.

Nationalisation is one thing, common ownership and socialism are something different, although nationalisation can be the basis for a socialist economy. There are those who would argue that in saying that one is splitting theoretical hairs. They would be wrong, because there is state ownership in the Soviet Union and in other Communist controlled countries, but real common ownership, i.e. socialism does not exist. I do not know whether the Soviet Union can be designated as "State Capitalist", "Bureaucratic Collectivist", a "Degenerated Workers State", or a form of "State Socialism". I do know that the country is run by a bureaucratic elite or a "new class" as Djilas, the Yugoslav socialist calls it, which has special privileges, who send their children to privileged schools, shop in special shops, have special apartments and generally live separately and are divorced from the mass of the people. Such privileges and powers have nothing in common with socialism which believes in democracy, in equal socialism and the ending of all privileges.

### *Socialism and the Democratic Tradition*

Socialism and democracy are synonymous. As someone — I think Alex Lyon MP — rightly said at Labour's Conference, there is no such thing as democratic socialism, there is only socialism, and if it is not democratic, it is not socialist.

Democracy is something the working-class movement in Britain fought for over the years, often by hard and bitter struggle. In fact the first workers' movement (in a sense the precursor of the Labour Party) was in Britain and was known as the Chartists. Let me outline what the Chartists' aims were. This I can best do by quoting Ernest Jones, a leading Chartist, born of working class parents, who fought Halifax (as a Chartist) in the General Election of 1847. (Incidentally, those were the days of a restricted electorate, and he polled 279 votes.) In a speech, he outlined what he stood for. "Universal suffrage; Vote by ballot; Annual Parliaments; No property qualifications; Payment of members; Equal Electoral Districts; The separation of Church and State; the restoration of that portion of Church property taken from the poor to its rightful owners; a voluntary system of Education; The abolition of capital punishment; The abolition of the new Poor Law; A system of Direct Taxation etc".

He also said in the same speech that "I shall feel it my duty annually to present myself before the inhabitants of your borough, in public meetings assembled, and there to resign my trust into their hands should such be the will of the majority".

Most of what the Chartists demanded has been achieved, although it has taken a long time. It is also interesting to note that Ernest Jones was in effect supporting a form of re-selection on an annual basis.

The point I am making is that democracy is rooted in the British working class movement. In fact, 200 years before the Chartists, during the

English revolution of the 1640s, there were the Levellers and Diggers, "The First Socialists", who were demanding both democracy and common ownership. Reading the Putney debates that took place in the Cromwellian New Model Army, one can clearly see how democracy is deeply rooted in our people.

The Labour Party is part of that democratic tradition. The Levellers and Diggers, the Chartists and early trade unionists, are our heritage, and we are not likely to discard that heritage. Without democracy and free debate and discussion, as well as tolerance the Labour Party would not be the Labour Party. The Labour Party will change, it must, but its democracy will remain only strengthened.

### *The Media*

This leads me to consider the press and media in our country. I am not one of those who believes that we have not got a free press. We have, but it is a press that is to a large extent manipulated, used and often — especially is this true of some of the "popular" papers — deformed in the interests of maintaining the free enterprise system. In the first place, arguments in the Labour Party are personalised. Much of the press is full of such statements as "Benn gives his Orders", or "Benn's policy to abolish the House of Lords". "Callaghan hits back" etc., etc. Then we see the sinister cartoons which show Tony Benn and myself with hammer and sickle, or standing with KGB men, alongside snide comments suggesting that we are against Parliamentary democracy and for dictatorship. Some of this dangerous rubbish gets across, because from time to time, I have letters from honest working people who have been deceived by what they have seen on TV or read in the newspapers.

Nye Bevan also suffered from the press. He is reported as once saying that Britain had the most prostituted press in the world. Michael Foot in the second volume of his book on Aneurin Bevan says on page 356, "... Some ill-wishers saw these operations in a sinister light: 'Bevan crisis weekend. He has two plans to grab the socialist leadership' ran the headlines in the *Sunday Express* of 3rd February; a tale followed of how the plotters had been assembling at 23 Cliveden Place. It was all a fabrication and Bevan took the rare step of issuing a public denial". Michael says, "No word of apology of withdrawal appeared in the Daily or *Sunday Express*, and a little while later, Arthur Deakin returned to the subject in a speech at Bristol". Then as now even some Labour and trade union leaders are misled by what they read in the newspapers.

To those who watch these things closely, they will see parallels between the situation then and the situation today.

Nye Bevan said, and I think in this situation the words need underlining: "The philosophy of democratic socialism is essentially cool in temper. It sees society in its context with nature and is conscious of the limitations imposed by physical conditions. It sees the individual in his context with society and is therefore compassionate and tolerant".

He then went on to say, "Democratic socialism is a child of modern society and so of relativist philosophy. *It seeks the truth in any given situation, knowing all the time that if it is pushed too far it falls into error.* (My emphasis — E.S.H.) It struggles against the evils that flow from private property, yet realises that all forms of private property are not evil. Its chief enemy is vacillation, for it must achieve passion in action in the pursuit of qualified judgements".

These were hardly the words of someone who was out to destroy democracy and create a dictatorial society. Yet that is what was being suggested at the time. After his death, like others, he is often referred to by previous enemies as a great parliamentarian and statesman.

The press has much to answer for, but what it is doing is understandable, because they in the main defend and support an outmoded economic and political system.

The press however was not always the defender of the establishment and capitalist society. When papers were first published in Britain they, or many of them, were democratic in orientation, and there was a great struggle to get them circulated without high taxes which put them out of reach of the working man.

A group of radical democrats set out to get rid of the Newspaper Stamp Act, and in a report said that they objected "to the limitation imposed by the stamp upon the circulation of the best newspapers, and to the impediment which it throws in the way of the diffusion of useful knowledge regarding current and recent events among the poorer class, which species of knowledge relating to subjects which most obviously interest them, call out the intelligence by awakening the curiosity of those classes — apart from financial consideration, they do not consider that news in itself a desirable subject for taxation".

The struggle for democracy in Britain has therefore taken on many forms. Press freedom was part of that struggle.

We as socialists want to extend the frontiers of democracy and to extend genuine freedom to society as a whole, the very opposite to what our denigrators charge.

The Labour Party believes that socialism can be achieved through the ballot box and given a good Labour majority, it can, with the consent of the people, transform society. Its objective is to build a classless society, where privilege, personal power and patronage have been abolished. The Party over the years has taken many steps along the road to a socialist society. It was responsible for the creation of the welfare state. It built the National Health Service. It brought into public ownership a number of important industries, creating some fertile oases in the desert of capitalism, but up to now it has failed to get rid of the desert altogether. It is a big task, but it can be done, on the basis of planning the nation's mineral and natural resources and utilising the enthusiasm of the people to do it.

### *Challenging Capitalism's Crisis*

It is now necessary to take stock of the situation in which this country and the capitalist system finds itself. There were voices in the Labour Party, quite important ones, who argued that because of the Keynesian economic interventionist policies that had been pursued by Labour Governments and to a lesser extent, Tory Governments, there could never be another slump of the proportions of the 1930s. These same voices in the Labour movement argued that socialist concepts were out-dated, and that although there would be some set-backs, the Western world would never again see millions out of work, with the sort of poverty and misery which existed in the past. Those so-called "theoreticians" who argued like that have been proved wrong. Keynesian interventionist policies, did help prevent an immediate post-war slump, but there were other factors at work which also were partly responsible. Europe, East and West, had to be rebuilt after 1945. The cold war caused the industrial/military complex in the USA and Europe to get rearmament under way. The military conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, and elsewhere were part of that process. These factors, in addition to Keynesian intervention, held back the slump, but the laws of capitalist economics could not forever be denied. It was only a matter of time before a major crisis in Western capitalism was bound to occur, accompanied by an inevitable slump.

I say this, not with any pleasure, but because it is a fact, and if we understand that fact, then we will know what solutions are required. There are of course two basic solutions to any capitalist crisis; one, the capitalist solution, is to place the burden of that crisis on to the shoulders of working people with the inevitability of rising discontent, internal tensions and repression, possibly leading to fascism, or war, or both. The alternative is a socialist approach, which entails planning the economy, with measures taken to ensure a redistribution of wealth, the growth of public expenditure, the reorganisation of industry on a planned basis by developing public ownership, training schemes for skill, less working hours and real moves towards an egalitarian society.

That is the choice that Britain has before it today. The proposals which the Labour party have put forward to solve Britain's problems, are not based upon some doctrinaire, dogmatic belief, but are necessary to solve Britain's problems. They are the only serious alternative to capitalist barbarism.

The fury of the Tory press and Tory politicians against the Labour Party NEC in particular, whose job it is to uphold the decisions of Labour's Conference, has one fundamental cause. They are afraid that the next Labour Government will get a good majority, that Labour MPs will fully accept Conference policy, and that a Labour Government, supported by its MPs, will have the strength and determination to carry out Labour's declared policies, without serious compromise. In other words, they fear that the days of capitalist power and privilege are numbered,



and that a new democratic socialist society is likely to be inaugurated. It is for this reason they incorrectly and deliberately equate Labour's policies with the destruction of freedom. It is a defence mechanism on their part.

As R.H. Tawney put it, "The British version of socialism, therefore, has democracy as its basis. In labouring to add new economic storeys to the house, it has no intention of destroying its political foundations. Its attitude to freedom is no exception to that statement. It involves, not the curtailment of liberties, but their more general extension, and is for that reason, denounced as tyrannical by those whose authority is likely, as a consequence, to suffer diminution. Classes at the top may fall, but cannot rise. The construction which they put on freedom is the result of that position".

### *The House of Lords*

We socialists should expect the establishment to do precisely what it is doing. Those with power and privileges have never been known to surrender them easily, they will fight strongly to preserve what they have. That is why they are so incensed about Labour's proposal to abolish the House of Lords. The House of Lords is a bastion of the powers and privileges of the British ruling establishment. The Lords' powers are used ruthlessly against Labour Governments and are equally useful when the Lords believe their own Tory Government might be making a political mistake, which could cost them votes in the country. That is what happened recently when Tory Lords revolted over rural school transport.

The Labour Party at its Annual Conference in 1932 passed a resolution calling for the abolition of the House of Lords. A resolution similar in many respects to that passed in 1978. The reaction of Conservative politicians at that time was almost exactly the same as today. One ex-Minister demanded that there should be a revision in the powers of the House of Lords so that in future a Labour House of Commons would be unable to carry out its socialist policy. An ex-deputy Speaker insisted that, unless that was done it might be necessary to revise the Royal Veto against legislation hostile to what he described as "economic privilege".

Today, as the Tory conference revealed there are Tory plans to reform the House of Lords, in order to strengthen its powers, to generally bolster it up, with of course some genuflection towards democratic concepts, but in reality ensuring that the House of Lords continues essentially as it is today and that socialist policies will be more difficult to carry through.

There is the argument being advanced, even in the Labour Party, that a Second Chamber, elected or selected, is essential. It is a proposition that cannot be sustained. The New Zealand Parliament has only one chamber, as does Sweden. Both are strong democratic countries. In Chile, there were two chambers, and the Second Chamber of Senators which was electorally weighted to assist the election of right-wing can-

didates, was used to stop President Allende carrying out his policies. The Senators also because of their obstructive tactics were very much responsible for the decline in the economic situation in Chile. They acted as a reactionary base against the progressive policies of Allende.

### *Labour and the slump*

In order to transform society, it will be essential to get our economic and industrial policy right. Labour has a clear alternative strategy, which is set out in our policy documents. What is necessary is that we recognise that Keynesianism has been important, that it was an advance on old fashioned laissez-faire economic policies, but that it is essential to move beyond Keynesianism to democratic socialist planning.

What about this Tory Government's attitude to economic policies? Sir Keith Joseph and Mrs Thatcher both regard any type of interventionist policies by Government in industry or on economic issues, as "creeping socialism". They not only reject Labour's alternatives as well as Keynesianism, they also reject Harold MacMillan's "middle-way". It is no wonder that MacMillan recently on TV referred to the unnecessary suffering that was taking place.

Let us recall what MacMillan said in an address to the Conservative Political Centre in March 1958, when he was Prime Minister. He said, "... those of us who lived through the inter-war years know that there is another problem, just as difficult to solve and certainly no less painful in human terms. It is not only inflation which can threaten the steady expansion of production and the full employment of our resources. Deflation, involving the failure of effective demand, can do the same thing. In the inter-war years we pursued a monetary policy which was unduly deflationary and we had the less excuse for it because we had quite sufficient reserves to take risks with them. Prices fell all right, but they fell too low. And what was the accompanying feature? Everyone in this hall who is more than 45 years of age has actually lived in a period when there were 2¾ million unemployed in this country . . ."

Today there are over 2 million unemployed, and the numbers are growing all the time. More and more factory closures are taking place, short-time working is increasingly the norm, and whole industries and towns are threatened. It is clear that the policies which were attacked by Harold MacMillan are again being carried out today by Mrs Thatcher and with the same disastrous results.

### *Socialist Internationalism*

This brings me to the issue of the Common Market. It is easy to recall that during the referendum campaign in 1975, we were told that Britain's membership of the Common Market held out real advantages for jobs and industry. It was suggested that membership was a short cut in dealing with Britain's economic problems. The reality has proved beyond all

reasonable doubt the case of those who argued against Britain being in the Common Market.

The point about the Common Market is that although it has a bureaucracy based in Brussels which propose some bureaucratic planning, it is through the Rome Treaty tied to the free market economy. Competition is supposedly the cornerstone of Common Market policy.

It is essential for us as socialists, as Labour Party members, to make it clear that although we are against the Common Market, and believe Britain should withdraw, we are not against the idea of European unity leading eventually to a United Socialist Europe. Labour is internationalist in outlook. It cannot take a nationalistic, chauvinistic position. It does not dislike foreigners, and it does not believe that civilisation ends at Dover. If we did, we would not be socialists, because internationalism is an essential ingredient of socialist concepts.

Therefore, at the same time as we rightly argue against the Common Market, we need to strengthen our ties with our comrades in Europe, by which I mean All-Europe, not just the EEC. There are for example, good socialists in Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, Finland, Greece, Portugal and Spain, (the last two countries named are not yet in the EEC), and it is our duty to strengthen our ties with all of them, as well as with our comrades in the EEC.

There are two lines of action we can take to improve our links and build up a European radical socialist movement. The first is to organise a European fight against unemployment, and the second is to work to make Europe (East and West) a nuclear-free zone, stretching from the Russian/Polish border to the Atlantic coast. There is also the need to control the multi-national companies, and to build up the trade unions so that they are in a stronger position to take international solidarity action.

There is no doubt that some of our socialist comrades in Europe are confused because of our decision at Conference to come out of the Common Market. The point being that under the Rome Treaty some of their people gain in certain respects, whereas we are net losers. What we have to do is keep the balance between our British interests and our international socialist position, which I admit is not easy.

### *Extending Democracy*

Although I have ranged very widely indeed, there are whole areas of policy, principles and theory that I have not spoken about. I have not developed our views on defence. I have not said anything about Democratic Management, Workers' Control or Industrial Democracy. Actually, these are vital and important questions because if we are to build a publicly owned industry that is socialist, then there must be forms of democratic management, along the lines advocated by G.D.H. Cole in his many books, articles and lectures. He advocated self-management of industry by the workers in industry, and that is what the Labour Party ultimately wishes to see.

James Connolly, the great Irish Socialist, who was shot by the British Army in 1917, once said, "Socialism is public ownership plus workers' control". Although the concept "workers' control" has a number of meanings the basic point is absolutely correct. In future Labour Governments in extending public ownership with the planning of the nation's resources, must ensure that the workers are involved in the decision-making process. Democracy at all levels is essential, both in industry and in political life.

This leads me to a very important point. The Labour Party is undergoing internal change. Over the years tried and trusted methods have been found to be inadequate and the demand has arisen in the Party for greater democracy, control and influence by the grass roots rank and file of the party.

Equally, the demand is beginning to make itself felt in the trade union movement. In the wider political sphere it shows itself in the demand for more open government, for less secrecy, for a Freedom of Information Act, for greater public accountability, democratic control of the Police, for the establishment of trade unions in the Armed Forces. All very important questions, and proof that British Labour is not seeking to set up a bureaucratic state like those in the communist countries in Eastern Europe.

In the Labour Party, the issue has shown itself in the demand for re-selection of MPs on a mandatory basis, the Manifesto to be under the ultimate control of the NEC, and a wider franchise for the election of the leader.

These are all questions, no matter how one feels about them, which will not go away, they will stay with the Party until they are resolved, as also will the demand for changes in the methods of block voting by the trade unions at Conference, even if the principle of the block vote continues to be accepted.

If positive reforms are carried out by increasing democracy within the Party, this will in practice sharpen up the Labour Party as a more effective instrument in the struggle to change society, and bring about a democratic socialist one. The demands for democratic change are real, they were not dreamed up in some closed Committee room at Party Headquarters or at the House of Commons.

There is however a real danger, and that is of a split between the PLP and the Party in this country. This must be avoided by intelligent and cool action. Labour is not two parties, it is one; the Constitution in Clauses 4 and 6 makes that absolutely clear. There are some who would like an elitist PLP, which would decide its own policy, have its own finances, and virtually be a separate party. Some, a tiny majority of MPs, have expressed this during the arguments about the PLP leadership contest.

Such moves to split the party must be resisted, and that also means that State money for the PLP must be under the ultimate control of the

Party in the country, and not regarded as purely a special fund of the PLP. Certainly researchers must be available for the Opposition Front Bench, as well as for back-benchers. The money must be correctly used in that way, it must only be used for the PLP but those employed must be so employed not individually by shadow cabinet members, separate from the party, but must be employed under party conditions of employment, be ultimately under party control, and responsible to the party administration.

These are all vital questions for the future of the party.

Parliamentary democracy is not under attack because of extending democracy in the Labour Party. That is a figment of some people's imagination, and is a popular theme with political pundits like Peter Jenkins of *The Guardian* and also with the reactionary press. The extension of democracy within the Labour Party in reality strengthens democracy throughout the country, and therefore strengthens democracy in Parliament.

Public accountability is vital. It is time that Prime Ministerial patronage, the House of Lords, seats on Quangos for "loyal service" was ended once and for all.

These have been demands in varying forms since the days of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the English Revolution of 1640, the Chartist Movement of the 1830s and the Reform Act of the 1860s.

Democracy is again resurgent, and it is essential to our socialist struggle. Labour's task is to ensure that the next Labour Government really carries out what the British people have long demanded.

### *Labour's Aspirations*

Let me summarise and conclude by saying what in my view Labour's objectives should be.

In the short term, Labour must build the strongest possible unity to get the Thatcher Government out of office at the earliest possible moment. This will require Parliamentary action plus the building of a mass movement outside Parliament.

After Thatcher is defeated through winning the next General Election, a future Labour Government must be as determined in carrying through its policies as Mrs Thatcher has been in carrying through hers. The Labour Government must be seen as the next step in the transformation of Britain from capitalist society to a democratic socialist one. Labour's objective is to create a classless, egalitarian society where extreme wealth on the one hand, and poverty, on the other, is abolished. Where everyone will have security of employment, a decent home to live in and a good education. Where there will be a genuinely free health service, where all forms of discrimination will be abolished. Where women will have real equality and where religious, racial and sex discrimination will be a thing of the past. Labour must work for peace and detente, for

multi-lateral nuclear disarmament, as well as removing all such weapons from British soil.

The cornerstone of Labour's policy is the extension and development of democracy both political and industrial.

The 1980s has socialism clearly on the agenda. Especially is this true of Western Europe. Labour although against the Common Market, must create a stronger unity of the socialist and trade union forces in the whole of Europe and work towards a united socialist Europe.

I began by saying that the Labour Party was at a milestone in its history, that new ideas and organisation was required. The truth is, there have been those in the European socialist movement who long ago understood the need for change. One of them was an Italian socialist Lelio Basso, who at a Conference in Paris in 1970 said:

- "a. The struggle for Socialism is an immediate struggle for the industrially developed countries of Western Europe.
  - b. This struggle cannot be waged according to the old formulae but it must start from new analysis, use new methods, new strategies and define as its aim a socialism different from the model which historical experience has so far given us.
- A profound renewal of the Left in relationship to its traditional forms must therefore be our aim."

With regard to the future of the Labour Party and its socialist objectives I feel I can do no better than quote Lelio Basso again, because I believe what he says is very revelant for Labour today. He said: "What is needed is a Party which abandons all the old, bureaucratic and dogmatic conceptions, and can create a live and democratic relationship with its class, which knows how not to impose itself on the movement to stifle it or contain it, but can insert itself on the movement to give life to all the real forces of disintegration applied by social contradiction, to link various movements of workers, peasants, intellectuals, students and exploited people of all social categories to locate in each of them the amount of breaking from the capitalist order, to assist them to weld themselves into a whole: organised and unorganised forces, social and political forces alike: in the common struggle for socialism which can no longer be postponed to the next economic crisis, the next electoral victory, but which must be led here and now with the most total commitment, resolution and unity".

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