

THE POLITICS OF THE SMITH GROUP SINCE AUGUST 1983

Kinnell

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How has the faction campaigned since August? What do they represent politically?

They have not developed any debate on the explicit political issues which they see as fundamental.

The November 19 EC unanimously agreed (on my proposal) to launch a discussion on imperialism " in order to clarify the basic issues behind the recurrent disputes ". Practically all the debate since then has been between those opposed to the faction (eg Scott and myself). Not a word from the faction until Cunliffe's recent document (IB 81) - a depressing exercise in scholasticism, on which more later.

The majority has written at length on recent developments in the Labour Party. Not a word from the faction.

Instead there has been a series of " scandals ".

It is a sorry and tedious tale. The political issues explicitly at stake would not merit one-hundredth of the sound and fury. The point is however, is as we noted in IB 70:

" In the earlier factional struggles around the Falklands and the Labour Party, the factionalism emerged, more or less, from the issue (though there was more to it ...). Now the issues emerge, almost completely, from the factionalism ".

And having emerged, in their turn, the " issues ", and the way they are argued, consolidate and shape the factionalism.

The record which follows looks like a record of trivial details. In a sense it is. But these " trivial " issues are what the faction leaders have chosen to define themselves.

As Lenin ~~put~~ it:

" Every little difference may become a big difference if it is insisted on, if it is put in the foreground ... Every little difference may assume tremendous importance if it serves as a starting point for a turn towards definite mistaken views ... "

(" One step forward, Two steps back ")

A. September 17

In the cause of trying to recreate unity, Carolan (supported on this by the EC majority) nominated Smith to open the September 17 conference.

On the day, shortly before the proceedings were due to start, Smith approached Kinnell and declared that he (Smith) would refuse to participate in the conference. " You'll have to find another speaker ".

Reason: members of the Spartacist League had been admitted to the conference.

Only after an emergency EC meeting did Smith calm down and agree to speak.

His speech put his own particular slant on events. The combativity of the working class was presented as a constant factor, and the shift for the worse in the political situation presented simply in terms of decisions by the Tories to attack harder and decisions by the trade union leaders to sell out more.

Carolan's concluding speech, in my view, presented a more rounded, materialist analysis of developments, trying to locate the leaders' sell-outs within the whole development of the working class. It was moreover, a summary of what we had said in conference documents. (See papers nos. 147 and 148).

But we do not need to, and should not try to, have a hard " party line " on such questions of analysis. If we found Smith's analysis somewhat crude and non-materialist, it does not matter all that much.

Nor did it matter that much that Smith gratuitously used his speech to " have a go " on various factional issues. He insisted heavily on his own unrelievedly pessimistic picture of the situation (how he squares that with the idea that the combativity of the working class has remained constantly high is his problem), a pessimism which he had made something of a factional " point of honour " as against the more nuanced assessments of the majority.

He got in a bit about the alleged centrality of the Cowley witch-hunt. One of the faction's main arguments at that time, as comrades may remember, was that the Cowley witch-hunt represented a fundamental turn in the whole political situation: it had been planned from Cabinet level as the first stage of a concerted drive throughout industry. They condemned the EC majority for underestimating it when we argued that the Cowley witch-hunt, while certainly important, was fundamentally a local BL issue rather than something which changed the whole situation throughout industry.

It can now be seen that we were right. The Cowley witch-hunt was a local issue. Smith implicitly admits that when in his call for a conference he omits the Cowley sackings from his list of new political developments since last April. It would be good to have an explicit statement from the faction that they were wrong, and irresponsible to factionalise on this issue as they did.

But again, the reference in Smith's speech did no great harm. Nor did his dragged-in reference to the Korean jet affair, on which more below.

What did do harm was Smith's reaction after the conference. He brought a motion of censure to the NC ... because he thought his speech had not been presented prominently enough in the paper! Plainly nothing would satisfy him except to have himself presented as the star of the conference.

B. The Korean jet

Smith raised objections to the paper's line on this issue at the EC on September 10 and September 17. His argument was that the USSR was guilty of nothing worse than a mistake, and that Socialist Action's editorial line had been better than ours.

Whatever you think of the issue politically, it was reasonable to raise it on the EC. What was bad was:

(a) The demagogic arguments used. Smith declared, for example: " There is a difference of world-view. Carolan is unable to assess objectively anything the USSR does. We have a material interest in de-bunking the anti-communist witch-hunt ". The issue was argued as if we had to stand up for the USSR over the shooting-down, or else be guilty of not fighting " anti-communism ". It was " anti-imperialist camp " politics against class politics once again.

(b) Cunliffe's behaviour. He had drafted the editorial in paper no. 145 which caused Smith's initial complaint, and he had freely agreed to amendments proposed by me. Anyone can change their mind. But when Cunliffe sided with Smith's condemnation of his own editorial, he did not say that he had changed his mind. He said there were new facts.

In reality there had been nothing to change our fundamental assessment. (After all, the Socialist Action editorial which Smith praised must have been written before, i.e. on the basis of fewer facts than, ours. They go to press earlier.) There had been some further holes revealed in the US story: but all that was common ground. As regards the USSR's story, which was the point of controversy, all the new revelations reduced its credibility ... and should have strengthened our initial condemnation of the shooting-down.

(Initially, for five days, the USSR denied shooting down the plane, and said it had been unable to identify it. Then it said that it had identified the plane as a spy-plane, and admitted shooting it down. There were other contradictions in the story too.)

C. " No demands on Kinnock "

At the October 15 NC Smith put forward a resolution declaring:

" We have to have a clear uncompromising attitude to the centre/right leadership established in the LP under Kinnock. We would no more place demands on him ... than /(on) the Foot leadership ".

I proposed an amendment to retain the condemnation of Kinnock but eliminate the idea that we should not place demands on the Labour Party leadership. (We had, after all, frequently placed demands on the Foot leadership!) For text of resolutions see IB 76.

Smith responded by saying: " I can't see any difference between my resolution and Kinnell's. But I won't accept Kinnell's because I'm sure that it will turn out later to contain something I don't agree with ". And eventually he pushed it to a vote.

Clearly there was a political difference of sorts: Smith wanted a more strident declamatory tone towards Kinnock, and altogether a more propagandist, self-proclamatory profile in the LP. He also insisted that the LP left was dead, or practically dead, while the NC majority argued that the Left was in retreat (but not dead), and was also differentiating, with sections like the LCC moving to the right and some moving more to the left.

But above and beyond that political difference, Smith's behaviour here was a clear example of dead-end gang-warfare factionalism ... he couldn't see what was wrong with my amendment but he would vote against it just the same.

D. The local government left

The October 15 NC also discussed the issue of socialists and local government. A resolution from Kinnell was passed (and has since been written up as a discussion document for the broad groups).

The faction leaders made no contribution to the discussion, except a brief statement from Smith that he agreed that we should be cautious about putting people forward, but that was because of the general political situation (bad situation in industry, death of the LP left, etc., as above).

Then in his summing up, Kinnell criticised the work of various comrades in local government - including a faction member. The faction leaders were immediately up in arms, and voted against the resolution.

Since then, the faction leaders have been silent, but other faction members have been arguing that the NC position is too critical of the local government left and of our own comrades involved in that sphere, and that we should push forward with getting more comrades involved. (See paper nos. 165 and 168; also GS's speech at the broad group agm).

At the March 10 NC the faction members voted against the item in the " Immediate Tasks " resolution on the local government left. In EC discussions on Booth's taking the wrong side on a local government wages struggle, the faction members have avoided endorsing Booth but also avoided coming out clearly against him, saying they have not heard enough to be sure yet.

Until further notice then, we must take the faction's position on local government as being for heavier involvement and less criticism. It seems a remarkable turnabout from the debate before the April Conference, when the faction were attacking the present majority for too much emphasis on involvement in LP official structures!

But then ... a number of faction members are involved in local government. And the Parsons faction, which the Oxford faction leaders want to woo, strongly favours more involvement in local government.

Here we have " factionalism " in the most sordid sense - trimming your politics to suit your chosen allies.

There is also a political logic, though. Because the Healeyite politics of self-proclamation are so abstract, the " revolutionary " rhetoric can easily be combined with the most humdrum reformist practice. All you have to do is to explain that your council chamber activities are, despite appearances, in their dialectical essence " the fight for leadership ". We predicted this as far back as IB 22+: using the faction's orientation, we said, " Instead of a unifying and dynamic political approach to the whole labour movement, we would get a more or less sharp disjunction in the organisation between TU activists and LP activists, and the possibility of routinism and accomodation on both sides, ie the inner collapse of ' the party ' into a series of constituencies ".

E. Palestine

The October 15 NC also saw the final stage of the faction's drive to condemn the leaflet issued at the LMCP conference.

We commented on this in IB 70: " The EC was acting responsibly and entirely within its rights to interpret the policy of the organisation. The gist of the problem is that Smith and others actually do not agree with the TILC resolution they voted for ... or do not understand it. All of us bear part of the blame for this: vague phrases about self-determination have frequently been used in the paper, and clearly, we did not bring the issue out well enough in the discussion (in 1982).".

" The organisation is in fact confused on the issue. A full political discussion on it is overdue and urgent. It is quite plain that a number of quite different positions exist within the majority formula of the ' democratic secular state '. The confusion can be remedied only by political debate, not by wild accusations in which politics takes second place to factional point-scoring. "

But we can't get any reasoned political debate from the faction.

At the broad groups AGM on October 30 we had on Palestine another example of the countless minor " crisis " which the faction has engineered over past months. There was a resolution from a non-member of the League on the question. Smith's first reaction was to declare that he would not accept anything the EC decided on our reaction to it. Finally he agreed that we should accept the resolution without amendment.

There was also the beginning of the argument about Grenada which would culminate at the November 19 NC in a motion of censure from Smith because there was an editorial introduction to a polemical article of his. (See IB 77).

Smith started by producing a resolution portraying the invasion of Grenada as a consequence of the South Atlantic war. He said he had a right to put it to the AGM whatever the EC said, because it reflected the line of the September 1982 conference!

Eventually he calmed down and agreed that we put a simple solidarity resolution, and he could argue his analysis in the discussion.

Then towards the end of the AGM, he approached Kinnell and said he had written a polemical article on the issue. Could Kinnell give a guarantee that it would go in the paper? Kinnell replied that he hadn't the authority to give a guarantee, and that Smith had better ask the EC: but personally he (Kinnell) would be in favour of publishing.

Not good enough, declared Smith: unless he got an assurance he would raise the matter in the AGM there and then! Eventually he calmed down on this, too.

There were other minor " confrontations " that weekend. When the scheduled pro-withdrawal speaker, McVicar, failed to turn up for the debate on the EEC at the day school on October 29, Smith immediately (in front of all present - including many non-members of the League) denounced the organisers of the school for allegedly rigging the debate. He then went on to accuse us of preaching an EEC parliamentary road to socialism and giving political credit to Kinnoch!

On Ireland there was a resolution from non-members of the League attacking the line we had agreed at our August conference. The EC, after a bit of argument, decided that we must have a definite League line against this resolution. Smith then abstained in the vote: and became indignant when in the EC later we asked him for an explanation.

All these disputes were essentially trivial. What makes them important is that these are the disputes which the faction pursues, and thus they shape the functioning of the leadership. Time is taken up with endless attempts by the faction to raise " scandals ". No political issue can ever be discussed calmly, on its merits.

F. International work

International work came up at the November 19 NC. Since April the EC majority has been pressing for definite policy in this area - proposing essentially what was in the end decided by the November 19 NC (see IB 77).

Each time the faction leaders had said we needed more discussion and a more fundamental reappraisal. We could have used our majority on the EC to ram through a decision: but we tried to be conciliatory.

Thanks to the constant procession of " crises " and " scandals ", the desired discussion was postponed and postponed, to November 19.

Then Cunliffe came up with the proposal to go for fusion with the USFI (IB 77). The faction leaders abstained on this, and voted against the resolution eventually passed. They had no positive proposals of their own.

That did not stop them making it a factional issue. Smith: " Whettling's contribution is just dead-end sectarianism. Kinnell's arguments against me in his document are just part of the bureaucratic method. Of course, on anything that relates to a world view on imperialism I will come out closer to the SL than the WSL. The WSL position is not held by anyone else who regards themselves as Trotskyist. It is a freak position ...

" Cunliffe's document is a big issue. To apply for a USFI franchise in Britain would be a big step to take. There should be a conference on it. If there is a vote I shall abstain on Cunliffe's proposal and vote against Kinnell.

" We have a very serious problem of national isolation. The majority of the WSL think that they themselves are the only people worth talking to... We have no option now but to find some way into the USFI, seek to get a hearing in the USFI.

" Part of the majority attitude is to get our own membership poisoned against the SL ...

" Because of our political positions, nobody in the world will touch us with a barge-pole..."

G. " Convergence " and the magazine

The issue of launching a broad-groups magazine came up first at the October NC.

The EC majority was in favour of it, but wanted to avoid polarisation if possible. So Carolan sought out a private discussion with Smith to put to him the idea that the magazine issue could be subsumed into a broader project of " convergence " between the League and the broad groups. The problems about loss of party profile, etc., could thus be avoided: the new magazine would be a party magazine, only that the " party " would have a different name.

Smith eventually seemed to acquiesce. Good: the issue could be taken to the NC without factional polarisation.

No such good luck. By the November NC the faction leaders were raising hell about " liquidationism " ... and condemning Carolan's move to get agreement and avoid polarisation as a dirty underhand trick!

The NC decided that we had to drop all talk of " convergence " and stop the discussion: however correct the proposal, it could not be carried through with a well-entrenched faction raising hell against it, even if that faction was in a small minority.

But we had to go ahead with the magazine - so we eventually decided at the January 7 NC. In this debate the faction leaders made speeches which identified Trotskyism and Leninism, not with the substance of the politics of an organisation, but with the labels and emblems it adopts. To produce a magazine with the same " political content under a different title (which we proposed for the sake of the advantages in circulation) would be " a further move away from Trotskyism " (Smith), " junking the specifically Leninist component of our politics " (Cunliffe).

H. " Not part of a developing situation "

During the NGA dispute the League had a line which was clear, substantially different from all other left groups, and in essence, unanimously agreed. It should have been an excellent chance to pull the League together.

On the anti-union laws more generally, in 1982 we had developed a line which again was clear, fairly distinctive, and unanimously agreed.

When we discussed perspectives for the coming months at the NC following the April conference (June 18), there was unanimous agreement that anti-union laws would become a bigger and bigger factor. And we were right.

Here was the possibility for uniting the League in action. In fact, much less has been done than could have been, thanks to Smith's inactivity (commissioned last June to convene a MCDTUR meeting, and reminded many times since, he has yet to do it). The issue has been made a factional football.

The high point of that dispute was the December 11 EC. Smith accused the EC majority of being on " an SWP binge " (too much stress on rank and file initiative as opposed to denunciation of TUC). He refused to vote on a resolution from Carolan which spelled out our attitude on the inter-relation of rank-and-file initiative and demands on the TUC. He put down a resolution assessing the NGA decision to call a one-day strike (which they later called off) and to suspend the mass pickets as " a serious retreat which puts the whole struggle in jeopardy ". When the majority indicated that we agreed with that, he added on a clause to make sure we wouldn't agree - " and we do not regard it as part of a developing situation "!

It would be comic if it were not tragic. It is certainly petty. Yet that is how the faction pursue their factional struggle on the issue of the NGA dispute.

Finally, Cunliffe's walk-out from the paper, and the EB " issue ", and the April conference " issue ", are the most recent steps in the factional struggle.

At each step, the explicit political content becomes less, the accusations against the majority wilder, the tone more desperate and strident.

Recreating Healyism

The ideological core of the faction's new international outlook is a regression to Healyism.

The Healyites' " anti-pabloism " fundamentally accepted the " Pabloite " vision of the world as being shaped by the struggle of two camps, Revolution and Imperialism. The Healyites differed by branding as sell-outs some of those seen by the " Pabloites " as good leaders of the Revolution, and by insisting more loudly on the need for a new leadership.

Thus for the " Pabloites " Castro led the Revolution in Cuba; for the Healyites, he sold it out. Neither faction provided an adequate positive analysis of the actual revolution.

This common ground between Healyism and " Pabloism " enabled Healy to move easily from strident sectarianism towards the colonial revolutions, to " Pabloite " attitudes to the Vietnamese Stalinists and Arab nationalists.

The present leaders of the faction made some efforts to move away from that after 1975. Now they have reverted to the original " crump " politics in the crudest form.

In domestic politics too, Healyism always tended to define a revolutionary stance by how loudly the existing leadership was denounced and a new leadership was proclaimed, rather than by an independent viewpoint on basic political issues.

One example: July 1972, the highest point of class struggle in Britain since World War 2, when five dockers were jailed under the Industrial Relations Act and then released under pressure of mass strike action. The Healyites called for a general strike - with the proviso that it should be called off when a general election was called! This reformist position was of course coupled with all sorts of denunciations of the existing leaders and self-proclamations by the Healyites.

In domestic politics too, the faction is moving back towards Healyite formulas: propagandist declarations on a bedrock of routine. That the movement is carried out through violent arguments over often minor issues means only that it is blind: the faction leaders themselves do not know where they are going.

Conclusion

In IB 36 the faction leaders accused us of "'critical support' minus the criticism " towards the LP left and of " rushing to prevent any move to raise a critique of Benn ". Around that time Piggot accused us of " telling workers to go to LP ward meetings rather than fighting the Tories in the factories ", and the faction leaders made much the same accusation in scarcely less crude terms.

Now they accuse us of being " on an SWP binge " - and some at least of the faction members reckon that we are " sectarian " because we criticise the LP local government left too sharply.

Is there any coherence behind this?

One basic feature of the view on domestic politics which the faction leaders have developed over recent months is a deep, demoralised pessimism. An initiative by us for a campaign against the anti-union laws is not viable. The LP left is dead. The GCHQ struggle was hopeless from the start. Everything is bleak in the trade unions: it is " an SWP binge " to fight for rank and file action in support of the NGA; all we can do is denounce the TUC.

This leads to a sterile denunciatory propagandism (" no demands on Kinrock "), which is coupled with a fetish of labels and emblems (a different form of a magazine is " a further move away from Trotskyism ", " an abandonment of the specifically Leninist component of our politics ").

At the same time, the most humdrum work in local government, if done by members of the faction, can be glorified as a fight for leadership.

All these political elements would be no more than nuances - if it were not for the fact that they are made the political platform for a faction which is effectively in a state of " cold split ".

As a platform, it is a characteristically neo-Healyite platform: revolutionary self-proclamations and flag waving to cover up lack of effective interventionist activity.

The pessimism seems un-Healyite. But even that has a precedent in the ultra-pessimistic perspective adopted by the Healyites' French counterparts, the Lambertists, after 1958.

After 1975 the old WSL, influenced by its Healyite background, grossly overestimated its possibilities of acting as and growing as an " alternative leadership " in the organisational sense. Its move towards the fusion represented the beginnings of a break from that whole way of thinking. Now the comrades have regressed politically: but disappointed by events, they have relapsed into a demoralised pessimism.