

New agendas for the Labour Left

By Reg Race

The Labour Party is now fundamentally different, in my view, from the party which existed in 1980-1. First of all, the great levels of activism and commitment which existed at the rank and file level have dissipated, for all kinds of reasons.

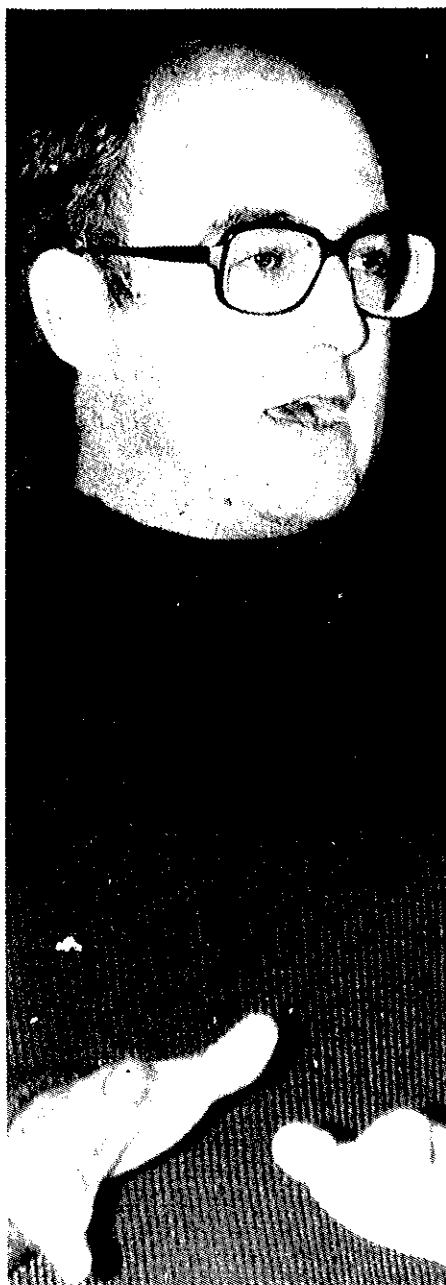
Secondly, we have a central apparatus which is quite, quite different from anything we've ever seen before in the Labour Party.

Thirdly the traditional dominant role of the Parliamentary Labour Party has been reinforced. There was a period at the beginning of the 1980s when the PLP looked a bit beleaguered. We're far from that now, as is exemplified by the changes to the policy-making apparatus.

That policy apparatus now consists of a few trade union nominees, a few PLP nominees, and the leadership group. Those are the people who make the policy of the party. They produce policy documents in secret, they publish them after the National Executive has had them for 48 hours, the NEC doesn't amend them in any way because there is such a huge majority for the leadership on the NEC, and then we're told the policy documents are going to go to conference and anyone who puts in a resolution criticising the document which gets passed by Conference will just have the resolution 'noted', so the policy document produced by that process of behind-the-scenes deals is really unamendable.

The traditional dominant role of the Parliamentary Labour Party has been reinforced, as has the traditional dominant role of a few big trade union bosses. The trade union leaders have always had a dominant role in the Labour Party, but now we have a grouping of trade union leaders, led by the GMBU and NUPE in particular, which underpins the leadership. The trade union block vote is now much more concentrated than it ever has been before, and five or six unions can have a majority of Labour Party Conference.

All these things have led to a much



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more authoritarian, undemocratic, unradical, uninteresting party than we've seen for many many years. The Party now is just terribly boring. It's also very

unspecific in many of its policy nostrums. I was struck by an article by William Ress-Mogg in the *Independent* where he said that Labour's latest vote-loser was imprecision. Labour's leaders are being very precise on some things, like trade union law, but they're also being deliberately imprecise on issues like the economy and social spending because they do not want to stoke up the expectations of working people as to what a Labour government might do.

All of these things make fundamental changes to the way in which the Labour Party operates.

And at the grass roots level it has not just been a question of demoralisation. There has been a genuine change of opinion by significant sections of the rank and file of the party. We've got to admit that and say that our job is to change it back.

Where the left could have had an influence which it has failed to have is that the left has been too backward-looking. It has tried to defend and defend and defend again some of the issues which were won at the beginning of the 1980s and which have been 'reformed' out of existence by a salami process. I'm not saying that those issues aren't important — I think they are important, and I fought for them myself for many years — but I think our tactics have been defective. We should have got ourselves a new agenda.

After the revolutions in Eastern Europe, some people may say socialism equals Stalinism equals failure. However, I think the left has reacted quite positively, it has said, "Fine, now we've got that out of the way. Now that we can make it clear that Stalinism isn't socialism, we've got an opportunity to do something else".

There is an opportunity for a new agenda on Europe. We have been locked into a debate on Europe which has concentrated on the powers of the European Community, and that has been an unproductive debate for some time. We now have the opportunity of moving beyond the geographical limitations of the EC, and doing so in a practical political fashion.

It is conceivable now to think of Europe in ten years' time with no NATO and no Warsaw Pact; with a new security co-operation arrangement which encompasses both the West and certainly Central Europe, and potentially the Soviet Union as well; and with economic integration spread from the EC countries into other countries.

We need to talk seriously to our comrades in Europe who fought against Stalinism and who want to create a democratic socialist perspective in Eastern Europe. We need to build alliances with them very, very rapidly indeed. The agenda is moving so fast. Almost every week you see some prominent politician in

the United States or Britain arguing a case for a new way of rearranging the political structures in Europe. It's time that we started doing the same! The left has been silent.

Cross-European unity and taking on the City are two key issues for our new agenda. If you are going to have a radical transformation of the British economy — developing its productive base, reinvesting in manufacturing industry, redistributing wealth and income — you must control the activities of the City of London. I mean controlling the outflow of capital, directing investment, limiting the activities of the capital markets and share markets.

We need institutions which are capable of dealing with transnational capital. You can't deal with transnational capital on a single-country basis, through the Westminster Parliament.

Then, if you have a European parliament with significant power, what is the role of the Westminster parliament? If you want to devolve and decentralise power to people, both at work and in civil society, then you have to strengthen the role of local and regional government. That would imply a polarity of strength at local level and at the European level, not so much at Westminster level. That issue has got to be debated.

And we need to raise the issues of economic democracy. They really haven't been discussed at all in the labour movement since the early 1970s. We need to discuss how to integrate worker and community control into national planning.

The cornerstone of socialism in the 1990s must be the ability to divest the state of power, to pull it down to the individual and to smaller collectives, and to have a political arrangement which enables those people to aggregate their views together so that they can control the great institutions of state and the great financial and economic institutions.

On all these issues — and there are many more — the role of the Socialist Movement and Labour Party Socialists is to get the issues debated and discussed. If we try to enlighten through discussion, there will be a much greater level of agreement. That was the failure of the left in previous years.

The Socialist Movement was never intended to be a specific inner-Labour-Party caucus. It's because we thought the twin-track approach was necessary that Labour Party Socialists has been formed. I want to see it carrying forward a very broad programme in two basic areas, policy development — not just criticising the Labour Party's policy, but also developing a whole new policy for the left — and a new constitutional settlement for the Labour Party.

I think Labour Party Socialists will perform that role, and I think it has got off to an excellent start.

Reg Race was talking to Martin Thomas.

The poverty of anti-Stalinism

By Robert Fine

"I am not for setting up a dogmatic standard. On the contrary, we must attempt to help the dogmatists make their dogma clear to themselves. Especially *communism* is a dogmatic abstraction." (Marx¹)

That Left and Right should find common ground on the issue of Stalinism has been a source of discomfort for a 'negative' socialism which defines its politics in opposition to the Right rather than according to its own independent standards.

One of the driving forces behind the history of left apologetics for Stalinism has been a misplaced determination to avoid common ground with the anti-communism of the bourgeois establishment, whatever the justice of the case. This attitude of mind has been a cause of great weakness for the Left.

The Right has its own good reason for being opposed to Stalinism, since Stalinist states and parties have a long and sometimes successful history of attacking the traditional capitalist classes and expropriating their property. I am thinking of the destruction of the native bourgeoisie in the Soviet Union itself after 1929, in the Baltic republics and Finland in the early 1940s, in the Soviet-dominated east and central European states after the war and in a number of Third World countries in the 1960s and 1970s — in all of which cases some form of Stalinist model was adopted on the ashes of traditional bourgeois rule.

To this extent, the hostility of the Right to Stalinism, whatever its additional ideological justifications, has been entirely rational. Since Marxism and Stalinism have in common a seemingly 'anti-capitalist' project, that is, a record of decisive inroads against capitalist private property, from the standpoint of the bourgeoisie this identity is far more important than any distinctions between them. Marxism and Stalinism appear either as equivalent phenomena or at least as located on a continuum characterised by the 'authoritarian' appropriation of capitalist private property.

From the standpoint of the working class, however, hostility to Stalinism derives not from its anti-capitalism but from its suppression of independent working class life. If for the bourgeoisie the distinction between Stalinism and Marxism appears peripheral, for the working class it is everything. For Stalinism represents not only 'anti-capitalism' but also the disenfranchisement of the working class and the suppression of independent working class organisation; in short, the opposition of

Stalinist states and parties to private property is accompanied by the crushing of political democracy and the freedoms of civil society. Marxism aspires not merely to anti-capitalism but to a definite form of anti-capitalism which empowers the working class and democratises both the state and society to its roots.

The distinguishing feature of Stalinism lies in the reactionary form it gives to the 'anti-capitalist' struggle: it represents the abrogation both of the particularity of bourgeois society (individuality, free will, civil liberties) in the name of the battle against egoism, and of the universality of bourgeois society (equal right, political democracy, universal suffrage) in the name of the class struggle. Marxism by contrast represents the extension of bourgeois particularity and universality beyond the limits imposed by bourgeois society; to use Marx's own phrase, communism is the 'positive supersession' of bourgeois property, law and state and not their 'abstract negation'. In this regard, in spite of their common commitment to 'anti-capitalism', Marxism and Stalinism are mutually and inherently antagonistic.

When I write of what Marxism is, perhaps I should say what Marxism ought to be if, firstly, it followed the spirit of Marx's own critique and, second, it placed itself firmly in the camp of democracy. Unfortunately, this is not what 'actually-existing' Marxism — not just official communism but also many strands of independent Marxism — has often stood for. Its critical emphasis has typically been placed on the insufficiency of Stalinist 'anti-capitalism' rather than on the surfeit of Stalinist anti-Marxism.

This attitude has been most visible in the interpretation of Stalinism as an essentially 'rightist' political force, which is destined to compromise with capitalism and collaborate with the bourgeoisie, akin in most respects to the extreme right wing of the labour bureaucracy. This partial analysis finds its historical foundation in those periods in which Stalinist states and parties, inside and out of Russia, have been ready to co-operate with sections of the established bourgeoisie against the more militant sections of the working class: I am thinking especially of the classic 'popular front' periods of 1924-28, 1936-39, and 1941-47; we could then add the years of peaceful co-existence and market reforms after 1956, the advent of Euro-Communism and 'historic compromise' in western Communist Parties in the late 1960s and the present readiness of sections of the Stalinist bureaucracy to embrace the accumulation of private capital as a solution to their problems.