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# **Looking for the left**

**David Purdy**

**Michael Prior**

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## ***Introduction***

In the last ten years, the British left has undergone a new and possibly its most humiliating trial. After nearly twenty years of a savage and largely victorious assault on its most central values, it shared in some of the hopes vested in a new Labour government only to discover that its fate was, simply, to be ignored. Indeed not simply to be ignored but for its very existence to be denied except as the sepulchre of some ancient rites practised only by members of a forgotten cult. It has been a long fall from the socialism, once described as being that good between us and barbarism, to the timid remedies now offered as resistance to an apparently irresistible and global capitalism. We still believe that socialism, perhaps remodelled, remains just what it has always been\_society's bulwark against the barbarisms of capitalism. But to justify this claim we have first to rediscover just where and in what form the left still exists.

This essay is in three parts. The first is an attempt to define the nature of the left, mainly in terms of a European experience. The second part is a specifically British and largely historical narrative about the left in this country. The third part begins to assemble some definition of what the left means today in Britain.

## **Part 1: What is the left?**

All human societies experience conflict – of interest, value, opinion or judgment – and all have political arrangements to deal with it – authoritarian or democratic, as the case may be. Political conflict is typically bipolar: protagonists tend to divide into two opposing sides and just as in war – “the continuation of politics by other means” – participants are either friend or foe, if only because my enemy's enemy is my friend and my enemy's friend is my enemy. There is no room for third parties except as intermediaries seeking to end hostilities. Indeed, the archetypal form of warfare is the duel: the old form of *bellum*, the Latin word for war, was *duellum*; and Clausewitz begins his classic treatise on war by defining it as “a duel on an extensive scale”.

Bipolar conflict has always existed: think of plebeian versus patrician, the Wars of the Roses, parliament versus crown and Whig versus Tory. But the terms left and right did not enter the vocabulary of politics until the early years of the French Revolution. Meeting in an amphitheatre, members of the Constituent Assembly sat on the left, right or centre, as viewed from the president's chair, according to their views on the great constitutional questions before them: the scope of the royal veto, the structure of the legislature, the powers of the executive, the independence of the judiciary and the extent of the franchise. The left, led by the Jacobins, sought to abolish the royal veto and hereditary privilege; favoured a single-chamber legislature; insisted that all power should rest with the elected assembly, including the appointment of judges and the power to quash judicial decisions; and called for “one man, one vote”, (women being excluded from full citizenship). There were groups further to the left who demanded absolute day-to-day control over the government and challenged the Jacobin tendency towards dictatorial centralisation. But both the left and the extreme left were more or less united in their struggle against the bourgeois liberals and the Girondins, who approved of the

anti-monarchical and anti-aristocratic aspects of the revolution, but were strongly opposed to popular sovereignty.

There are several ways in which 'left' and 'right' can be used in politics.<sup>1</sup> The terms may be used descriptively, to summarise the two sides in a conflict; evaluatively, to express a positive or negative judgment on one side or the other; and interpretatively, to mark a shift in the balance of political forces or a passage from one phase to another in the life of the nation. The terms are, of course, antithetical. One cannot be on both left and right at the same time; and each term has the opposite sign to the other: to commend one is to condemn the other. Nevertheless, the difference between them is relative, not absolute: ideas, programmes and parties may be left-wing at one time and right-wing at another. Until the mid-nineteenth century, for example, the political left in Europe was primarily concerned with issues of civil freedom, parliamentary reform and national liberation. But as liberal demands were achieved without disturbing the prevailing class structure, the mantle of the left passed to socialists and anarchists, hitherto minority sects, who argued that the ideals of 1789 could not be realised within the framework of bourgeois democracy, but would require radical changes in the ownership of property, the organisation of the economy and the distribution of life-chances. Thus, the entire political spectrum shifted to the left: a distinct right and centre continued to exist, but they were now defined by virtue of their opposition to the socialist movement, which rapidly overshadowed its anarchist siblings and henceforth formed the core of the left, notwithstanding the later schism between Soviet communism and social democracy.

It is an irony of history that this shift of emphasis from democracy to ownership later meant that socialists and the broader left, historically always the bastions of the struggle for democracy, were to be assailed with great success by a radical right on the grounds that their demands for a change on ownership were a fundamental attack on personal liberty.

The left-right distinction is not the only spatial metaphor in politics: we speak of frontbench and backbench, centre and periphery or top-down and bottom-up, not to mention base and superstructure. There are also various temporal metaphors: radical/conservative, innovative/traditionalist, forward-looking/backward-looking, progressive/reactionary and idealist/realist. Until the 1970s, these contrasting pairs largely aligned with the left-right axis: the left stood for radical social transformation, the reduction of social inequality and progress towards a new and better world; the right stood for the maintenance of the existing order, the defence or acceptance of social hierarchy and scepticism about ambitious schemes for social improvement; the centre stood somewhere in between these poles and since it claimed to be neither left nor right, its whole existence and *raison d'être* depended on the underlying antithesis.

The collapse of the post-war social settlement, the demise of Keynesian social democracy and the rise of neo-liberalism as the polestar of politics, described elsewhere, changed all that. From the crisis of the 1970s, it was the free-market right that emerged as the radical, dynamic, modern and forward-looking force, particularly in Britain and the US, while the left was pushed into a conservative, hidebound and backward-looking stance. This historic reversal of roles ushered in a period of defeat for the left in Western Europe,

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this argument is taken from the Italian historian, Bobbio.

North America and the Antipodes, which the collapse of communism in 1989-91 only intensified and from which it has still not recovered. Indeed, it has become a commonplace of contemporary politics that the division between left and right is irrelevant to the problems and conflicts of the world in which we now live.

One version of this general claim is the end-of-history thesis propounded by Francis Fukuyama (1992), who argued that the big questions about how society should be organised and governed had finally been settled by the victory of democratic capitalism over the other main contenders for world supremacy: fascism and communism. With ideological conflict now at an end, politics would henceforth revolve around problems rather than positions. Leaving aside the emergence of Islamic radicalism and the so-called war on terror, the chief problem with this view is that it has all been said before: the end of ideology was confidently proclaimed by Daniel Bell and others in the late 1960s, just as the advanced capitalist countries were about to be rocked by a whirlwind of social dissent, economic crisis and political radicalism. Ideology, it seems, springs eternal.

A slightly different argument for saying that politics is no longer polarised between left and right is that the old ideologies have no solutions to contemporary problems. Neither the minimum state of the free market right nor the big state of the collectivist left is claimed to be capable of tackling new sources of social exclusion and poverty such as failed education, family breakdown and deviant lifestyles, of rehabilitating offenders and repairing collapsed communities, or of building new forms of transnational governance to combat climate change and regulate the global marketplace. The best-known exponent of this view in Britain is Anthony Giddens. In a series of books beginning with *Beyond Left and Right* (1994), he has argued for a “third way” which transcends the old dichotomy. This is not, he insists, a mere exercise in triangulation, but a novel synthesis, which incorporates elements of both left and right and gives them a fresh significance. The general approach is encapsulated in New Labour sound-bites such as: “economic efficiency and social justice”, “tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime”, “no rights without responsibilities”, “work for those who can, security for those cannot”, and so on. ‘Problems not positions’ remains the key mantra of the Labour government.

Unlike the end-of-history thesis, the ‘third way’ does not disclaim ideological status. But is it coherent and effective? Can we really make sense of the world and engage with it to some purpose if we discard the distinction between left and right or relegate it to the second rank of importance? The key issue is essentially the extent to which the ‘problems’ emerge within a coherent social system within which solutions emerge or are repressed. Capitalism remains an unstable, unjust and undemocratic economic system that continues to degrade our habitat, deform our society and diminish the human spirit. Moreover, these various harms are generated by mechanisms that are intrinsic to the system. Hence, as the left has maintained for the past 150 years, the central problem of politics is still how to mitigate and counter the harm that capitalism does and, in the long run, to transform and transcend it.

Of course, the precise manner in which capitalism functions and the specific problems it throws up vary from one culture and epoch to another. Thus, as times change, political movements must adapt their programmes, priorities, methods and styles or risk becoming obsolete. None can, for example, afford to ignore the increased salience of resource

depletion and environmental pollution since the 1970s. It does not follow, however, that the categories of left and right are redundant. On the contrary, the left-right split is reproduced within the Green movement: there is a green, pro-capitalist right and a green, anti-capitalist left. The same goes for feminism and the other social movements that came to prominence in the late 1960s and 1970s.

This is not to deny that after almost thirty years of neo-liberal hegemony, the left is very much weaker than the right both in terms of their political leverage and also in terms of the internal coherence of their ideas. But as Bobbio suggests, the very dominance of the right helps to explain the prevailing consensus that the war between left and right is over. The defeated left has an obvious interest in disguising its weakness, while the victorious right has every reason to propagate view that there is no alternative to the way things are.

Yet despite this conspiracy of silence, the left-right distinction survives, not just in everyday speech, but at a deeper philosophical level. As we have seen, the rise of neo-liberalism reversed the roles of left and right on the temporal plane of politics. But attitudes towards social equality still form a basic dimension of political space. Equality is, of course, a relationship between two or more entities. Hence, whenever the word is used, three questions necessarily arise: Equality of what or in what respects, between or among whom, and on what basis? The left is sometimes accused of wanting to equalise the distribution of absolutely everything among all human beings everywhere as an end in itself. This is a caricature. By the same token, no political movement can avoid having some view on the three questions about equality.

What really divides left from right are their respective attitudes towards the origins and consequences of human inequalities and the possibility of overcoming them. Roughly speaking, the left believes that although some inequalities result from natural conditions, most are the product of social arrangements; that the consequences of inequalities for both individuals and society as a whole are largely harmful; and that while the scope for reducing them is constrained by the need to avoid compromising other values such as liberty and democracy, in general the pursuit of equality is both highly desirable and far more feasible than its opponents allow. On each of these counts, the right takes the opposite view: that human inequalities are largely natural; that their consequences are broadly beneficial; and that attempts to overcome them are either futile or pernicious.

Important though it is, the horizontal division between left and right is not sufficient to explain the pattern of political conflict since the French Revolution. Political space also contains a vertical dimension along which movements can be placed according to their attachment to personal liberty and their commitment to democratic norms. The resulting cross yields four basic categories: liberal-democratic left and right, and authoritarian left and right. Bobbio actually uses the words “moderate” and “extreme”, but this terminology elides the distinction between ends and means: there is no inconsistency in supporting what are conventionally regarded as ‘extreme’ policies while eschewing the use of authoritarian methods and respecting democratic norms. Admittedly, the further to the left one stands relative to the prevailing consensus about how much of what kinds of equality and inequality the good society contains, the more difficult it is to influence current policy through the democratic process. But to describe an ideal society is by no means to be committed to imposing one’s ideal on everyone else, regardless of whether they agree.

Suitably relabelled, Bobbio's categories offer a useful guide to the political history of the last century. At the authoritarian end of the vertical axis, on left and right, respectively, stand communism and fascism. At the opposite end, ranging from left to right, are social democracy, liberalism and conservatism. After the First World War, the course of political conflict in Europe fell into three partially overlapping phases. In the 1920s, liberals and conservatives were more or less united in seeking to repel the perceived threat of Bolshevism, while social democrats were divided between those who supported the new Soviet republic and were prepared to work with the communists and those who saw them as enemies. In Italy, where the post-war social and political crisis was particularly severe, conservatives threw in their lot with the fascists in a pre-emptive strike against the left, anticipating a realignment that became more general in the 1930s. After the Nazis came to power in Germany, communists made common cause with social democrats and liberals in order to combat the growing threat to democracy itself.<sup>2</sup> This pattern of conflict persisted through the Second World War and its immediate aftermath and was only disrupted by the onset of the Cold War. Thereafter, social democrats, liberals and conservatives united in opposition to communism and fascism, while continuing to compete with each other for influence, votes and power.

Where they were strong in western Europe, as in Italy and France, communists were systematically excluded from government. Elsewhere, they remained politically marginal. In eastern Europe, mostly rather weak Communist parties obtained power on the back of Soviet armies and proceeded to eliminate social democratic opposition. In an attempt to break out of their ghetto, most Western communist parties sought to distance themselves from the Soviet Union and to develop national-democratic "roads to socialism". By the 1970s, Eurocommunism, as it came to be known, had become a recognised political tendency and in Italy, France and Spain broad left coalitions in which Eurocommunist parties played a leading or prominent role, stood on the brink of power. Meanwhile, a new formation was emerging on the right. Unlike the fascist movements of the inter-war years, the new right proclaimed its commitment to liberty and democracy, while repudiating the post-war social settlement, which its conservative forebears had endorsed and, indeed, helped to shape. In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union saw new political movements emerge in eastern Europe which have to a degree mirrored previous social democratic and right-wing nationalist but which have yet to achieve any complete political definition

Currently, a general realignment has begun which has not yet run its course. Since the collapse of the communism, communist parties have disbanded, declined or reinvented themselves as technocratic parties of the liberal-democratic centre. Ex- or sub-fascist parties, for their part, now pay lip service to democracy and have repositioned themselves on the nationalist right. Thus, the authoritarian side of political space currently stands vacant offering tantalising, if as yet unvoiced, perspectives for a number of parties particularly in this era of heightened security concerns about external enemies. At the

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<sup>2</sup> Note that communists and fascists never formed an alliance, with the sole exception of the mutual non-aggression pact between Stalin and Hitler in 1939, which was short-lived and of tactical rather than strategic significance. The titanic military struggle that followed the Nazi invasion of Russia in 1941 strongly suggests that the division between left and right carried more weight than the authoritarian features that the two movements shared in common.

same time, with the triumph of neo-liberalism, the entire political spectrum has been pulled to the right, dragging erstwhile social democrats and liberals with it. As a result, the left-hand side of political space is also largely vacant, populated by an incoherent, if potentially large, grouping on 'anti-capitalists', environmental activists and remnants of previous left formations, whilst the mainstream parties cluster around a narrow range of positions in the centre. Thus, while the ethical and philosophical issues that divide left and right have lost none of their significance, the effective framework of politics has shrunk, creating an unhealthy gulf between the political class and the general public and weakening the culture of democracy.

From this standpoint, the emergence of the democratic left as a serious political force would be an important step towards reforming our society's political institutions and revitalising democracy. Clearly, however, if it is to recover from defeat, regroup and challenge neo-liberal hegemony, the left must look beyond the short-term exigencies of electoral-legislative politics and seek to reclaim the ideological ground that is now occupied by neo-liberals of varying hues. In summary form, the table below indicates what the contest is about and how the ideals of the contestants diverge. The opposing paradigms are ideal-types from which the programmes of actual political movements are likely to deviate as they compete for support and court allies. There is, in other words, an important distinction between projects and policies. Nevertheless, it remains vital for the left to have a strong sense of where it wants to go if it is to have any chance of shifting the balance of forces and starting to build a new, post-capitalist civilisation.

<b>Democratic Left</b>	<b>Contested Issues</b>	<b>Neo-Liberal Paradigm</b>
<p><i>Positive autonomy Social condition Civil, political, social State and society</i></p> <p><i>Broad Business, public, household and voluntary Collective and systematic Post-capitalist Mainly social Democratic planning Restrained Managed global convergence</i></p> <p><i>Socially embedded Self-development and control Economic, ethical and aesthetic Living well</i></p>	<p><b><i>Political philosophy</i></b> Conception of freedom Ideals of equality Scope of citizenship Domain of democracy</p> <p><b><i>Economic organisation</i></b>  Accounting framework Sectoral categories  Environmental responsibility Generic form Business ownership Co-ordinating mechanism Growth dynamic International regime</p> <p><b><i>Cultural norms</i></b>  Conception of the person Cardinal virtue Value discourse  Central preoccupation</p>	<p><i>Negative liberty Respect, status, opportunity Civil and political only State</i></p> <p><i>Narrow Private and public</i></p> <p><i>Individual and piecemeal Capitalist Mainly private Market forces Unrestrained Global market framework</i></p> <p><i>Atomistic Self-reliance Commercial</i></p> <p><i>Getting and spending</i></p>

## **Part 2: Where is the left**

### ***The Formation of Power***

European socialist parties underwent three great convulsions in the twentieth century after their formation in the late-nineteenth century which tracked the phases of political conflict noted above. The first was the split into at least two parts, nominally Socialist and Communist, in the early twenties after the Russian Revolution; the second was the long drawn-out cataclysm of fascism and military occupation followed by reformation; the third was the collapse of Communism after 1989. The trajectory of these convulsions was, of course, different in each country from Finland across to Portugal. But what most

European socialist parties have in common is that each has been formed and reformed, shaped by outside forces which have in many cases effectively obliterated them and then required them to reform under new conditions. They have in this sense a history, something written into them which acknowledges the way in which the world can change and that political formations are not immutable. This has not led, necessarily, to left formations which are either effective or comfortable for those who still call themselves socialists or just on the left. The extraordinary collapse of the French Communist Party, for example, has not yet led to the vacuum left by its departure being filled by other than a sclerotic Socialist Party. But, even so, the map of European left-wing political formations remains one which shifts and changes.

The exception, of course, is Great Britain<sup>3</sup> where the left has been largely defined by a single political formation, the Labour Party (L.P.), a curiosity in the context of European socialism in that it has been largely untouched by any of the three convulsions. Formed decades after most European parties, it avoided the first simply by chronological contingency. It was established as a membership party only in 1918<sup>4</sup> and so avoided any split after the independent formation of the Communist Party in 1920 largely because the constitutional structure of both bodies made splits, at least initially, not just difficult but, in practice, rather meaningless. The failure of the second great convulsion to impact on the L.P. is an obvious historical contingency whilst the muffled impact of the third resulted from the total political dominance over the left acquired by the L.P. in the previous fifty years.

It is difficult to over-emphasise this dominance and the speed with which it occurred. In 1910, the still unconstituted L.P. won 7.0% of the votes in a two-party system in which the Conservatives and Liberals shared over 90%. In 1924, with a 77% turnout, it acquired 33% of votes cast and henceforth, even in the darkest days of 1931 when its leadership had jumped ship, it would almost never drop below 30%.<sup>5</sup> A consequence of this was that a party structure, essentially *ad hoc* and transitional in form composed of a bag of affiliated agents, many with their own independent external presence as well as both constitutional and *de facto* rights inside the party, was never challenged either internally or externally. After all, using Blair's measure, it worked. The apogee of this success was in 1951 when it took 48.8% of the vote and the Conservatives 48% with a turnout of over 82%. Ironically, the Conservatives won a slim victory in seats won. This two-party dominance was maintained until 1966 when the L.P. again topped 48% of the vote and the Conservatives took almost 42%. The subsequent forty years has seen a slow but inexorable drift away from both parties. Even so, despite this slow shift, the pattern of two-party domination has become, after over eighty years, an ingrained political cliché even for the left.

The L.P. was never a wholly socialist party in the classic ideological mould of the Second International even though its constitution enshrined the famous Clause 4 encapsulating a socialist position on ownership of economic enterprise. It retained strong elements of a nonconformist liberal base particularly amongst its leadership. Despite this, left internal

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<sup>3</sup> Northern Ireland is not part of this analysis.

<sup>4</sup> The name 'Labour Party' was actually taken by a group of M.P.s in 1906 long before the party was actually formed in the country. Some might feel this situation has, in practice, continued ever since.

<sup>5</sup> The exception is the 1983 election whose oddity is really the crux of the problem of the L.P.

dissension centred around the socialist left which largely maintained both intellectual and moral dominance amongst L.P. members. The L.P. became a curious, almost paradoxical, body; one whose natural policy position, as seen by its membership, was almost always to the left, often far to the left, of its natural leadership. The annual Party conference was for several decades, a battleground, with policies emerging with majority membership support as expressed by the votes of constituency delegates usually being negated by the block-voting power of the trade-unions. In continental socialist parties, such ideological differences usually resulted in splits. However, the L.P. remained largely immune to such, the defection of the Independent Labour Party in 1931 being the only exception up to the breakaway Social Democrats in 1981. Two reasons can be proposed for this constancy.

The first essentially relates to power. Aneurin Bevan, the most prominent and popular Labour left-wing M.P. for thirty years from his election in 1929, described the I.L.P. decision as remaining "*pure, but impotent*". The extraordinary electoral dominance of the L.P. relative to other left groups from 1924 onwards, not just nationally but, and in some ways even more importantly, in regional bastions of local government, meant that it always had at least its finger-tips on state-power even in the darkest days of the National Government. Any defection inevitably meant that such possibilities would be snatched away, permanently for the defecting group, though only temporarily for the incumbent leadership. The last and most important defection, that of the Social Democrats in 1981, was the final proof of this. The second reason was that the control exerted over the party machine by a right-wing leadership was essentially buttressed at all levels by the affiliated trade-unions, so that splitting from the L.P. was for many akin to splitting from a trade-union movement that for many members aroused greater devotion than the party. In the Labour heartlands, L.P. organisation was almost an ancillary to regional union offices particularly in South Wales, Scotland and the North East.

The result of this curious standoff was that a normally right-wing leadership was always constrained in just how far it could shift policy to the right by the sheet-anchor of its membership whilst the left dominance amongst the membership could never be turned into major policy shifts nor into electing a leadership which accepted its policies. Gaitskell's failed efforts in the late-1950s to remove clause 4 from the L.P. constitution is an example of this former impasse whilst the most famous example of the latter occurred shortly afterwards. It took almost exactly fifty years from its formation for any effective breakthrough to occur on policy when a major decision to support unilateral nuclear disarmament was passed against passionate opposition from national leadership in 1960. The vote was won largely because the Transport Workers led by Frank Cousins voted against the leadership. Hugh Gaitskell famously vowed to "*fight and fight and fight again to save the party that we love*" which he did by getting a couple of unions to switch sides the following year. The membership of the beloved party has remained consistently committed to unilateralism.

### ***The Challenge to Power***

The L.P. almost repeated the height of its 1951 electoral success in 1966 when it took over 48% of the vote, a point when the left, revived by evidence of greater levels of social dissent, faced a clear choice in how to proceed. There was a strand, represented by

the Mayday Manifesto grouping, which urged the formation of a new kind of political formation, less attached to existing parties and more flexible in its approach to political action. This had some initial success but was splintered by the 1970 election and the success of the alternative and dominant left trend which was to 'do something' about the Labour Party. There were, naturally, various ideas on what 'to do' which evolved through the 1970s<sup>6</sup> and which were buttressed by the generally socially rebellious propensity of that decade, but they boiled down to two main themes. The first was to organise inside the L.P. on a much more systematic basis. At least one Trotskyist group which came to be called by the name of its publication, *The Militant*, did this using some form of party inside the party,<sup>7</sup> whilst other left members did it using more-or-less overt networking. The Campaign for Labour Party Democracy, formed in 1973, was the most prominent of these. The Communist Party, the main left body outside the L.P., effectively abandoned all but nominal electoral pretension, and focussed instead on the second strand, the formation of various broad left groupings in unions and in student politics which brought together Labour, Communist and other left-wingers in informal groups which concentrated on presenting left slates in internal elections. These proved remarkably successful in both spheres, launching the careers of several future Labour politicians including Jack Straw<sup>8</sup> and Charles Clarke and, more importantly, shifting the balance of power decisively to the left in several unions including the key Engineering Workers.

Although most of the Labour leadership remained on the right, this sustained networking meant that by the end of the 1970s, the left for the first and only time gained effective control of the National Conference and elections to the National Executive. This provided the basis for a series of rule changes which allowed some measure of democracy for the party membership including a say in the election of leader and deputy-leader and automatic re-selection of sitting M.P.s by their local constituency party together with the National Executive claiming the responsibility of writing the Party's election manifesto based upon party policy as decided by Conference. The key change was constituency re-selection, a fundamental democratic practice which the right-wing of the L.P. simply refused to accept. In 1981, under the leadership of the Limehouse Four, 27 Labour M.P.s left the Labour whip in Parliament and formed a new party, the Social Democrats. Although the S.D.P. only briefly threatened the L.P.'s dominant position, it was able in alliance with the Liberals to split the anti-Conservative vote. In the 1983, election, the Conservatives slightly increased their national vote as compared with 1979 whilst the Alliance stripped 10% off the Labour vote. The SDP gained 6 seats and 11.6% of the vote, its high-water mark, whilst the Conservatives gained a majority of 144.

It was at this point that the British left fell apart. Contrary to the image now sedulously peddled by Labour politicians, the 1970s was not a time of great internal dissension on the left. There were a few dissident voices against the general 'militant labourism' of the left, a strategy of ramping up industrial action over wages and pushing Labour policy to the left via trade unions votes but these were largely ignored. There was little dissension

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<sup>6</sup> This is a very abbreviated summary of what happened in this period. A much fuller account can be found at [www.hegemonics.co.uk](http://www.hegemonics.co.uk)

<sup>7</sup> There may have been others. Such as Steven Byers and Alan Milburn, once of the International Marxist Group, may yet be waiting for the phone-call activating them from their deep sleep.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Straw was elected chair of Leeds Labour Society in 1966 in a meeting packed with Communists who had joined the day before after dissolving the Communist Society.

over such left positions as opposition to the Common Market, even when this went down to defeat in the 1974 referendum and proved to be probably the most unpopular of Labour policies after 1979.<sup>9</sup> Nor did opposition to any form of incomes policy arouse much debate across the spectrum from what would now be termed the 'soft left' through to the ultra-left. There was, of course, considerable dissent on the right. In the 1983 election campaign, Dennis Healey, the deputy-leader, distinguished himself by an almost open hostility to the plan to drop Trident. This left-right conflict had existed inside the L.P. since its founding. But after 1983, left against left descended to open warfare whilst the right-wing of the L.P., in particular right trade-union leaders, worked systematically to limit the democratic changes made in 1979 and to restore the normal right-wing dominance over policy formation.

The left broke apart over two issues. The first was the suicidal attempt by Arthur Scargill to use the miners' union to promote what amounted, at least in fantasy, to an anti-Thatcher uprising over the bodies of his hapless miners. The second was the assault by the re-elected Thatcher government on the power of local councils in particular rate-capping and the abolition of the Greater London Council along with other metropolitan authorities.

The former blew away the remains of the broad left alliance within the unions as even some Communist union-activists doubted the wisdom of Scargill's actions whilst others refused to break ranks with the code of solidarity. The latter was a more complex, though less heart-breaking, issue centring around the democratic rights of locally-elected bodies to resist central diktat as to how they should raise money. Although councils all over England were to some degree involved, amongst them the G.L.C. led by Ken Livingstone, South Yorkshire (David Blunkett) and Islington (Margaret Hodge), the key focus was Liverpool which seemed resolute in its intent not to set a balanced budget within the limits of the rate-capping imposed by central government. In the event, both the Militant-dominated council and the leadership of the Labour seemed more intent on squaring up to each other than defeating the government with the former failing to take the decisive steps over the edge of legality, something for which it undoubtedly had considerable popular support in Liverpool, and the latter sending in its special forces to dissolve the District Labour Party and initiate expulsion proceedings against dissidents throughout the country.

It is up to historians to judge just how fragile was the hold of Thatcherism on Britain in the mid-1980s, the years when the most ferocious of its neo-liberal policies were being implemented. The urban riots of the early part of the decade had already placed markers for the deep opposition faced by this agenda whilst the repressive tactics used to crush the miners' strike, which had almost amounted to martial law in some places, had repelled a very wide section of society. That there was a strong undertow of support for the miners was shown in 1992 when, in the pouring rain, the largest political demonstration between the Aldermaston marches and the anti-war protest in 2003, took place almost spontaneously in London. It was to protest the plan by Michael Heseltine to close most of the remnant of the British coal industry and suggested that if a more careful and less

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<sup>9</sup> The 1983 manifesto did not propose complete unilateral nuclear disarmament, just dropping Trident and refusing to allow deployment of US cruise missiles. Nor did it propose large-scale nationalisation, just the return of those industries privatised up to 1983. It did affirm a full withdrawal from the EEC.

fragmented protest had been undertaken in 1983 it could have succeeded. Again, if a significant number of councils had stuck by their initial avowals to refuse to set rates under the new capping rules then an entirely new path might have been set for British politics. It was, after all, only a few years on in 1990 that Thatcher herself was effectively deposed by the threat of widespread civil disorder over the poll tax. Perhaps the key reason for the failure of the left, both 'hard' and 'soft', to effectively oppose the newly elected and still fragile neo-liberal policies of Thatcherism, just at the one moment when they had control of the L.P., was that they had no hegemonic perspective outside the militant labourism of the 1970s which had already been defeated.

Be that as it may, the fact of the times was that the manner in which resistance collapsed with so many left-wing Duke of York's turning back just as the top of the hill approached led to dismay and disillusion towards and within the left which has lasted to the present day. In electoral terms, it is from this time that one can date the slow erosion of Labour support in the Northern cities which were at one time its main bastions. There was considerable popular support for resistance to the Thatcherite assault on local councils which were clearly and correctly seen as attacks on representative democracy. One can still see residual signs of this in, for example, Livingstone's enduring popularity in London; in Dave Nellist's continuing presence on Coventry Council fifteen years after nearly winning the constituency as Independent Labour after his de-selection; and, perhaps most remarkably, in Tommy Sheridan, who fought the 1992 election in Glasgow Pollock from a prison cell serving six months for anti-poll tax actions.

Alongside these internecine struggles, there were two other processes at work. First, the Communist Party, whose industrial influence had been decaying for a decade or more, finally collapsed under the weight of its internal conflicts and international events. This meant that the one body which had attempted to unite broad left groups inside unions in common purpose disappeared. Second, a well-financed effort was made by the right of the L.P. to gather together those various groups in the L.P. which remained after the S.D.P. defection into a single effort to 'reclaim' the party. This tortuous and clandestine process has recently been documented in some detail by Dianne Hayter<sup>10</sup>. It amounted essentially to a systematic media-campaign and in careful mobilisation of union-leaders to restore the normal right-wing balance on the Labour National Executive and in the annual conference. The latter proved relatively easy given that the towering figures of Jones and Scanlon had been replaced by much less forceful individuals and, in the case of the engineers, by an old-fashioned right-wing leader in Duffy.

The result was that once Kinnock had started his assault on the Militant group, it proved relatively easy to steadily roll-back the democratic practices of 1979. The long paths of this process are too dreary and repetitious to itemise. Its final stage was the assumption of the Labour leadership by a man whose attachment to the L.P. was minimal and whose attitude to the general membership verged on the contemptuous. There has been a tendency amongst some political analysts to see this as a kind of redemptive punishment, a session on the naughty-chair for a party whose membership had transgressed decent behaviour and which had made the party 'unelectable' – the key word of the time. That the most significant part of this transgression leading to 'unelectability' was the refusal

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<sup>10</sup> **Fightback!: Labour's Traditional Right in the 1970s and 1980s**, D.Hayter, M.U.P., Manchester, 2005

by the right of the party to accept democratically-decided policy slipped into oblivion to be overlain by legends of the 'loony left' as sedulously fostered by the *Daily Mail* and the *Sun* and of quick sound-bites about "the longest suicide note in history". In a recent pamphlet about reforming the L.P., the M.P. regarded as being the most left-wing in the deputy-leadership elections referred to "*the horrors and wreckage of the early 1980s*"<sup>11</sup> without any reference to the split being a policy issue over L.P. democracy leading to the defection of a group of right-wing M.P.s or indeed anything connected with politics at all, instead characterising it as kind of political Black Plague.

There is a similar tendency in selective amnesia which has emerged in the Labour left in viewing the past two decades as split into two parts; the genuinely modernising years after the election of Kinnock to the leadership in 1983 up to John Smith's death in 1994 followed by the tyranny of Blair in the succeeding years. This approach to democracy in the L.P. is identical to that which insists on describing the New Labour project as Blairism, said to be something which did not exist before 1994 and ceased to exist at the end of June, 2007. In fact there are no elements of the centralising and controlling practice of the last ten years which did not initiated in the period after 1985, for example the substitution of policy formed in broad outline at conference with a National Policy Forum preparing rolling policy documents. The distortion of this body into the Byzantine mechanism for controlling dissent may have progressed much further under Blair and Brown than was intended in 1990 but its basic intent was always there. The extent this programme was clearly formulated in the mind of those such as Kinnock, who were part of the 'soft' left in the mid-80s, is unclear. What is certain is that the defeat of the left inside the L.P. after 1981 led to a cumulative process of re-assertion of control by its traditional right-wing leadership which went far beyond the previous regime involving not just disciplinary control but also effective obliteration of the ideological presence of any coherent alternative. In the wake of the defeat of militant labourism, Blair and Brown, both originally adopted as M.P.s on the basis of their soft-left positions, assiduously and successfully promoted the idea that there existed no alternative to taking over the principles of Thatcherism albeit with a veneer of a human-face.

Into this litany of loss of nerve, foolishness, betrayal and defeat, one final note should be appended.

There was a third, popular struggle which took place in the 1980s whose outcome was more positive. In September, 1981, a march by a small group of women from Cardiff arrived at the gate of the Greenham Common U.S. airforce-base to protest against the planned positioning of cruise-missiles there. They set up a camp which, in various forms was to last 19 years and to spark a whole variety of linked protests including several mass demonstrations, civil-disobedience and challenges all the way to the High Court over the legality of the nuclear build-up. Greenham emerged from the two left movements of the 1960s and 70s which had escaped domination by the 'socialist left', the anti-nuclear campaigns begun by C.N.D. at the end of the 1950s and feminism, a combination which although disputatious managed to avoid the suicidal progress of the two other popular protests against the Thatcher regime.

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<sup>11</sup> **Fit for Purpose: a Programme for Labour Party Renewal**, John Cruddas and John Harris, [www.compassonline.org](http://www.compassonline.org), 2007

Just what role, the Greenham Common camps played in shifting nuclear policy in that decade is unclear. But in political terms, the final result was, at the very least, a good draw for the protesters. The Greenham women took rough policing, prosecution and vicious vilification in the press and emerged with massive international publicity and support. They were, so far as left protest of the times went, the last women left standing. They also spawned a genuinely new kind of left, one in which new forms of organisation developed which centred around consensus, the absence of leaders and a willingness to place most emphasis upon personal direct action rather than indirect political representation. The anti-global capitalism and environmental movements of today draw a great deal from this. They tend to drive the socialist left mad with apparently endless searches for consensus decisions and sometimes circular arguments. But their effectiveness in mobilisation has been proven even if such mobilisation often seems ephemeral.

### ***Then and Now***

In some superficial respects, the situation of the L.P. now bears some resemblance to that of the mid-1960s; a party whose leadership is pursuing policies opposed by most of its membership and is able to control these differences by an internal structure in which the membership is essentially powerless. However, the situation now is radically altered not simply because the membership is now far less; 177,000 and falling compared with nearly a million signed-up forty or so years ago but because the entire context within which it works is different and because the mechanisms of control are far tighter. The latter need little further description. It is the context which is important, specifically three issues; the diminished role of trade unions; the loss of moral leadership by the left; and the hollowing out of the British state with the associated crumbling of the two-party system.

The dominating presence of the unions in left politics has always been one of the defining features of British socialism separating it from the European tradition. They have had two, distinct and in some ways contradictory roles. The first was as a politicising agent in the working class in terms both of strengthening support for the party which it had a major role in founding and of providing a steady flow of leaders, albeit largely white males, at all levels of left formations. The negative side of this presence was a persistent strand of syndicalism in these formations, a strand which continued through to the reliance on industrial action to achieve political ends in the 1970s and, ultimately, to the disastrous miners' strike. The second presence was as part of the bureaucratic apparatus of the L.P. which, throughout most of its history, sustained a leadership to the right of the majority of the membership. Inside both the national conference and the National Executive Committee, it has invariably been the union votes which have kept the party safe for the leadership whilst in the mid-1980s it was union-leaders who restored right-wing authoritarian leadership. This arrangement has effectively been in place since the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 which was re-christened the Labour Party in 1906<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> The original committee of the LRC consisted of four representatives of membership parties, one from a socialist society and seven from the trade unions.

These two presences have often been contradictory but, until the last two decades, the first has always been seen on the left as a factor which outweighed the second given that it seemed as though overcoming the right-wing bureaucracy was possible based upon the grass-roots support of a politicised union movement. As noted above, in the mid-1960s, this possibility was the dominant and ultimately successful project within all left formations. Forty years on, this dual-role has been splintered. The unions are, numerically, much diminished. Their previous grip on large parts of the private-sector has all but disappeared and continues to decline whilst their membership is aging.<sup>13</sup> Union density is now amongst the lowest in Europe. This is a long-term trend begun in the Thatcher years but which has continued unabated throughout the whole period since 1997 under Labour.

That this is a tragedy for British workers is undoubted. However, the political implications of this long-term decline have yet to be assimilated \_ at least on the left for it is clear that Brown and Blair have long taken them onboard. Essentially, the second presence, that of providing bureaucratic support for Labour leaders, remains largely undiminished. The twelve union nominees to the N.E.C. provide reliable votes to provide the five government nominees with a simple majority out of thirty three members on their own leaving the six representatives of the membership to offer token dissent. However, the other presence of providing politicised leadership has almost totally vanished. Any left project which involves an element of shifting the unions to the left has effectively disappeared as they have adopted an increasingly administrative role with respect to their members. This is not to suggest that unions never play a progressive role. In mobilisations against the BNP, for example, local and regional union offices have provided valuable support. But, overall, it is clear that the kind of support for the left which once existed at grass-roots level is largely gone. Blair and now Brown understand this. They know that the unions, nationally, are tied to supporting the Labour leadership in the hope, almost totally unfulfilled, that they will enact forms of labour legislation which relax the constraints of the Thatcher era. They also know that the left-turn inside the unions of the 1970s will never happen again. Unfortunately, this obvious fact has yet to dawn on, for example, the CLP representatives on the NEC who campaign vociferously against any action which they see as altering the federal structure of the L.P. even though this structure is the very thing which renders them impotent. The future role for trade-unions in the British left is one of the great unspoken issues that the left has dodged. The unions have been the refuge and the hope of the socialist-left since before the formation of the L.P. They are no longer, can no longer be that. Just where they fit in left politics is unclear but one thing is clear \_ that the left must now find an alternative road.

The second shift in context is more subtle but, in its way, more important. In the mid-1960s, the Labour left held a majority amongst the Party's membership and could offer effective opposition to the leadership because it held on to a moral and a broad intellectual hegemony both inside the Party, which the best efforts of Crosland and Gaitskell failed to dent, and also outside in a broader left. This domination was based

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<sup>13</sup> In 2006, union density amongst all workers was 25.8% with 17.2% density in the private sector. Union membership was 24% amongst employees aged 25-34 years and 39% amongst employees over 50 years old. This marks a decline from a peak union-density of 55% in 1979.

around 'socialism' as it was then understood. In Eley's words: "*For roughly a century between the 1860s and the 1960s, the socialist tradition exercised a long-lasting hegemony over the Left's effective presence...If the Left was always larger than socialism...socialist parties also remained at their indispensable core.*"<sup>14</sup> Eley writes of the European left. In Britain, most of the membership of the L.P. plus that of the Communist Party was the essential core of that broader Left.

In 2007, this central hegemony of socialism as the normal language of the left and as a sheet-anchor on the ultimate practice of Labour leaders has disintegrated. Again in Eley's words: "*Socialist languages of politics, socialist models of organising the economy, socialist projections of the good society, socialist ideas in general have all been catastrophically delegitimized...Socialist ideas now have a more embattled and less legitimate place in the public discourse than one might ever have anticipated even two decades before.*"<sup>15</sup> We are not arguing here that this is a good simply stating a fact about the place which the socialism, which was the core ideal of L.P. membership in the 1960s, now has in political discourse even on the left. It has no pull, even a residual one, on the Labour leadership, who are now evidently free to pursue whatever policy seems most fitting their own designs, and it has little attraction within a wider activist left. Yet, and this is something that becomes startlingly obvious as one moves around the various public debates centred on the L.P., the left within that party seems largely oblivious to this fact. The problem for them remains that of getting back lost members and decrying the betrayal of socialism by New Labour in general or, for those who quixotically carry a flag for Gordon Brown, specifically Tony Blair.

The third shift in context is the overall hollowing out of the British state and of the two-party system which has sustained it for so long. This is the issue which really lies at the heart of the problem of what defines the left and where it resides. In the mid-1960s, Britain was a unitary state governed within the framework of a two-party system, historically largely dominated by the Conservatives but with Labour the only constant and legitimate opposition and within Labour, a socialist left which could always see itself as a government-in-waiting. This system has almost fallen apart.<sup>16</sup> Scotland and Wales had started down paths of national legal identity, whose future route is uncertain, but which has already given their nationalist parties a leading role. In England, a slow edging towards a more pluralist political structure had given a third party an increasingly prominent role despite the obvious unfairness of the electoral system. All this has taken place against a background of growing disillusion with the political system as a whole reflected in the decline in electoral turnout.

It remains unclear just where this process of hollowing out, that is the way in which outward forms are maintained but the internal structure is progressively weakened, will lead. Two paths can be seen. One is formation of the kind of minority or small-majority governments which were seen between 1964 and 1974 but with the balanced vote between Labour and Conservative falling to around 35% each of the turnout rather than the 45% plus of the previous era. This could lead to a negotiated reform of the electoral

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<sup>14</sup> G. Eley, forthcoming

<sup>15</sup> *op cit*

<sup>16</sup> Just to re-cap: in 1966, the Labour/Conservative vote totalled 90% of the total taking 97.8% of the seats on a 72.9% turnout. In 2005, comparable figures were 67.5%, 85% and 61.4%

system adopting proportional representation following the lead of the Scottish, Welsh and European elections. This, in turn, would lead to the formation of coalition governments in which the 'left' would stretch across sections of several of the governing parties. A second path could be that Labour or Conservative maintain workable majorities despite having less than 20% of the electorate vote because of quirks of the electoral system and an even lower turnout. Such a manifest failure of the system, particularly in a potential context of security tension, real or imagined, is as likely to lead to a form of electoral dictatorship as anything progressive. Parties which have lost any kind of popular support and are hollowed-out versions of their past selves, but which maintain the forms of government, can swing wildly to maintain their power.

These three major shifts in the context of national and party political discourse mean that the 'problem' of the L.P. is now almost diametrically opposed to that which was posed forty years ago. Then the problem was how to change it internally. Now the problem is how to dissolve its electoral dominance over the left without provoking a potentially disastrous shift to authoritarian modes of governance and, simultaneously, how to reconstruct the left within a new structure which takes into account the new political landscape of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This does, of course, require some answer to the delayed question of what, in this new landscape, does 'left' actually mean?

### ***Searching for the Left***

This process of hollowing-out combined with the catastrophic, if partly self-inflicted, defeats of the 1980s have produced a left in Britain which is scattered, fractious and unable even to recognise itself except by largely meaningless labels of affiliation. The key, though apparently paradoxical, question for all of us on the left is just what constitutes the left and where can it be found. It is, in other words, a process of self-discovery. There are many answers to the question of course but the following, derived from the schematic of part 1 may serve.

The left encompasses those who believe in some measure: that usually social and collective responses to general social and economic issues are to be preferred to individual ones; that, in particular, market processes are undesirable in providing public services; that these public services include education, health, public security as well as, potentially, some other areas which might include some natural utility monopolies and some aspects of housing; that a practical and functioning democracy should exist in all areas of social activity including economic; that forms of ownership other than private may be preferred in many sectors of the economy; and that equality is a public good in its own right. There is plenty of scope for the argument and dispute traditional on the left over these and it is likely that they could be expanded particularly internationally, but they encompass what most would think of as forming the broad left.

It should be clear that this left is wider than what, historically, was called the socialist left whose core belief was that society operated under a general social and economic system called capitalism and which could and should be replaced by an alternative system called socialism, systems which in both cases were essentially defined by ownership. It needs to be recognised that a significant part of the left, as defined above, is resistant to the very idea of over-arching systems and does not recognise any neat dichotomy into capitalist

and socialist. It remains an undefined as well as a problematic task for the socialist left to re-assert the intellectual dominance it once held within the broader left.

So where does this left now reside? Perhaps a division into five, overlapping sectors is helpful. First, there is a core of left-wingers within the remaining membership of the L.P. including some elected Labour representatives. Second, there is a left fraction of a number of the parties which have largely developed over the past three decades including the two nationalist parties, the Green Party and, yes, the Liberal Democrats and which will also include some of their elected representatives. Third, there are the members of those small socialist groups which still retain an explicit attachment to the Communist or Trotskyist parties of the past. Fourth, there is a body of individuals who have been members of the Labour Party as well as those Communist or Trotskyist parties, who retain left ideals but have detached themselves from active national politics. Fifth, and probably the most numerous, there is a body of individuals who are active in some form of political action, both local and global, and who regard existing political formations at least with scepticism and often with downright hostility. Some of them are descendants of the local campaigns once organised by Labour and Communist members but now largely detached from any organised political body. Others are more similar to the Greenham women in their forms of organisation.

Just how many people could be assembled under these headings is impossible to know; a personal guess would be around a quarter of a million with the majority in the last two categories. But numbers are, at least for the moment, largely irrelevant. The task faced on the left is how to fashion some kind of network from these disparate groups which can acknowledge each other and engage in debate about political strategy, without attempting to denigrate the choices that have led to their particular place of residence but with the objective of developing some discernible impact on practical politics. This is not a new project. It can be seen forty years ago in the May Day Manifesto group and nearly thirty years ago in Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright imagining how the left might move *Beyond the Fragments*.<sup>17</sup> There were efforts in the 1990s to form some kind of red-green alliance which effectively amounted to a new kind of left unity. All failed though not without some initial success. Why should any new endeavour succeed now?

The negative answer to this is that there is really no alternative. Two efforts to work through the L.P. – one based upon a democratic left turn, one on the New Labour centralised, pragmatic approach – have failed whilst the left outside the L.P. has fragmented in all directions without any clear purpose. The positive answer has to be that Britain is approaching a general political conjuncture in which a programme of a left coalition could have real purchase given a shift towards proportional representation throughout the electoral system. Organised and systematic tactical voting based upon simple criteria for being ‘on the left’ could have a swift impact in such circumstances. It follows that an immediate component of this process of self-discovery is just how we should approach the impending general election. Many on the left voted against Labour in 2005 on an anti-war basis and some of these have permanently changed their affiliation to other parties. Still others will continue to hold to the position that they cannot vote for

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<sup>17</sup> S.Rowbotham, L.Segal and H.Wainwright, **Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism**, London, Merlin, 1979

a government led by those who took us into an illegal and immoral war and still refuse to recognise this. Still others will return to voting Labour on the age-old grounds of keeping the Tories out. Still others will never have left Labour though retaining grave doubts over the New Labour project. There is no possibility that these disparate elements can be reconciled into any common voting. However there does exist a chance that the electoral dilemma can be recognised and a common approach worked through locally in some cases whilst the very process of recognition could be a major step on the road of reconciliation.

Where to begin? Perhaps the best approach is to change the metaphor used to describe left political action which, in a sense, has been dominated by the quasi-Darwinian slogan that from acorns do big oaks grow though only one acorn succeeds, crushing out all the other seedlings from failed acorns. Instead let us instead turn to the metaphor of rain-making by seeding clouds with silver iodide particles, no one of which is decisive but in which all are necessary. The left exists in Britain as a large amorphous cloud without measure and without purpose. Just what would happen if it could all shift in one direction is hard to know but it would certainly be spectacular. We should take as our alternative slogan that from many drops a flood can come.