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1. The socialist promise

When the Labour Party met in conference in October 1973, the democratically elected Marxist Government of Salvador Allende had just been overthrown in a bloody military coup in Chile. Alvaro Bunster, Allende's ambassador, came to the conference and received full public support from Labour leaders for his call to resist the Junta that was already torturing and killing Chilean socialists in their thousands. Yet six months later, when the new Labour Government had been in office for only six weeks, the Labour Foreign Secretary allowed warships to be handed over to the new Chilean authorities, and successfully resisted a campaign against his decision that was waged by the Party's General Secretary, by left-wing junior Ministers, and by trade union leaders. Concessions were made by the Labour Government to this pressure from within its own ranks: the sale of spare parts, and the overhaul of engines for military aircraft already sent was banned, and the Labour Government opposed plans by a major engineering consortium to build a copper smelting plant for the new military regime. But the warships that the Chileans had ordered, and which had been the focus of the left-wing campaign, were sent.

This sharp reversal of policy was important in its own right, for it involved a Labour Government in allowing arms to be sold to a regime which had already murdered men and women holding similar political views to those found in the rank and file of the British labour movement. But it was important too because it raised in sharpest relief the questions to which this book is addressed: of the relationship between the promises of Labour politicians in opposition and their performance in power, and of the seriousness of their claims to be seeking to create a new and a socialist Britain. For the Labour Party conference in 1973 did not simply discuss the events in Chile. The men and women who gathered in Blackpool that autumn also believed themselves to be committing the next Labour Government to the Party's most radical programme for at least forty years.

In that *Programme*, the Labour Party declared itself to be 'a democratic Socialist Party', prepared and determined to 'put the principles of

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democracy and Socialism above considerations of privilege and market economics'. It promised the creation of 'no less than a new social order' through the pursuit of the Party's 'basic Socialist goals'. These the *Programme* listed, as follows.

*To bring about a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families.

*To make power fully accountable to the community, to workers and to the consumer.

*To eliminate poverty wherever it exists.

*To achieve far greater economic equality in our society - in income, in wealth, and in the living standards of everyone.

*To increase social equality by a substantial shift in the emphasis now put on job creation, housing, education and social benefits.

*To improve the environment, so that the workplace is more comfortable, our cities more inviting, and the air and water around us cleaner.

To achieve these basic objectives, the *Programme* made a long series of specific policy proposals. The next Labour Government, it said, should extend price and exchange controls, should increase state pensions, should repeal the Housing Finance and Industrial Relations Acts, should take rented property into municipal ownership, and should tax the rich to finance the extension of social services to the poor. The next Labour Government should establish a complex planning and control machinery over the giant private firms which - on the *Programme*'s own argument - dominate the economy; and it should extend the public sector into at least North Sea Oil, shipbuilding, docks and building land. The *Programme* was explicit on this need for public ownership, and in being so it broke with over twenty years of Labour Party ambivalence on what was once Labour's defining policy. To restrict Labour Government activity simply to social reforms, the *Programme* said, is insufficient. For 'even the most comprehensive measures of social and fiscal reform can only succeed in masking the unacceptable and unpleasant face of a capitalist economy, and cannot achieve any fundamental changes in the power relationships which dominate our society'. Only the use of public ownership and State planning can end 'the arbitrary exercise of economic power' and transfer social control 'from a small elite to the mass of the people'.[1]

If the Labour Government retains office in 1974, the willingness and ability of Party leaders to implement this *Programme* will soon be demonstrated, and their performance in office will show how genuine is

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the socialist intent of a political party from which virtually all men and women of socialist principle were driven by the events of 1964-70. For there are questions which have to be put and answered before the promise of *Labour's Programme 1973* can be believed. In the short run, and for the electorate in general, Labour's new found radicalism raises again the credibility of the Party's promises, and the extent to which Labour in power can offer a genuine and more radical alternative to Conservative policies. In the long term, and for socialists of all varieties, the renewed radicalism of the Labour Party poses even more central questions, against which they will have to determine the allocation of their own political loyalty and activity in the next decades. Has the Labour Party *really* converted itself into a force that will reform capitalism out of existence, and if it has, will the promise of the 1973 *Programme* prove more successful than have similar Labour Party promises in the past? Or is it still folly to believe that the Labour Party is, or ever could be, anything more than a major blockage on the struggle for socialism, and a major threat to the industrial power, living standards and job security of workers in an advanced capitalist society?

I hope that the argument which follows will contribute to an assessment of these questions, by its interpretation of Labour Party history and by its analysis of Labour Party development. For this is not the first time that this radical appeal and socialist promise has come from the Labour Party, and so an assessment of the potential of the Party now does seem to require a prior consideration of how the Party has developed, and of what in the past it has promised and it has done. In particular, since Labour politics are *par excellence* the politics of Parliamentary action, any assessment of the potential of the Labour Party in the mid-1970s must be based on an appraisal of the kinds of Parliamentary leadership that the Party has had, and which it now enjoys. Indeed, that assessment of the possibilities of Labour socialism must go further, to an understanding of the logics, potential and constraints that have come to be associated with Parliamentary politics, and which even now shape the character of the Party's Parliamentary leadership and its own left wing.

To that end, the chapters that follow look closely at the Party's history and in particular at its two periods of office since the war. Chapter 2 considers the formation and early character of Labourism and traces its development to the General Election of 1945. Chapter 3 looks in detail at the experience of the 1945-51 Labour Governments, to see what happened on the last occasion that the Party attempted to

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implement a radical programme of the type it adopted in 1973, and to locate some of the problems that it might conceivably experience if it were ever to try to reform capitalism into a new social order again. Chapter 4 traces the response of the Party leadership in the 1950s to the failed promise of the Attlee years; and chapter 5 looks in detail at the record in office (between 1964 and 1970) of the men who still lead the Labour Party. Chapter 6 then attempts to explain why this pattern of conservatism and frustrated socialist promise has been so unbroken; and chapter 7 explains why the left wing of the Labour Party has so far been unable to stem the conservative tide. The final chapter then returns to the questions set here; and in drawing the strands of the argument together, argues the bankruptcy of the Labour Party's road to socialism.

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2. The early Labour Party

The Labour Party, at its creation, was the culmination of a long nineteenth-century tradition of working class politics that had repeatedly sought the amelioration of working class conditions through involvement in existing Parliamentary structures, and which had consistently rejected more violent and more radical forms of political behaviour. The Labour Party grew out of this non-revolutionary tradition: one that stretched back at least to Francis Place, and which had been transmitted down the century through the 'moral force' wing of the Chartist movement, through the Reform League of the 1860s, through the Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress after 1871, and, after 1874, through the Lib-Lab working class M.P.s who followed Gladstone. Throughout the nineteenth century, these men and institutions - embodying as they did in their various generations this non-revolutionary prescription for working class politics - had participated in Royal Commissions and Select Committees, had lobbied the House of Commons, had periodically mobilised working class political energies behind moves to extend the franchise, and had latterly urged working people to seek their political salvation through the election of men of their own class to an increasingly democratic Parliament. And with such a background the early Labour Party politicians did not have to define afresh how the working class should seek its political goals; nor indeed, did they have to define the character of those goals themselves. Rather, early Labour Party leaders *inherited* a set of attitudes and practices which defined working class political goals as a set of ameliorative measures attainable within the existing social structure of property ownership and control, and which indicated that those goals could best be pursued by constitutional means. The early Labour Party, that is, inherited a set of attitudes and practices that defined 'politics' for the working class by specifying the parameters of that class's legitimate and adequate political aspirations and actions. It was these parameters to which Keir Hardie referred at the founding conference of the Labour Representation Committee (as the Labour Party was known from 1900 to 1906) when he spoke of

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'Labourism': that body of working class political 'theory and practice which accepted the possibility of social change within the existing framework of society; which rejected the revolutionary violence and action implicit in Chartist ideas of physical force; and which increasingly recognised the working of political democracy of the parliamentary variety as the practical means of achieving its own aims and objectives'.[1]

It is impossible to understand the character of the early Labour Party without recognising that this was its background, and without seeing the *industrial* and *social* attitudes, practices and institutions of the working class that had come in the nineteenth century to buttress it. It was these, after all, that had provoked Marx's attack on the 'sheepish attitudes of the workers'; and drawn from Engels his famous outburst: 'the English proletariat is actually becoming more and more bourgeois, so that this most bourgeois of all nations is apparently aiming at the possession of a bourgeois aristocracy and a bourgeois proletariat as well as a bourgeoisie'. For only rarely had the separation of industrial and political institutions and activity that was at the heart of this 'Labourist' legacy of the Victorian working class been challenged in the nineteenth century. It had been questioned only by the 'physical force' Chartists of the 1840s and by the Marxist sects of the 1880s and 1890s - each of whom had, in their different ways, argued both that the working class should use its industrial power to advance its political aims, and that those aims were realisable only in that revolutionary transformation of society that was anathema to the more constitutionally minded of the Victorian working class political and industrial leaders. But these revolutionary calls had repeatedly failed to gain mass working class support; and in their failure had left ever stronger the tradition of constitutional reform politics (Labourism) that was their major competitor.

For the century which had seen - on one view of Chartism - 'the first broad and politically organised proletarian-revolutionary movement of the masses' (Lenin) left, as its legacy to twentieth-century working class politics, not the predominance of a revolutionary tradition but a constitutional reforming one. The nineteenth-century revolutionaries had failed in part, of course, because of that poor leadership, weak organisation and deficient tactics that are the curse of every failed revolutionary movement. But they failed more because they faced a working class which - after the defeat of Chartism, and in the mid-Victorian period of industrial supremacy with its Imperialist aftermath - had established those 'extraordinarily deep sociological roots of

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reformism'[2] that were later to buttress the Labour Party. Late nineteenth-century socialist revolutionaries, that is, faced a working class whose leading sections had already 'warren [ed capitalism] . . . from end to end'; and had laid down what were to remain its characteristic institutions: not the revolutionary party but the 'trade unions, trades councils, T.U.C., co-ops, and the rest'.[3] And they faced a class which, in the process, had generated institutions and leaders who, in periods of prosperity at least, could deliver those marginal but significant improvements in wages and conditions on which support for social reform politics and class collaboration in industry could and did flourish. Moreover, in the process, these very institutions and leaders, and the sections of the class that they represented, gathered an increasing interest in rejecting and opposing political movements that might, by their radicalism, jeopardise existing gains.

In particular, 'Britain's economic dominance of the first seventy years of the nineteenth century [had] enabled skilled workers, through the scarcity of their skills and union organisation, to gain a privileged position for themselves within the labour market, and on that basis [to] dominate and control the emerging working class movement'.[4] Indeed, between 1850 and 1890 their craft unions were the major working class institutions functioning persistently on a national basis. Though the philosophy of class collaboration and reform politics within which they struggled to defend their craft privileges against the unskilled was challenged by the Marxist S.D.F. and by the unions of the unskilled that S.D.F. militants helped to organise in the late 1880s, that challenge was weakened by the twenty-five years of dominance that the crafts had enjoyed after the failure of Chartism. These unions and their members were the institutional and sociological bed-rock of the non-revolutionary tradition of working class politics; for they had much to lose in revolutionary upheaval and much to gain from a co-operative legislature. As E. P. Thompson said,[5]

> Each advance within the framework of capitalism simultaneously involved the working class far more deeply in the *status quo* . . . Each assertion of working class influence within the bourgeois democratic State machinery simultaneously involved them as partners (even if antagonistic partners) in the running of the machine. Even the indices of working class strength - the financial reserves of trade unions and co-ops - were secure only within the custodianship of capitalist stability.

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And so, although there were moments - in the 1820s, 1840s and 1880s - when the prospects for a sharp break with non-revolutionary working class politics were greater than hitherto, in the end the nineteenth-century revolutionary tradition proved weak in the face of 'the truly astronomic sums of human capital which (had) been invested in the strategy of piecemeal reform'.[6] It was from this capital that the Labour Party emerged.

2

The natural political home of working class reformers in the late nineteenth century was the left wing of the Liberal Party. 'With the exception of one or two Conservative trade union leaders, the officials of (all) the labour organisations belonged to the Liberal Party';[7] and so too, in their voting allegiance, did the majority of their members. Lancashire and Birmingham were perhaps the major exceptions to the more general rule that enfranchised workers (especially the more skilled and better organised) tended in the last quarter of the nineteenth century to give their newly acquired vote to the party of Gladstone.* And it was only slowly, and against an inherited set of ideological, organisational, political and personal links between the older trade union leaders and the Liberal Party, that this allegiance was severed and a separate Labour Party formed.

The reasons are doubtless well-known. The Liberal Party under Gladstone was increasingly preoccupied with the Irish question, to the virtual exclusion of all else; and in the Irish struggle, the political autonomy of the Irish M.P.s offered a model and a hope to those who thought separate political organisation would give the working class greater leverage at Westminster. The senior councils of the Liberal Party proved unresponsive to the trade union movement's growing need for legal protection in the face of a hostile judiciary. At grass roots level, local Liberal caucuses proved reluctant to accept as candidates aspiring politicians from the working class. And finally, for the tiny group of

* There was, even so, a substantial Conservative vote amongst working class electors. As H.Pelling observed: except in Yorkshire, working class voters were 'evidently subject to more contradictory pressures than the middle class voter in this period . . . ' and were consequently less prone to vote solidly for Liberal candidates. Moreover, 'the evidence of electoral behaviour suggests . . . that unskilled workers showed (even) less cohesion on class lines than those who were more skilled'. H.Pelling, *Social Geography of British Elections, 1885-1910* (London, Macmillan, 1967) p. 420 and p. 424.

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socialists who formed the Independent Labour Party in 1893, the Liberal Party's commitment to private enterprise and to an inactive State clashed with their collectivist aspirations and with their search for 'the public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange'.

For all these reasons, and particularly the last, the I.L.P. sought separate Labour representation in Parliament through the 1890s. For all these reasons, *except the last*, the leaders of both the old craft and new unskilled unions, under pressure from socialist militants within their own ranks, came to abandon their Liberal connections as the nineteenth century closed. So in February 1900 the Labour Representation Committee was created, as yet another of the Labour Committees seeking direct working class representation in Parliament: in this case, as an alliance between the pitifully weak Socialist societies (the I.L.P., S.D.F., and the Fabians) and initially the newer and less skilled unions of the T.U.C. - 'to promote and co-ordinate plans for labour representation'. It was this body which by 1906 had changed its name to the Labour Party, had lost the support of the Marxist S.D.F., and had - in the wake of the Taff Vale judgment - won the support of the bulk of the unions affiliated to the T.U.C. Of the major unions, only the Miners' Federation retained their Lib-Lab connections; and with the affiliation of their M.P.s to the Labour Party in 1909, the Party had established itself - if only shakily - as the political voice of the organised working class.

But although the Labour Party was, after 1900, organisationally distinct from the radical wing of the Liberal Party, the aspirations of its leaders and the substance of its policies remained enmeshed in the intellectual and ideological universe of Liberal-Radicalism. It is true that there were socialists of the I.L.P. variety in the Party, and that these men played a disproportionately large part in the senior echelons of the Edwardian organisation. But from the beginning the Labour Party was a coalition, in which the socialist wing was a minority; and the I.L.P. leadership proved more committed to holding that coalition together than to inscribing socialist policies and aspirations on an organisation which would doubtless have split under the strain. They settled instead merely for an agreement[8]

> establishing a distinct Labour Group in Parliament, which shall have their own whips and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to co-operate with any party which for the time being

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> may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interest of labour.

That, in the context of pre-1914 British politics, meant an alliance with Liberal policies and with the Liberal Party; and the I.L.P. knew it.

For in a real sense, I.L.P. socialists had no choice if the Labour Party was to avoid internal schism and electoral annihilation. The only way in which the I.L.P. leaders of the Parliamentary Labour Party could retain the newly won allegiance of the trade unions was to restrict the Party to a programme of discreet social reforms acceptable to union leaders who were - in the main - merely 'loyal but disheartened Gladstonians'.[9] Nor could the Party adopt a more socialist programme if it was to avoid electoral defeat at the hands of a working class electorate steeped in this same Gladstonian liberalism; and it was to avoid such a slaughter at the polls that Ramsay MacDonald (the I.L.P. secretary of the Labour Representation Committee) signed the secret electoral pact with the Liberal Party in 1903. This too bound the early Labour Party to Liberal-Radicalism. For though in the long run - and with the benefit of hindsight - it is clear that the Labour Party was the greater beneficiary of this agreement to prevent Liberal and Labour candidates running against each other in the 1906 General Election, in the short run it tied the hands of the tiny Party to the support of 'the general objects of the Liberal Party'.* It meant that at local level the Labour Party had to select candidates whose moderation would neither alienate the Liberal vote nor drive the local Liberal caucus to break the agreement and run a separate candidate. At national level it kept the Parliamentary Labour Party as a loyal vassal of a Liberal Government which it dared not offend, lest the pact between them be abandoned and the Labour Party run the risk of almost certain electoral defeat.

But it must not be thought that even I.L.P. M.P.s found this close proximity to the Liberal Party irksome. On the contrary: one of the first L.R.C. M.P.s defected to the Liberals within twelve months of his election; and the rest of the early Labour Party M.P.s remained bound by close personal and ideological ties to the radical wing of the Liberals. After all, men like Hardie, Henderson and Shackleton - who all led the Labour Party at various times in its early years - had initially thought of

* Under the agreement, 'the Liberal leaders agreed to use their influence to prevent local Liberal opposition to any L.R.C. candidate who supported 'the general objects of the Liberal Party'; in return the L.R.C. was to 'demonstrate friendliness' to the Liberals in any constituency where it had influence'. R. Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (London, Merlin Press, 1973) p. 20.

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