

‘We cannot administer capitalism because we don’t believe in it!’

Clement Attlee

This second article was written some 20 years after Webb’s. When there was a serious prospect of an electoral alliance between Labour and the Liberals, during the 1930s, it took the form of calls for a ‘popular front’ against the Conservatives. Clement Attlee had recently been elected leader of the Labour Party. This is how he evaluated the project in the Left Book Club’s The Labour Party in Perspective.

The Labour Party stands for such great changes in the economic and social structure that it cannot function successfully unless it obtains a majority which is prepared to put its principles into practice. Those principles are so far-reaching that they affect every department of the public services and every phase of policy. The plain fact is that a Socialist Party cannot hope to make a success of administering the Capitalist system because it does not believe in it. This is the fundamental objection to all the proposals that are put forward for the formation of a Popular Front in this country.

There are many people who suggest that what is required at the present time is the formation of an alliance between all the Left Wing forces in order to get rid of the present Government. The argument is based sometimes on the need for getting through certain urgent reforms in home affairs, sometimes, and perhaps more frequently, on the plea that at all events all can unite on a common policy in foreign affairs, and that on this basis it would be possible to rally a majority in this country for what is vaguely called a Left Government. Many people stress the purely negative attitude – that is to say, the urgent need of getting rid of the present administration before, through their feeble and dishonest policy, they allow the world to be plunged into war. Others believe that it is possible to form a short-term policy to which the various Left Wing groups would give their adhesion, and that upon this basis electoral arrangements could be made which would ensure a majority.

I would not myself rule out such a thing

as an impossibility in the event of the imminence of a world crisis. It might on a particular occasion be the lesser of two evils, but it is worth while examining these proposals in some detail, because they have an appeal to many who do not in my view look far enough ahead.

I will first deal with the purely negative proposal which considers that the really vital thing is the extrusion from power of the present Government. I should be the last person to underrate the importance of this, but the overthrow of the present Government means its replacement by another. You cannot simply leave a vacuum.

A majority of heterogeneous composition returned on a negative policy of turning the Government out, with a clear foreign policy but no programme for home affairs, would not last more than a few weeks. Even where foreign affairs overshadow the political scene, the day to day work of a Government is mainly concerned with administration and legislation on internal affairs. The essential support that a Government needs is not for a few major issues, but for the ordinary common round and daily task. The first essential for a Government which has to work through the House of Commons is command over time. More things are lost by delay than by open opposition. The elaborate machinery of the Whips Office, and the discipline imposed on the supporters of a Government, are essential if it is to function at all. This discipline, although enforced by pains and penalties, by hopes of reward and by the fear of dissolution, depends in the last resort far more on a realisation by the members of the relative importance of particular issues. The discipline imposed by membership of a party not only in the House of Commons, but in constituency party work, is a reflection of a general appraisal of the value of the attainment of certain aims, and a willingness to subordinate the particular points on which the individual feels keenly to the general sense of the Party. It is, in fact, the acceptance of the fundamental principle of democracy – majority rule.

It has never been easy to obtain this discipline in parties of the Left. Parties of the Right tend to contain fewer individualities, while their members in this country have been drilled by the nature of their upbringing to the acceptance of what they would term the team spirit. Parties of the Left tend to be composed of enthusiasts for particular reforms who hope by joining with others to achieve their aims, and of men and women who have through their individuality come to the front, rather than those who by the possession of wealth or position have drifted into politics. Thus the Liberal Party always tended to be fissiparous. It always included in its ranks a number of what are called impolitely ‘cranks’ – that is to say, enthusiasts for various good causes. The party was kept together by the

large body of persons who were traditional Liberals, or perhaps even without any market convictions except an interest in politics and a desire to make a career.

In the Labour Party, the Trade Union element serves as the solid core of disciplined membership. The loyalty to majority decisions, which is the foundation of industrial action, takes the place of what is called among Conservatives the team spirit, while long training in the responsibilities of Trade Union work has induced a habit of mind which realises the practical necessity for compromise in non-essentials. A further link which makes for united action is the common faith in Socialism which inspires the members. There are, however, always a few who, while convinced Socialists, have as their main incentive devotion to some particular reform. Their enthusiasm for their own special cause is apt at times to make them lose their sense of proportion. There are also, naturally, some members whose fervent desire for the achievement of their ideals makes them impatient of the delays and partial successes which are inevitable in working through the methods of parliamentary democracy.

The experience of the two Labour Governments showed how difficult it was for many of these to accept the compromises inseparable from all Government, but particularly from a Government in a minority. There was needed to give the experiment the degree of success which it attained the full force of party loyalty and of devotion to the cause of Socialism.

But if there is to be an election resulting in the return of a majority consisting of several minorities united only on a negative, the Government will be intolerably weak. If the groups are in themselves strong and coherent, it may be possible, by the inclusion of leaders drawn from all of them, to obtain a fairly consistent support, but at best the battle will only be transferred from the floor of the House and party meetings to the Cabinet Room. The larger the party the greater its sense of responsibility; the smaller the group the more irresponsible. The largest party becomes at once the prisoner of the minority groups, which put all the pressure they can to ensure decisions in the sense which they desire ...

Many of these objections apply equally to the suggestion that there should be a positive programme to which all organisations on the Left should adhere. It is thought that many Liberals might accept a limited programme of certain specific items calculated to be carried through within the life of one Parliament, and that upon this basis a Left Government might be achieved at an early date. It is thought that there is a large body of Left opinion which, while unwilling to commit itself to Socialism, is yet prepared to accept a considerable instalment of the

Socialist programme. It is commonly suggested that enough work for one Parliament could be found without going beyond the limits which would repel adherents of the Capitalist system.

It must be admitted that there is considerable strength of opinion in support of this proposition, and I think that there is ground for the view that there are many in this country who are prepared to go a long way with the Labour Party while not prepared to take the plunge and join any affiliated organisation. It is, therefore, worth while examining this proposition.

The first question that arises is as to the limits of the programme which would be acceptable. I find that the proposition often reduces itself to this – that if the Labour Party would drop its Socialism and adopt a Liberal platform, many Liberals would be pleased to support it. I have heard it said more than once that if Labour would only drop its policy of nationalisation everyone would be pleased, and it would soon obtain a majority.

I am convinced that it would be fatal for the Labour Party to form a Popular Front on any such terms. It may be possible in other countries, but not in this. I have stated above that Socialists cannot make Capitalism work. The 1929 experiment demonstrated this. No really effective steps could be taken to deal with the economic crisis, because any attempt to deal with fundamentals brought opposition from the Liberals. Labour men who saw clearly the need for dealing with causes had to try to deal with results. The amount that could be extracted for the workers from a Capitalist system was limited. When this limit had been reached, failure was bound to ensue. I admit that the experiment was not made under fair conditions. The Party was handicapped by the conditions of the time, which demanded drastic measures, and by its leading personnel, who had surrendered their minds to Capitalism long before they sold their bodies.

Therefore any such short programme to be acceptable to Socialists must contain measures which will take the country a long way on the road to the desired goal. It must contain a big instalment of nationalisation. The subjects of nationalisation must be not those about which there is little controversy, because they are not vital, but those which are really vital for the transformation of society and are called for in the national interest. I shall indicate later what I believe these to be, but I do not know how far it would be possible for any large number of Liberals to accept them.

Next, there must be a development of the control of the community over trade and industry, which runs counter to the shibboleths of individualism. I do not underrate the value of the suspicion of bureaucracy which the Liberals exhibit. It is, indeed, necessary that Socialists should import into

the structure of the society which they are building what is valid in Liberalism, but I have the impression that Liberal elements in a Popular Front Government would balk at necessary controls.

With this there must be a steady pressure exerted through the medium of the Budget, wage standards, social services, etc., towards a more equalitarian society. I return to the point which I made above – that in the carrying on of a Government it is all-round support that is required. A Socialist Government must inform its whole administration with the socialist ideal. All its Ministers must be conscious of the goal to which they are steering the ship of State. It is just here that I see the crux of the situation. In a Popular Front the Socialist elements are definitely out to replace Capitalism by Socialism. They work with that aim in view all the time. If, on the other hand, they have colleagues or supporters whose conscious aim is the preservation of Capitalism, there cannot possibly be harmony.

There are those who will say that this is a playing with words; that 'We are all Socialists now'; that there is no absolute Socialism or Capitalism; that it is all a matter of degree and so forth. I cannot accept this. Socialism to me is not just a piece of machinery or an economic system, but a living faith translated into action. I desire the classless society, and the substitution of the motive of service for that of competition. I must, therefore, differ in my outlook from the man who still clings to the present system. Even though we agree that, say, the mines should be nationalised, we disagree with the end in view and with the reason for our action. He regards the mining industry as an exception to the general way he wishes to carry on industry. He thinks that owing to the history and conditions of the industry it had better be nationalised, but he still regards it as a profit-making undertaking. I, on the other hand, conceive it as a basic activity of the community or providing certain necessary needs, and as but the first of many services which must undergo a transformation.