

Editorial

Democracy – Growing or Dying?

This is the hundredth number of *The Spokesman*, so we are expected to have a birthday party. Nostalgia is in order at such events, and we have accordingly devoted quite a large part of this number to reproducing articles and features which involved us, with many of our readers, in a variety of campaigns to change things for the better. Sometimes these have succeeded, if only, say the sceptics, in provoking our old antagonists to find new ways to make them worse again. Sometimes they have failed, only to stiffen our resolve to try again, when times may be more propitious for their success.

There are, of course, a number of key concerns which have continuously preoccupied us. There has been no possibility of forgetting, even temporarily, the desperate urgency of the struggle for peace and disarmament. It has been quite possible, but very regrettable, to forget the struggle for the widening and deepening of democracy, and this possibility has been amply brought into evidence by the progress of sundry statesmen, not to say less elevated tribunes of the people, some of whom have opted for popular emancipation, one at a time, me first.

This kind of apostasy does discourage people, if only temporarily. If hope springs eternal, so too does the aspiration for effective power over the terms and conditions of our own lives.

Politicians commonly tell us that the major social struggles are about power. 'We need' they say, 'power to prevent the next war, or to save the environment from destruction, or to protect people from exploitation and domination.' That is one way of putting it, but there are dangers wrapped up in it. Power does not come sanitised, prepacked only for good causes. Time and again there is contrary evidence. What we really need is the annulment of power, so that none can

make wars, burn the atmosphere, or lower the people into misery. Yet if we are to avoid the charge of piety, toothless anarchism, empty promises, then we have to concede that the first step to a higher freedom requires that we learn the necessary arts to stop the various evildoers who breed for us all these wars, depredations and oppressions. But if such steps are truly to lead upwards, then the higher freedom itself must always remain in mind.

Fittingly, we have chosen a number of contributions by our founder upon which to thread the thoughts of our contributors on these matters. Bertrand Russell reviewed one of our books, Max Beer's *History of British Socialism*, when it first appeared shortly after the First World War. He highlighted Beer's acute perception that the English establishment could vainly attempt to school their people in the rites of caution and conservatism, but 'in periods of general upheavals ... the English are apt to throw their mental ballast overboard and take the lead in revolutionary thought and action. In such a period we are living now'. After a long and depressing lull in their energies, it could be that we may be about to see their strong renewal very soon.

Russell's appreciation of the roots of English socialism is exemplified in the article we have reproduced by John Hughes and Charles Atkinson. This was initially commissioned for a book to celebrate Russell's centenary, and was published by Spokesman in 1972.

Three other contributions which we have selected from among many celebrate the movement for industrial democracy. In one of them, Karl William Kapp draws attention to the sharp growth in pollution which has resulted from rapid industrial development. Kapp's profound scholarship recalls the natural, as well as social spoliation chronicled by Marx and Engels which accompanied extensive air and water pollution, and gave rise to an early, and profound concern by trade unions to encourage environmental protection. When we published Kapp's article in *The Spokesman*, we were able to use it as a key text for a conference on Socialism

and the Environment, in which we brought together a number of specialists including F. E. Le Gros Clark and Lord Boyd Orr, and activists such as Colin Stoneman, Malcolm Caldwell and John Lambert, who agreed to continue their work by establishing the Socialist Environmental and Resources Association, which carries on to this day.

Quite different but every bit as audacious is the contribution from Mike Cooley, which starts from the same premises, but, based on the author's profound experience of trade unionism in a high-tech industry, goes on to explore the prospects for long-term development of new techniques to benefit the natural and social environment. This great labour was stimulated by the fear of retrenchment in the Aerospace industry, when Tony Benn invited the shop stewards at Lucas Aerospace to put forward proposals for alternative uses which could harness the skill and creativity of a workforce whose talents would otherwise be jettisoned on the scrapheap of already widespread unemployment.

Cooley's team of shop stewards deliberately designed their research to cause 'respondents to think of products not merely for their exchange value but for their use value'.

They collected a large number of proposals for new products, and grouped them into six major ranges containing technical details, economic calculations and even engineering drawings. They sought a mix of products, some of which would be profitable under market criteria and some of which might not necessarily be profitable 'but would be highly socially useful'. After encouraging this enormous effort by trade unionists, Tony Benn was unable to see it through to fruition because he was redeployed by Harold Wilson in a cabinet reshuffle following the referendum on British membership of the European Community. Benn's demotion took him off to exile in the Department of Energy, and gave the subjects of the Department of Industry into the care of Eric Varley, whose appetite for industrial democracy had already diminished somewhat since he

tasted the fruits of office.

The Spokesman never abandoned its interest and concern for democratic reform, especially in the areas of industrial autocracy and dictatorship. But we also maintained a continuous interest in the question of peace and disarmament, on which we have chosen two of our articles to celebrate the launch and development of the campaign for European Nuclear Disarmament. We launched this campaign alongside Edward Thompson, Dan Smith, Mary Kaldor and nuclear disarmament veterans such as Peggy Duff and Bruce Kent.

It was agreed that the Russell Foundation should canvass European support for this appeal, with the aim of convening a representative European Conference or Convention. After vigorous preparations the first such Convention met in Brussels in 1982, and it was agreed to follow it with a second such Convention in Berlin the following year. Retrospectively we can see that this marked the high-water mark of the END campaign.

It brought together strong representation from all the peace movements and pacifist groupings, together with most of the main European left and centre left political parties. The German Social Democrats and Greens were powerfully represented, as were the Italian Communists, the Labour Party and a cross-section of Scandinavians. We received strong support from Alva Myrdal, the pioneering Minister for Disarmament in Sweden.

All this gave rise to profound misgivings in the Soviet Peace Committee which did not relish the success of another peace movement which was non-aligned. We have reproduced some of the salient papers which reflect this controversy. In those far off days the Labour Party in Britain agreed for the simultaneous dissolution of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the Warsaw Pact. The Warsaw Pact dissolved itself many years ago, but the North Atlantic Treaty still seeks to expand itself eastwards to the great distress of all those against whom it

is directed. Even if it reached as far as Vladivostok we sometimes get the impression that it would need new outlaws to mobilise against. President Eisenhower was right to warn us against the Military Industrial Complex, of which Nato is the living embodiment. If we continue to generate another hundred numbers of this journal, while we have breath left, we shall resist these embodiments of militarism, and continue to devote our energies to laying the foundations of the peaceful commonwealth which will come into existence with the abolition of war.

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Eppur si muove

Of course the struggle continues. Labouring to produce 100 numbers of *The Spokesman* has taught us that none of our institutions can be taken for granted. The advance of democracy, in particular, needs to be maintained vigorously, or it will go into retreat. Years ago, Eric Hobsbawm wrote a famous article: 'The Forward March of Labour Halted'. But he did not accurately diagnose what caused the arrest. Actually, the trade unions continued to grow long after Hobsbawm thought that they were becalmed. The growth of trade union membership represented a growth in the negative power of Labour. It could block measures which offended it, but found the initiation of positive change far more difficult. That is why the 1970s began with a resounding debate about industrial democracy, leading to the Bullock Report and proposals for reform. These were all negated by a Parliament jealous of its powers, and above all anxious not to use them. Had the unions been able to initiate positive changes, British history might have been completely different. But the defeat of this impulse led directly to Mrs Thatcher, mass unemployment, and the wholesale reduction of trade union influence. It also led to an abrogation of many traditional democratic checks and balances.

Today, a new crisis is on us, and there may be a new birth of trade union disquiet. Can this mutate into positive change? If it does not, the future may be dire.

Ken Coates