

We haven't long

Ken Coates

With characteristic and youthful exuberance, Ken Coates argued for 'many schools' in which the young left could develop its ideas about workers' control and the 'logic of disarmament', and also examine artists of the day. The Kessingland Summer Camps duly gathered on England's chilly East Coast in 1958 and '59, assembling a startling array of politicians and artists to look ahead and debate 'will the sixties be red?'

Organisations are usually boring: even when people in them are interesting, they tend to grow an organisation-face that dominates them, so that they look as if they're all shirt and no stuffing. I agree with Sean O'Casey, who once said that there's no man who has the right to be proud of an organisation, although there are plenty of organisations which ought to be proud of a man. On the other hand, I've been taught, and accept, that man is made in his social environment, of which he is a part; and that his organisations, from the family on, teach him to make himself as good a self as they can. Today, when our organisations are manifestly not making very good selves out of any of us, and bid fair to blow us all up into the bargain, it is of the greatest importance that we not only have a socialist youth and student organisation which is as efficient as possible, but that we understand the real meaning of efficiency. I contend that political efficiency is not a question of string and paper-clips, but of ideas. If NALSO [National Association of Labour Student Organisations] has not been triumphantly successful of late, this is far less to do with whether the secretary answers his letters the day he gets them, than with whether the letters he writes back contain things exciting enough to be worth waiting for. The annual conference of NALSO has clearly recognised the job of this generation as being the disarming of its governments and the fashioning of a society in its own more beautiful image. So what follows is certainly not a digression.

Organisers and Organised

Old Jerry Bentham has been pickled a long time now; but at least he's preserved out of

reach of the public nose. The society which has taken his image, even in its fabian-paternalist pyjamas, is an unencased abomination, looking more and more like a character in one of Samuel Beckett's novels. You remember the retching and stinking pilgrim's progress of Molloy, crawling through the forest to his city? Stuck in a ditch in sight of the polis, Molloy may bring tears to our eyes: but unless we develop organisations capable of allowing us to stride on beyond him, we shall unquestionably rot with him. Molloy's society is wrong just because it is divided. A society of organisers and organised invariably is wont to become a society of organisers against organised. Democracy is about overcoming this difficulty: but democracy is a process: it is either expanding always, or it is over and done with. Today's democrats, the socialists, must by their very nature reach out to the organised, lend them their strength, help them to become their own organisers. But in England there is only one road to the organised: and that road is the Labour Party. (A Labour Party which itself is significantly imbued with the Big-Brother Organiser-Mrs Webb mentality.) If you like, Mrs Webb levies toll at the near end of the road, so that many of us, from Declarationeers to ordinary rebels, feel disinclined to walk thereon. It is this situation which has so long rendered immobile the young Left: for the only other little alleyway which has presented itself has similarly been fronted with a bureaucratic toll-house: Mr Pollitt, not Mrs W clipping its tickets. Both sets of tickets are marked: 'The Vocation of Leadership'. This vocation, we feel, is a racket: many of us have ground out a place for ourselves at universities although we originate from the working class: and we know that we are just the lucky ones. They can't sell the 'leader' business to us: we've been on the other side of the counter. We have learnt the vital lesson that the only kind of leading that is tolerable is teaching, in which the leader holds before himself the objective of making himself redundant. And so in universities the radicals moan, or pay reluctant homage to the petty figures at the tollgates, through the Student Labour Federation and NALSO. In such circumstances there is little wonder that neither body is particularly effective. NALSO, we discovered at our last conference, has fallen down in that it has failed to find literature, speakers, and other amenities for its constituent clubs. Angry, some of them switch paths, affiliate to SLF, sample the superior philistinism of the straight gate.

Action

What to do? Of course, the new NALSO EC must provide efficient services: pamphlets, speakers, schools. But it is no use questing after abstract efficiency, for if we see this as our solution, our more efficient

machine will go efficiently nowhere. Unless our Labour Party can be made to draw back from blindly plodding on to 1984, we're all lost. We must make a coffin for Molloy, and the only thing to hand for boards is the tollgate of Mrs W. NALSO then must provide demolition equipment, because since the end of the war, the incantation of the formula 'socialism' has not proved enough. The chanting, loud as you like, has not so far even raised a blister on the bureaucratic paint. But the appearance of *The Insiders* has. When we begin to use our heads as well as our larynxes, the moral is we can invest our formulae with meaning, strength, consuming fire. Your ticket-man has invented no machine to punch holes in ideas: only better ideas can do that. What *Universities and Left Review* has begun, NALSO must help to grow deeper, to spread, to flourish. For me, if we fail in this and succeed in everything else, we shall still be sterile. So, we must run not one, but many schools – effective schools in which the most articulate partisans of the left put their viewpoint and are cross-examined by us. *Industry and Society* must defend itself against *The Insiders*, and both against all comers. The unilateralists must meet Strachey's arguments, battle must be done between the most powerful expressions of contending opinions. Our debates must be more informed, more thorough, more strenuous, that the ideas formed in them may usefully grow into actions.

Towards a tolerable polity

And why not begin on the grand scale? Why not, this Autumn, a week's camp, a giant intervarsity preessional conference, in which together, in meetings and seminars, we not only examine the logic of disarmament, the merits of 'new thinking', the rival schemes for workers' control of industry, and all the other questions which preoccupy our annual conferences; but also examine the Osbornes, the Tynans, the Lessings, the Lindsay Andersons, the thought-formers of the radical young, and consider the culture we want to see arise among us? We could go over the Hoggart thesis with its proponents, and ask the *Daily Mirror* to defend itself in open court among us. If we mix together all the struggling counter-proposals, let loose a real and wild debate at the very beginning of the academic year, who knows what may come from the mixing as it continues? The decisions of such a contest are the property of those who make them. But if we can show that socialism means thirst for truth, means keen inquiry, as well as a vote against the rent act, then we may even multiply the votes against the rent act. We will also multiply our numbers.

Thinking alone will pull up no trees. But thoughtful tree-pulling is easier than the other kind. And what begins in universities never stays

there unless it is barren. The first among fabians, who saw the world rounder than most of his colleagues, wisely said, apropos of the special breed of cultural paternalists:

‘—what we want is not music for the people, but bread for the people, rest for the people, immunity from robbery and scorn for the people, hope for them, enjoyment, equal respect and consideration, life and aspiration, instead of drudgery and despair. When we get that I imagine that the people will make a tolerable music for themselves, even if all Beethoven’s scores perish in the interim,’

Any man who thinks this want has been met in the welfare state is as morally blind as he is aesthetically deaf. The culture of the *Daily Mirror* is the culture of people locked all day in monotony, living in smog, ‘educated’ forty in a class by harassed teachers, reared to recognise Man’s Holy Grail in Her Majesty’s Mint. How can their politics rise higher? We must find out: the need to do so weighs heavy on us, for ‘if and we do not, we shall all blow to hell ...’ Of one thing, though, I would throw out a guess: that we shall discover, even if all Beethoven’s scores perish in the interim, that when the people can make a tolerable music for themselves, they will make for themselves a tolerable polity.

But we haven’t got all that long.

Ken Coates is acting Secretary of NALSO. His autobiography reads, ‘born 1930, went to school, worked in pits from 1948 to 1956, got State Scholarship for essay on Sean O’Casey, but couldn’t settle in English Department at Nottingham so switched to sociology. Was deviationist in Communist Party, is now deviationist in Labour Party. His article was written before the NALSO Summer Camp was arranged.

CLARION student magazine, Summer 1958