Searching for the left

Michael Prior

First published: September, 2009

ISBN: 978-1-4092-9890-8

The author would like to thank Peter Lawrence and David Purdy for helpful discussion and comment on initial drafts of this booklet.

Contents

Introduction

The left has existed in European politics for over two hundred years after the Jacobins sat on the left side of the National Assembly following the French revolution. Ever since, just what defines the left at any given moment and in any particular country has been controversial particularly amongst the left itself, always a notoriously argumentative and fissiparous bunch. This has been particularly true of the British left over the past twenty years to the point where it almost defies definition. This problem will be tackled later. However one thing is clear; in the last twenty years, the British left has been through tough times amounting to humiliation. After defeat in frontal confrontation with a resurgent and radical conservatism under Margaret Thatcher, it has been largely marginalised within its own political formation, the Labour Party. The primary aim of the Party became electability, so that, in the name of 'modernisation', it adopted the neo-liberal base of Thatcher's politics with a layer of social concern allegedly directed towards improving the lot of the most disadvantaged in society. This layer was shown to be thin and transient just as the great experiment in neo-liberal free-market economics started to collapse in 2007 and as one of its main progenitors, Tony Blair, left the British political scene. As the banks fell into disarray, the stark facts of British society were laid bare. The previous decade of Labour government had been one in which a version of the classic ditty was only too applicable: the rich had had the pleasure whilst the poor had got the blame and were to suffer the pains of recession.

Unfortunately, while the British left was justly able to complete the chorus of "Ain't it all a bleeding shame", it has essentially been paralysed with regard to offering any systematic alternative. As Gordon Brown's rudderless administration stutters towards its closure, the left, some of

whom had initially rather placed their hopes in him, stays in the shadows – at least in England[1]. The left does not appear to have any coherent response to the political crisis presently engulfing the country, a crisis essentially of legitimacy made all the more serious because it overlaps with an economic crisis. Constitutional reform has popped up on the left as an issue in much the same way as it has appeared on the agendas of Brown and Cameron, as a knee-jerk response, not something springing from any previous belief. Just thirty years ago, I wrote[i]:

> *It is nearly always possible for contemporary observers to believe that their age is of historic significance, that the choices faced by their society at that moment will determine its future for years to come. And, nearly always, such self-importance can come to seem ridiculous in the light of actual events. New directions for a society seldom occur with the regularity of a railway timetable and social theory, including Marxist theory, has often tended to look for the arrival of old trains rather than the departure of new ones. Nevertheless this book is written in the belief that the next few years are likely to prove of historic significance for Britain and, in particular, for the left in Britain.*
>
> *The main basis for this assertion is the precipitate decline in the economic and political status of Britain over the last decade. This needs little in the way of illustration. We discuss the reasons for this decline in some detail below. All that is needed here is one conclusion, that the failure of the Labour administration of 1964-70 even to begin its heralded modernisation of British society marked a watershed*

[1] One of the arguments of this essay is that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have increasingly followed their own political paths and that the left in these is different to that in England.

> *in British political life. From the moment of that failure, when the belief that a new direction could be found within the framework of the old system gave way to the usual patch-and-pray ad-hocery, the normal processes of British government began a long-drawn out holding operation, a desperate attempt to hold the centre in the face of mounting centrifugal pressure. That this holding operation has been carried out so smoothly is a testament to the extraordinary resilience and adaptiveness of the British ruling elite and to its powers of consensual domination. Yet it has remained a holding operation for all that: a series of temporary expedients that have held off the more open and dangerous forces.*

In 2009, Britain is waking up from a decade of dreaming which has been almost the mirror-image of the 1970s. Instead of economic decline together with industrial and social rebelliousness, we had been told that a new form of capitalism had solved the problems of both cyclical recession and class conflict. 2008 saw the breaking of that dream and we are now in the middle of just such a political holding operation as the Labour government was desperately trying in 1979. In that year, our prediction that the succeeding few years would be of '*historic significance'* for the left in Britain would come true in ways that we could scarcely have imagined then given the need to retain some positive optimism. It is difficult to face the next few years with any comparable, even if misplaced, hopes.

This pamphlet attempts to come to grips with the basic problem of just what defines and could unite the British left and how it could organise to become a leading political force in the country. It is organised in two broad parts. The first is historical, something for which no apology is necessary. The left often suffers from a selective historical amnesia, something at least partly responsible for its failure. To

appreciate what needs to be done we need to understand from whence we have come. The second part tries to define what the current left encompasses and, tentatively, attempts to lay out some possible future path. This is an ambitious task and one which undoubtedly fails in some respects. However it does endeavour to approach the task in a non-sectarian and constructive way and I hope that criticisms follow the same path.

Part I: The Left in British history

Ancient History

As in the rest of Europe, throughout the nineteenth century the central political cause of the left in Britain was democratic reform expressed in two forms; the extension of the franchise and the freedom to organise in the workplace. Neither was easily obtained and in Britain they were inextricably mixed. However, there were also two big differences in Britain compared with the general continental experience.

First, in most of Europe, the political left became dominated by a socialist current in the second half of the nineteenth century. For example, the German Social Democratic Party was formed in 1875 and, although technically illegal until 1890, it made steady progress in elections whilst the Italian Socialist Party was formed in 1890 as the amalgamation of two other parties and by 1900 it had a significant parliamentary presence. French socialist parties began in 1879 though they almost immediately began the process of splitting into more or less 'revolutionary' parties. The common feature of all these and other European groups was that they engaged in electoral politics and slowly achieved prominence in their parliaments in the last part of the nineteenth century. In Britain, full manhood franchise was obtained rather later than in much of Europe (not until 1918) and working-class electoral activity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was conducted largely within the Liberal Party. The only significant socialist party in Britain, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), was formed in 1891 but remained a rather sidelined, largely regional body compared with the so-called Liberal-Labour MPs such as Keir Hardie.

The second distinguishing feature of the British left was the dominant role of trade unions which throughout the second half of the nineteenth century extended their scope and membership, often in the teeth of state opposition. It was this struggle for democratic reform around trade unions rather than party politics, parliamentary representation and the extension of the franchise which dominated left politics in Britain in this period.[2]

In February 1900, representatives of most of the socialist groups in Britain (the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society), met with trade union leaders at the Memorial Hall in Farringdon Street, London. After a debate the 129 delegates decided to pass Hardie's motion to establish "*a distinct Labour group in Parliament, who shall have their own whips, and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to cooperate with any party which for the time being may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interests of labour*." To make this possible the Conference established a Labour Representation Committee (LRC). This committee included two members from the Independent Labour Party, two from the Social Democratic Federation, one member of the Fabian Society, and seven trade unionists, effectively equal representation for the political and labour wings.

The name 'Labour Party' was first adopted in 1906 by the group of 29 MPs who had won election under the auspices of the LRC.

Its 'object' in 1910 was to 'secure the election of Candidates to Parliament and organise and maintain a Parliamentary Labour party with its own whips and policy' It was a 'federation of national organizations', a loose and ill-

[2] It is commonly forgotten that the suffragette movement was concerned to extend the franchise to give equality for women in a system which only gave the vote to 40% of males.

defined alliance rather than a coherent party with specific aims.[ii]

Nationally, the Labour Party only acquired individual membership in 1918, after extension of the national franchise to all adult males and some women, when something like the existing constitution was adopted. It was only after 1918 that the party began to contest nearly all seats and to systematically oppose the Liberals, the party which had been the main representative of the working class before 1914 and with whom the LRC had concluded electoral pacts. Its success was then meteoric. By 1924, it was able to form a government, albeit as a minority, and by the end of the decade, it had totally eclipsed the Liberals.

This complex organisational process and its sudden rise to power has provided the Labour Party with unusual, though longstanding, features which still define its nature and politics.

First, as a federal organisation in which most democratic power is exerted by affiliated bodies whose own individual members have different relationships with their national body, it has only a limited role for individual members. A consequence of this has been a persistent inability of positions which commanded significant, often majority, support within the individual membership to determine party policy as expressed within party manifestos. It is noteworthy that the one affiliated body with specific political ambition controlled by individual membership, the ILP, split from the national LP in 1932 to begin a long decline.

Second, it has remained true to its original LRC roots in being primarily an electoral body dedicated to providing the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), a separately constituted body with its own rules and policy, with members and to electing local councillors. It has had a minimal role as a campaigning body or one with any ambition to the

development of any left political culture outside Parliament. As a result, a wider political body of left campaigns and agencies has always existed outside the LP with overlapping membership and various levels of support but with no official relationship. It is a provocative but essentially truthful comment that it has always been this loose gathering, a kind of political penumbra, which has provided the LP with the full characteristics of a political party rather than being just an electoral machine. The procedural basis of this has been, at least until recently, the way in which affiliated bodies have memberships which contain both LP members (often a minority) and members of other political groups as well as those with no direct political affiliation. The classic example of this is the way in which Communists were always able to play an indirect part in forming Labour policy by their active participation in policy formation inside the unions to which they, as individuals, belonged.

Third, the trade unions have always had a crucial role inside the LP, usually one that is supportive of the leadership of the PLP and which provides much of the party's money. In McKibbin's words "*One of the most highly class-conscious working-classes in the world produced a Party whose appeal was specifically intended to be classless. Accepting the Labour Party meant accepting not socialism but an intricate network of loyalties. In return, the Labour Party accepted its members as long as they understood its disciplines and conventions…This was a trade-union code of behaviour; so were the political aims of the Labour Party essentially trade-union ones…Within these limited terms the Labour Party has had reasonable success. If it is objected that it has not served the 'true' interests of the working-classes the answer is that it was never designed to do so.*"[iii]

One of the abiding features of unions is solidarity, an unquestioning support of other members against external forces. This, translated into political terms, is essentially a

kind of tribalism in which support for the party rather than support for some external political principle becomes the dominant feature of political calculation.

Fourth, the LP was never a socialist party though it contained elements of support for a socialist political programme in its constitution and a proportion of its elected MPs, though possibly not a majority, would always define themselves as socialist.

This odd, hybrid body might have been expected to undergo various kinds of political development into something like the continental pattern if it were not for its remarkable and, at the time, unexpected transformation into a party of potential government, a transformation which, even after the debacle of the defection of the then Labour Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald, in 1931, continued without any serious challenge. Labour won only 7.0% and 6.4% of the votes cast at the two general elections of 1910. In 1923, on an extended franchise, its share was 30.7%, just ahead of the Liberals, who were damaged by the bitter feud between Lloyd George and Asquith, and it was able to form a minority government. As a result, this rather strange political formation has continued to dominate left politics in Britain down to the present day without significant alteration to its original form despite the contingent features of its first structure.

Less ancient history

The most unusual feature of British political life has been its great stability. Continental European socialist parties underwent three great convulsions in the twentieth century after their formation in the late-nineteenth century. 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 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, though this may now be changing. But, even so, the map of European left-wing political formations remains one which shifts and changes; at the moment, Germany, France and Italy are all sites of a realignment of the left which may have far-reaching consequences.

The exception to the European pattern, of course, is Great Britain where the left has been largely defined by a single political formation, 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 chronology. It was established as a membership party only in 1918 long after the Continental parties and so avoided any split after the independent formation of the Communist Party in 1920. There was simply no time to allow for the formation of rival socialist blocs within the LP before the Russian revolution made a choice between different political paths inevitable. The failure of the second great convulsion to impact on the LP is an obvious historical contingency whilst the muffled impact of the third resulted from the total political dominance over the left acquired by the LP in the previous

fifty years and the absence of any significant Communist alternative.

The mirror-image to Labour's stable position on the left is that of the Conservatives on the right. Great Britain has been for almost a century a two-party state in which power has shifted regularly between them[3]. Indeed if one substitutes Liberal for Labour, this system has dominated British politics since the mists of time. A first-past-the-post (FPTP) electoral system has almost guaranteed the electoral impotence of any other parties whilst the 'broad church' posture of both parties, one to the left the other to the right, however limited in the actual control of the party, has enabled the extremes on either side to be neutralised if not absorbed.

The current national political scene might, superficially, suggest that this two-party system remains in full flower. However, this is not the case. The highpoint of two-party dominance was in 1951 when Labour and Conservatives split 98% of a popular vote of over 80% of the electorate. Since then there has been a slow but steady erosion of their position. In 1966, the Labour/Conservative vote totalled 90% of the total taking 97.8% of the seats on a 72.9% turnout whilst comparable figures in 2005 were 67.5% of the vote, taking 85% of the seats on 61.4% turnout. There are two rather stark conclusions from these statistics. First, it is now possible for a party to obtain a clear parliamentary majority with the votes of little more than one-fifth of the adult population. Second, the gap between the aggregate share of the vote of the two main parties and their share of seats won has grown significantly. The stability of the two-party system has become precarious.

[3] There was a brief period in the 1920s when Labour-Liberal coalitions formed governments before the eclipse of the Liberals

Labour was never a socialist party in the classic mould of the Second International, even though its 1918 constitution enshrined the famous Clause 4. It inherited the non-conformist conscience of the Liberals, and its leaders owed more to the Webbs than to Kautsky or Bernstein. There was, nevertheless, a strong socialist current among the party's membership, which normally stood to the left – and often well to the left – of the leadership. For decades, the annual party conference was a battleground, as policies supported by the majority of constituency delegates were regularly defeated by trade union block-votes. Yet despite these repeated collisions, the Labour Party managed to avoid damaging internal splits. The breakaway of the ILP in 1931 and the defection of the SDP in 1981 were only serious schisms, and neither broke the two-party system, though by fighting the 1983 election in alliance with the Liberals, the SDP came close, winning 25.4% of the votes cast compared with Labour's 27.6%, the only time since 1923 that Labour had fallen below 30%.

Labour's relative immunity to splits was largely due to the electoral system. Under FPTP, breakaway parties whose voters are thinly spread throughout the country stand little chance of winning seats in a general election, however many protest votes they pick up at by-elections. Moreover, even during the dark days of the 'National Government' formed after Labour's ignominious ejection from office in 1931 and dominated by the Tories, Labour retained important bastions in local government and thus kept its finger-tips on state power. These facts of political life, brutally encapsulated in Aneurin Bevan's jibe that the ILP after splitting from the LP was '*pure, but impotent'*, were reinforced by class sentiment. In the eyes of many trade unionists, splits in the party formed to defend trade union interests and largely financed by the unions were akin to breakaway unions, acts of betrayal that served the class enemy.

Thus, the Labour Party exhibited a curious stand-off: a largely left-wing membership with nowhere else to go confronted a right-wing leadership which relied on trade union block-votes to avoid conference embarrassments, but needed constituency activists to fight elections. The limits of left-right cohabitation were clearly exposed in the impassioned confrontations of the Gaitskell era. After his attempt to remove Clause 4 from the party's constitution was foiled by the left, Gaitskell campaigned against the 1960 conference decision to support unilateral nuclear disarmament, overturning it the following year by getting a couple of unions to change sides.

In a bid to break out of this impasse and broaden its campaign for a socialist alternative to the policies of the Wilson government, the May Day Manifesto group sought in 1968 to build a new left formation that was less attached to traditional party politics. After some initial success, the movement fell apart in the run-up to the 1970 election. As Raymond Williams, the Manifesto editor, later wryly remarked: '*A strategy for common action could survive anything except an election.*'

During the 1970s, the left inside the Labour Party set out to take it over: the Trotskyite *Militant* tendency by building a party within a party, the Campaign for Labour Democracy by means of open networking and dogged committee work. The Communist Party, the main organisation of the left outside the Labour Party, effectively abandoned electoral pretensions and focused on altering the balance of power inside the LP, developing broad left groupings in the unions and in student politics. Although constituted as a broad left they scarcely bothered to conceal the fact that their intent was to change the LP. They proved remarkably effective, launching the careers of several future Labour politicians, including Jack Straw, Charles Clarke and John Reid, and

shifting the balance of power decisively to the left in several unions, including the key Engineering Workers.

By the end of the mutinous 1970s,[4] having gained control of both the party conference and the National Executive Committee (NEC), the Labour left proceeded to change the rules of the game. Party members gained a say in the election of the leader and deputy leader, hitherto the province of the PLP, constituency parties gained the power to deselect sitting MPs, and the NEC was charged with ensuring that the party's election manifesto reflected conference policies. Incensed by these reforms, particularly constituency re-selection, 27 MPs on the right of the party resigned the Labour whip and in January 1981 followed the 'Limehouse Four' into the SDP. The chief beneficiaries were the Conservatives. Buoyed by military victory in the Falklands and facing a divided opposition at home, Mrs Thatcher was returned to power at the General Election of 1983 with an overall majority of 144, despite receiving only 42.4% of the votes on a turnout of 73%.

At this point the British left fell apart. There had been no great dissension on the left in the 1970s. A few dissident voices were raised against the strategy of 'militant labourism'[iv] – ramping up industrial action over wages and pushing Labour policy to the left via the unions – but these fell on deaf ears. There was little dissent from the left's opposition to the Common Market, even though withdrawal had been decisively defeated by the electorate in the 1975 referendum and was probably the most unpopular of Labour's policies after 1979. And across a spectrum ranging from what would now be called the 'soft left' through the CP to the ultra-left, opposition to any form of incomes policy, the only effective left policy to limit inflation, was *de rigueur*. These positions were, of course, strongly contested

[4] A good deal of commentary on this decade can be found at www.hegemonics.co.uk

by the Labour right. Indeed, during the 1983 election campaign, Dennis Healey, the deputy-leader, openly disavowed the party's manifesto commitment to cancelling Trident and refusing to allow the deployment of US cruise missiles.[5]

However, after 1983, the left descended into open civil war, while the right sought to regain control over the party machine and restore relations with the unions. Two issues split the left: Arthur Scargill's suicidal attempt to take on the Thatcher government, and the government's assault on the powers of local authorities. The NUM debacle blew away what remained of the trade union broad left, as even Communist activists demurred at Scargill's tactics. The introduction of rate-capping and the abolition of the Greater London Council, along with the other metropolitan councils, was part of a general drive by the Conservatives to impose monetary and fiscal control and raised basic democratic questions about the independence of local government. Councils throughout the country were affected, but the front line was in Liverpool, where the *Militant*-controlled council seemed determined not to set a balanced budget. In the event, *Militant* and the Labour leadership spent more time squaring up to each other than attacking the government, squandering the chance to rally resistance to the neo-liberal revolution at a time when public attitudes to it were still malleable.

The main reason for the left's failure to oppose Thatcher more effectively was that it had no hegemonic project of its own. Indeed, it had no political strategy at all beyond the pursuit of 'militant labourism', at root a syndicalist conception of politics, which had already been discredited in the 1970s, when inflation accelerated, tension mounted and

[5] It is a political myth that the 1983 manifesto contained a commitment to outright unilateral disarmament. It is ironic that the current campaign against renewing Trident is now, in effect, just such a policy.

profits plunged. Two further, subsidiary factors contributed to the left's decline: the collapse of the CP, as rival factions battled for control; and the efforts of the Labour right to 'reclaim the party', a tortuous and clandestine process recently documented by Dianne Hayter.[v]

Once Neil Kinnock had embarked on a purge of the *Militant* group, it proved relatively easy to roll back the 1979 reforms, laying the groundwork for the tightly disciplined and centralised party of the New Labour era. There has been tendency among political analysts to see Labour's travails in the 1980s as redemptive punishment for its earlier transgression in making itself 'unelectable', a keyword in the New Labour lexicon that gave a veneer of sophistication to such demotic coinages as the 'loony left' and the 'longest suicide note in history', minted by *The Sun* and Gerald Kaufman, respectively. In a recent pamphlet, Jon Cruddas, generally regarded as the most left-wing candidate in the deputy-leadership elections of 2007, referred to the '*horrors and wreckage of the early 1980s*', neglecting to mention the issue of internal democracy and the SDP's defection, as if Labour had been the hapless victim of some political Black Plague.

Historical amnesia is a besetting weakness of the left. Until things fell apart under Gordon Brown, those who had at first supported Blair, but later became disillusioned, drew a sharp distinction between the 'modernising' years from 1983 to the death of John Smith, and the 'Blairite' years from 1994 to the accession of Gordon Brown. In fact, all the elements of the centralised control that became New Labour's stock in trade were put in place during the Kinnock years. The neutering of the party conference and its conversion into a stage-managed spectacle may have gone farther under Blair and Brown than Kinnock intended or foresaw, but the stifling of debate and the cult of the leader began on his watch. Take, for instance, the quiet abandonment of any

commitment to social partnership for fear of stirring up memories of the 1970s, or the hubris of the Sheffield election rally three days before the 'shock' defeat of 1992.

It is important in understanding the current position of the left to compare the slow dwindling of the socialist left with two campaigns in the 1980s conducted by the largely non-socialist left: the nineteen-year protest against cruise missiles by the women's peace camp at Greenham Common and the opposition to nuclear power.

Emerging from the two movements of the 1950s and 1960s that were not dominated by socialists, namely CND and feminism, the Greenham women survived rough policing, prosecution and vicious vilification in the media. What part they played in getting the missiles removed and the US base closed is open to question, but so far as popular protest goes, they were the last women left standing and in doing so achieved wide publicity and almost iconic status as the only lasting opponents of Thatcher.

The anti-nuclear campaign of the 1980s came from a different direction, that of the environmental movement which had developed from the late 1960s. It was focused on one specific issue — the expansion of nuclear power, an expansion whose ambitions had ballooned to massive proportions following the oil-price rises in the 1970s. Although the long drawn-out public inquiry over the building of a new kind of reactor at Sizewell eventually decided in favour of the developers, the expert arguments of the protestors did convince most outside observers and although the then state-owned generating company, the CEGB, still clung to a notional plan for nuclear development, in practice the proposals were quietly abandoned.

These two, quite different, campaigns spawned the new forms of political organisation and action which have

become dominant over the past twenty years particularly in the form of environmental activism. They are based on consensus decisions, the absence of leaders and direct personal action, together with sound research into the facts of the particular campaign. Essentially they are inheritors of the anarchist tradition so long overshadowed by the socialist left. These movements can be maddening in their search for consensus and their allergy to structure, but their capacity for mobilisation is proven, even if the results sometimes seem ephemeral.

Thus in the early 1990s, the British left had been effectively smashed, killed largely by its own internal dissension and its failure to move beyond the failed policies of the 1970s. It had been supplanted by two, distinct programmes; that of a 'modernising' group inside the LP which was intent on developing a form of socially-respectable neo-liberalism inside the husk of the LP and, externally, campaigning groups focused particularly on environmental issues, which had little knowledge of, or time for, the socialist left as it had been constituted.

The left under New Labour

Introduction

The New Labour project led by Blair and Brown has been a massive success in terms of maintaining a parliamentary majority for twelve years — a record for any Labour administration — even if the prospect of extending this by another quinquennial under Brown's premiership has faded. New Labour now seems to be departing from the scene under the cloud of an economic recession, in the eyes of many exacerbated if not brought on by its adoption of the free-market neo-liberal economic policies of its Thacherite predecessor.[vi]

There has been a political price paid for this success. First, there has been a steady erosion of the Labour vote with five million fewer voting for them in 2005 compared with 1997. Second, the electoral turnout plummeted on their watch dropping by over 11%, suggesting a general disillusion with the whole political process. Finally, Scotland and Wales having been given some measure of devolution by Blair, probably unwillingly, have both drifted steadily away from central control leaving previous Labour hegemony[6] over much of the electorate of these countries in tatters. The explosion of public anger over parliamentary expenses essentially rests upon these underlying changes rather than upon the seriousness of the specific wrongdoing uncovered by the *Daily Telegraph*. The (possibly short-lived) flurry of concern about various kinds of constitutional reform suggest that politicians of various hues have woken up to this political crisis.

[6] Northern Ireland, also increasingly detached from the U.K., has never been organised by the LP.

It would be wrong to suggest that these shifts have been provoked by any kind of leftwing protest; the situation is far too complex for that and the left has been far too splintered. Even so, one defining moment in the Blair regime was the massive anti-war march of 2003 followed by Blair's mendacious and contemptuous response. This moment clarified what had become increasingly clear in the previous decade; that the Labour Party under its new leaders was set upon making a long transition from being a party of the British left to one embedded in the English centre with an inclination to the right. This shift is sometimes presented as no more than a necessary re-adjustment of policy given the obvious electoral cliché that obtaining an electoral majority depends upon a majority of the 'centre' vote. This ignores the fact that the meaning of 'centre' in political terms depends upon the dominant political hegemony of the time and is not fixed. The fact is that, in the decade after 1979, a political faction, which was probably a minority in its own party at the beginning and was always in an electoral minority, decisively shifted the central hegemonic principle of British politics. New Labour was a process of accommodation to this shift following the failed attempts by the British left to resist it in the 1980s. The current crisis of political legitimation is the result. The crisis of the left is that it has yet to find an appropriate response.

Then and Now

In superficial respects, the situation of the LP now bears some resemblance to that of the mid-1960s; a party whose leadership is pursuing policies opposed by much of its membership and 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 at the last published account, 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; the final reduction of the annual conference to no more than a media-dominated rally is just the final seal on this. It is the context which is important, specifically three issues; the diminished status 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 British left politics has always been one of the defining features of British socialism separating it from the Continental European tradition in which unions have had a supportive but not decisive role. 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 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 LP 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 normally been the union votes which have kept the party safe for the leadership[7] whilst in the mid-1980s it was union-leaders who restored right-wing authoritarian leadership of the LP and have subsequently backed all the constitutional changes depriving the membership of any role in forming party policy.

[7] The late-1970s when this normality disappeared was, of course, literally the exception which proved, that is tested, the rule.

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 ruling right-wing bureaucracy was possible based upon the grass-roots support of a politicised union movement. In the mid-1960s, this possibility was the dominant and ultimately successful project within most left groups both within the LP and outside it.[8] 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 ageing.[9] 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 had 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 Labour National Executive Committee supply enough reliable votes on their own to provide the five government nominees with a simple majority out of thirty-three members 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

[8] The Communist Party and some of the Trotskyist splinters all effectively backed this programme though with different emphases.

[9] 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.

has effectively disappeared as they have adopted an increasingly administrative role with respect to their members. Essentially, the previous role of the unions as politicising agents amongst the working class has largely disappeared.

The lively political debate at union conferences which fed through to policy debate at the LP conference has now effectively gone. 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 has largely disappeared. 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 LP 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 LP. They are no longer and 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, the loss of moral leadership by the socialist left, 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 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.*"[vii] Eley writes of the European left. In Britain, most of the membership of the LP 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*."[viii]

I am not arguing here that this is a good thing but simply stating a fact about the place which the socialism, which was the core ideal of LP 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 LP, 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[10] by New Labour in general or, for those who still quixotically carry a much-tattered flag for Gordon Brown (ignoring the fact that Brown was the architect of the neo-liberal New Labour project), specifically by 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 is 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. Within Labour, there was a socialist left which could visualise itself as being a government-in-waiting. This system has almost fallen apart.[11] Scotland and Wales had started down paths of a legal national 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 structure and inner vitality 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 now falling to around

[10] Or of social democracy which is the current euphemism for the word which cannot be uttered.

[11] 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%

35% each of the turnout rather than the 45% plus of the previous era. This could lead to a negotiated reform of the electoral system adopting a degree of 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 more 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. This can already be seen in the opportunistic behaviour of both Labour and Conservative and is likely to increase.

These three major shifts in the context of national and party political discourse mean that the 'problem' of the LP 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 political 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 21st century.

The Brown Project

By 2007, such of the socialist left inside the LP that had not been expelled or had left of their own volition was effectively corralled into various discussion groups without any significant political purchase. They could be and were

ignored by the party leadership, the first time in the party's history that this had been possible. The effectiveness of such groups is best judged by the hope displayed by many of the remaining centre-left that Blair's replacement by Brown would result in a leftward shift. As Neal Lawson, chair of the centre-left Compass group wrote in November, 2007:

> *Gordon Brown has spent the last 10 years waiting patiently to take the step on the top rung of the ladder. And what does he find there? No one to frustrate his ambitions, but not the room to manoeuvre he may have anticipated. From Murdoch to the Mail, from the CBI to the IoD, he finds only regressive voices. That is why he needs to build a progressive consensus of ideas and organisation to combat the forces outside Westminster that want to frustrate the ambitions of a more radical centre-left consensus. Such a consensus can only be built by a clear vision that is both popular and principled*[ix]

Similarly, Jon Trickett MP, later to become Brown's PPS, wrote in October, 2007

> *We need to learn to multi task again; simultaneously reconnecting with all parts of the coalition into a new historic block. This is the task which Gordon Brown must address if he is to win. The first hundred days were devoted to emphasising the change of PM and also to establishing am impression of competence and strength. These are necessary attributes of governance but as the polls now show they do not amount to a strategy for reconnecting with Labour's missing millions. The stakes are high but the prize is a great one. Brown has the opportunity to create a coalition, win a fourth term and in the process change Britain into the social democratic country which is waiting to be born.*[x]

The difficulty with both these expressions of hope lay not just with an over-estimate of the degree to which Brown retained any social-democratic pretensions (though clearly such hopes were to be soon dashed) but also the extent to which any obvious coalition or "progressive consensus" existed. As suggested above, the LP had had since its foundation, a progressive left 'penumbra' around it which furnished the trappings it lacked to be a full political party rather than an electoral machine. The collapse of the left in the LP after the mid-1980s had been paralleled by a similar decline in this external penumbra and the growth in a set of progressive forces that had little or no allegiance to socialism and its groups and very little faith in the electoral process.

The collapse of the Labour left together with that of its socialist out-riders meant that the wider British left, led for decades by its socialist component, was left leaderless and without any coherent political strategy. This is the subject of the final section but at this point is useful to consider the political strategy of the Labour leader, Gordon Brown, as he searched for a political base for an extended period in power, an ambition no one doubts he still holds. The current perception is that his premiership is already doomed and this remains the most likely outcome. However, the quirks of the British electoral system, which presently contain a built-in bias to Labour, mean that the election in 2010 may be closer than is sometimes assumed.

He has already one major achievement under his belt; the co-authorship of the transformation of Labour into a party which has held power for twelve years in the course of successfully moving its policy position firmly into support of neo-liberal Thatcherism, a shift comparable with that undertaken by Margaret Thatcher herself in 1979-1983 with respect to the Conservative Party. No one, apart from a few starry-eyed naïfs, can possibly believe that he intends to shift far from this apparently proven policy position. However,

this does not mean that he is without serious political problems of which, as a student of political history, he is bound to be aware. There are essentially three of these.

The first is that the British state is slowly falling apart with the effective separation of Northern Ireland, the slow-motion departure of Scotland and a slower, though still inexorable process in Wales. It remains uncertain just how these three national situations will evolve. None is near completion but in each has acquired a momentum which will now be hard to slow though it may well stop short of full independence. The furore over the release of Megrahi is a concrete example of just how far Scottish sovereignty has evolved. The formation of coalition governments in each where once there was effective single-party domination is one of the milestones along the line, a result of the various kinds of proportional representation which now exist in these quasi-states. This by itself offers a serious, if so-far muffled, challenge to the first-past-the-post system which now so distorts Westminster elections. It also means that the national Labour Parties in each will come under pressure to move away from the united British structure of the past. The problem is compounded for Brown because he is so evidently a Scot with the unanswered 'West Lothian' question hanging firmly over his head.

So far, his response has been to try to provoke some kind of political support around the idea of 'Britishness', one of those weasel words which mean, in practice, something quite different to its surface meaning. In this case, 'British' actually means English, a none-too-well-concealed drive to give Labour the majority in England which it will increasingly need, but so-far lacks, as the Celtic nations drift into their own channels. That he should have adopted direct from the BNP the slogan "British jobs for British workers" is evidence for just how serious this issue of Englishness is seen by the Brown cabal.

The second problem is that the signs of popular disillusion with the British political process shown in the gradual drop in electoral turnout, combined with the steady advance of third-party voting, has become a full-scale crisis of political legitimacy though one partially concealed by a specific row over parliamentary expenses. The very suddenness of the crisis and the fact that it has been sparked by what is superficially a specific and contingent factor, leaking expense accounts to a newspaper, makes it difficult to forecast where it will lead. The fact that all kinds of reforms to the political process have been placed on the agenda, including wide-ranging changes to the electoral system, suggests that politicians in all parties are aware that there is a deep-seated malaise. However, it is also clear that many of the most senior party leaders, including both Brown and Cameron, are very unhappy with moving very far away from the present system.

The third is similar but specific to the political positioning of the two main parties. Brown and Blair drove New Labour to adopt all the clothes of neo-liberal capitalism so that by now Labour's central political position is essentially that of a right-centre nationalist party (though one uncertain as to whether its nationality is British or English). However, this terrain is one already occupied by a previous incumbent who is unwilling to vacate it and who still, loosely 'owns' it. To appreciate this it is only necessary to note how often Labour was said to have out-manoeuvred the Conservatives by occupying 'their' territory and now, how often the reverse is true. Labour is still seen as a party which has taken power, rather like a cuckoo, by stealing another's nest. The result is an political system which has shifted from apparently immutable stability to one systemically unstable as potential voters swing from one centre-right nationalist grouping to the other depending on which manages to push the right buttons at the right moment, whilst others simply turn away from voting on the entirely rational basis that there is no

difference between the only two parties which can achieve power. The extraordinary shift in the opinion polls in October, 2007, apparently because of one small policy claim on inheritance tax, is a vivid reminder of this. Neither to the left nor to the right are there real alternatives to this duopoly ─ at least not in England ─ though lurches in specific cases towards both extremes, the Green Party, Respect, UKIP and the BNP, as well as towards independents like Richard Taylor in Wyre Forest suggest that there is some repressed desire to find such. The Liberal Democrats also waver around the centre, uncertain which way to swing as they seek to offer alternatives to both sides, sometimes taking away their supporters only to find them turning back as the specific issue, such as the Iraq war, fades.

Brown's central problem is that New Labour achieved power in 1997 essentially by offering a new take on Thatcherism; something in which it had some success. However, sharing a house with another tenant means that, ultimately, the other will have their day. Trollope described parliamentary politics in the nineteenth century as being a struggle between the Ins and the Outs in which, inevitably, the labels would come to be reversed; the only issue was the precise timetable. On this inexorable law Brown is now hung. His only way out is to claim legitimacy over the ground now shared by Conservatives and to move them out, something that requires them either to relinquish it or to be erased from it. In this endeavour he has had two key advantages; first, he has power, that is he has the ability to offer real political honour and, second, he leads a party which is, apparently, unsplitable, whilst the Conservatives are more vulnerable to internal dissent. There are two reasons for this. First, the internal structure of the Conservative party, whilst hardly democratic, does now offer more room for disaffected groups to organise into factions than tightly controlled Labour. Second, there are a number of issues, notably Europe but also others on social policy and the environment,

over which such factions are bitterly divided. The fright occasioned by the rather absurd UKIP in the European elections shows up this fragility. This factor may prove yet decisive. The Labour leadership election debacle showed just bereft is the Labour left of any leader who might threaten defection. This was emphasised by the spectacle in the early summer of this year of the parliamentary left united in support of Brown apparently on the basis that the only credible alternatives are from the right of the party.

In his first, tentative, steps as leader, Brown began to lay out his stall. In policy terms, this was to stay rock-solid on the nationalist centre-right whilst, politically, to begin to offer a home to disaffected or possibly just bored members of both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Play tunes on the theme of being the Big-Tent Party and hope that, at suitably opportune moment, he could turn over the National Unity card, split the Tories by filching a large chunk of their M.P.s and, possibly, some of their leadership and humiliate the Liberal Democrats by doing the same thing with them. Until that moment came, continue to appoint such as Digby Jones as junior ministers and assorted Tories and LibDems in the hitherto unknown constitutional role of "government adviser".

This would have been a hard trick to carry off, a manoeuvre which might have come to be called an inverse Ramsay Mac in future political science textbooks, if successful, but which could also fail. However, it is one which Brown was almost forced to seek as it offered a solution to all three of the political problems noted above. A centre party reorganised on such lines would almost certainly retain political legitimacy by securing a large share of the popular vote ─ at least at its first general election ─ and could thus fend off the tricky question of electoral reform. It would obtain such a margin most securely in England and would allow Scotland and Wales and their beleaguered Labour parties to sail off to

whatever destination beckoned, defusing the national question at least until specific and unavoidable demands for further national autonomy were tabled.

The arrival, just on cue, of the economic recession appeared for a fleeting moment, counter-intuitively, to offer hope that this policy might succeed. In a hastily improvised role as World Leader, the fortuitous chance of a G20 summit in London allowed Brown all the necessary trappings of the such a statesman and gave impetus to the somewhat odd notion that, as a main party to creating the crisis, he was the man best suited to solving it.

Since then various chickens have arrived back home, notably the expenses scandal and the increasingly desperate rear-guard action to avoid the increasingly obvious fact that the huge sums of money poured into the banking system, whilst they may have staved off immediate financial armageddon, have resulted in a huge shift of private into public debt which are going to lead to major cuts in public expenditure. Because of the addiction to neo-liberalism, a general increase in taxation, as an alternative to big cuts and resulting higher unemployment (and higher expenditure on benefits), is ruled out.

As a consequence, the original Big Tent strategy has degenerated into just another strand in the debasement of the British political system; the appointment of unelected persons to ministerial rank by a simple process of ennoblement. Parachuting Peter Mandelson into the peerage to renew his role as New Labour fixer has been just the most egregious of these moves. Mandelson, now effectively Deputy Prime Minister, leads a bloated ministry which has six lords and ladies out of eleven ministerial posts. David Miliband heads a team of seven at the Foreign Office of

whom only three have been elected.[12] Thus what was originally a reform to the inheritance of legislative power by the aristocracy has now become a convenient arm of executive power. Meanwhile, various 'non-political' appointed peers as Lords Malloch-Brown and Darzai have been fleeing the tent though, of course, maintaining their role as unelected legislators.

Brown's electoral strategy is now in tatters and his government lags badly in all opinion polls. The general view that Labour is now heading for a bad defeat in 2010 may be misplaced. Labour has a significant inbuilt advantage in Britain's FPTP voting system and, although there is pressure mounting for a reform to this, it will not occur before the next election. However, whatever the likely result, this election provides a major headache for the British left faced, as it is, with no clear alternative to voting Labour to keep the Tories out, a mantra of defeat which has been the mainstay of the left for many elections in the past. Yet in the midst of a major political crisis it is necessary to find some alternative if the most important opportunity for altering the basis of political power in Britain is not to be lost.

[12] Glenys Kinnock was first posted on to the FCO website as a minister when neither an MP nor a peer, almost a constitutional first, though she later was elevated to the Lords. For the pub-quiz aficionado, the first example of this premature elevation appears to have been Patrick Gordon-Walker who was appointed as Foreign Secretary in 1966 even though he had lost his seat in Smethwick. However, when he then went on to lose a subsequent bye-election in Leyton, he was forced to resign. No such constitutional niceties now that the convenient option of the life peerage has been invented.

Part II: Searching for the Left

The long-drawn out historical process outlined in the previous sections contains some important conclusions for the British left. Essentially these come down to the fact that for at least seventy years — certainly since the British Communist Party gave up any pretence to achieving power — its political action has been focused on the Labour Party. However, the structure of the LP as a federal body, with only a limited role for individual membership, a separate Parliamentary Labour Party and an almost total focus on electoral activity, has meant that this action was largely indirect. Examples of this are the nuclear disarmament campaign in the late-50s and early-60s and the debate around incomes policy in the 70s. In both cases, large-scale action was centred around shifting votes inside constituency Labour parties and union branches which fed through into votes at union conferences and thence into debates at the LP conference which might then feed into government policy. The annual debate at the LP conference became the focus of left activity not just by LP members but by the entire left.

This process climaxed in the second half of the 1970s with the one full-scale attempt by the left to shift the structure of the LP to one dominated not by the Parliamentary party but by the membership. Although initially successful, it ultimately failed for three reasons. First, part of the right-wing of the party defected into an alliance with the Liberal Party. Second, left domination produced a policy which failed to move beyond the 'workerism' of the 1970s. Third (and this is a factor usually ignored by much of the left) it failed to address the crucial question of the role played by the unions inside the LP, one which normally gave unquestioned support to bureaucratic and conservative forces inside the party. The left swing of the 1970s remains a one-off aberration with normal service quickly resuming after 1984.

Things fell apart quite quickly after about 1985 and the left flowed into channels sufficiently numerous to be regarded as a political delta rather than any countable number of streams.

The most obvious path was to become part of the left diaspora, the large number of people who saw themselves as being on the left, perhaps even political in a general sense, but who abandoned any specific political affiliation. Given initial impetus by the fractious implosion of the Communist Party and expulsions from the Labour Party, this flood has with ups and downs continued to the present largely as the Labour left has slowly abandoned their party. Highlights in this procession would include giving up Clause 4, the election of Labour in 1997 ─ which saw a significant number rejoining the LP ─ the Iraq war and all the subsequent cover-ups which for many marked the final moral decay of New Labour.

Many of those who left formal political affiliation contributed to an important shift in institutional politics, what can be called the NGOing of the left. As what I termed the political penumbra of the LP fell apart, its campaigning role shifted more and more into the NGOs which began to play an increasingly important role from the 1980s onward. These included large charities such as Oxfam, Shelter and War on Want as well as environmental NGOs such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. Less prominent but more numerous were a mass of single issue groups, some with specifically charitable aims, others with a more diffuse focus and some with specifically local or community bases. Mostly staffed by people on the left, they took increasingly political stances so that in the early 1990s, a group of them even suggested forming some kind of united front to oppose Thatcherism. This idea was soon knocked on the head but their public stance continued. The culmination could be seen in the G20 marches organised by Put People First, sponsored by around a hundred and fifty of such NGOs and a handful

of more traditional agents such as trade unions and a complete absence of specifically political bodies such as LP constituency parties or socialist groups.[13]

These NGOs have highly developed processes of policy formation and are astute in their lobbying. However, the political problem is clear. Apart from sometimes being heavily circumscribed by their charity status, their job, apart from direct charitable work, is that of lobbying whatever political formation happens to make up the government of the time. Acting to change governments rather than changing government policy is outside both their remit and their competence. As a consequence, a feature of the left is that it can now show an impressive list of policy alternatives to the neo-liberal agenda which has characterised New Labour but little in the way of political options to implement such policies apart from posting them to No. 10.

The second move has been into other political groups and parties. Some of these are explicitly on the left such as Plaid Cymru, which describes itself as supporting "*decentralised socialism*", but mostly they contain more or less important left currents such as the Green Party and the Scottish Nationalist Party. There has also been a rather surprising proliferation of successors to the Communist and Trotskyist groups of the 1970s. There seem to be at least ten parties with the words 'Communist' or 'Socialist' in their names and several other groups claiming some form of socialist allegiance.

Finally, there remain those stubborn left-wing members of the Labour Party who hang on, sometimes rather precariously, to the old allegiance. It difficult to discern just how many these number but recent voting patterns offer a clue. Some 53% of the individual membership of the LP took part in the Deputy-Leader election in 2007, that is around

[13] A full sponsorship list can be seen at http://www.putpeoplefirst.org.uk/

95,000. Of these, 23,000 voted for John Cruddas, the centre-left's standard bearer, in the voting round before his elimination. Ann Black, supported by the leftwing Labour Representation Committee, obtained 20,203 votes when she was elected to the 2008 National Executive. So, perhaps, around 20,000 people whose politics are left of centre still remain in the LP.

Meanwhile, alongside this left, most of whom would probably label themselves as 'socialists' or at least 'social-democrats', there has developed what I have heard called the 'horizontal left'; those political activists who have given up on the 'vertical left', that is a left organised in any kind of hierarchy and focused on electoral activity, and have formed loose-knit campaigning groups focused on environmental or anti-globalisation issues. Ideologically, the dominant strand in these groups is a form of anarchism rather than socialism, an anarchism which has been stimulated by internet access and ideas about common intellectual property and living outside consumer society. Very smart tactically, knowledgeable, brave and committed, these groups are in a sense the lineal descendants of both the Greenham Women and the anti-nuclear movement of the 1980s. The common feature of what are rather disparate groups is a rejection of modes of organisation which the socialist left has long taken to be required; leaders, hierarchy, decisions taken from on high to low. Instead they have adopted a decision-making process based on consensus and equality. It is true that this intent is often distorted and that personal leadership can be exercised in ways which manipulate the process. But it is also true that these democratic processes emerged as a reaction to the centralised and disciplinarian democracy which many saw as characterising the socialist left.

The gap between these activists and the socialist left is great. The party which might be expected to find most sympathy with them, the Greens, is often seen as co-opted and

subservient to electoral processes despite having taken on much of their democratic ethos.

The political problem facing the left is how to bring together these four broad groups into some kind of common action given that the common focus of transforming the LP, which provided a base left unity for many decades, is no longer a feasible option.

Where we need to be

The process of political hollowing-out discussed above combined with the catastrophic, if partially 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 it can be found. It is, in other words, a process of self-discovery. There are many over-lapping answers to the former question of course but the following 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 and ineffective in providing public services;
- that these public services include education, health, public security as well as some other areas which might include some natural utility and transport monopolies and some aspects of housing;
- that environmental concerns, in particular global warming, require urgent and radical policy responses based upon social action rather than individual market-based options;

- that services such as health and education should be free to all without discrimination;
- 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;
- that all citizens are entitled to receive a basic level of financial support from the state if they are without personal resources;
- 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 they could be expanded, particularly internationally, but they encompass what most would think of as forming the broad left.

Clearly, 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 also needs emphasising that much of the left now lives inside political areas which are by no means ‘owned’ by the left. Nationalism, the environment, the peace movement, a whole range of international issues such as resistance to Israeli oppression of Palestinians or the crisis in Darfur as well as dozens of local and regional initiatives have left participation but are not wholly of the left or fully defined by it. The environmental movement is a key example. Although

the left has a prominent role in the Green Party, it is by no means the only grouping there whilst such as Zac Goldsmith have perfectly sustainable environmental credentials whilst being, politically, on the right.

Just how many people could be assembled under these headings is impossible to know; a personal guess would be around a hundred thousand activists with the majority being unaffiliated to any organised left group. In electoral terms, a left platform based upon the above principles might, at the moment, be able to get ten to fifteen per cent of votes cast. But numbers are, for now, 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 individual places of residence and 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 thirty years ago in Rowbotham, Segal and Wainwright imagining how the left might move *Beyond the Fragments*[xi] and Prior and Purdy suggesting that the left should move *Out of the Ghetto*.[xii] 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 LP— one based upon a democratic left turn at the end of the 1970s, one on the New Labour centralised, pragmatic approach — have failed whilst the left outside the LP has fragmented in all directions without any clear purpose. The positive answer has to be that Britain is approaching a general political conjuncture which, as the previous analysis argues, is unstable and likely to give rise to seismic movement as the

great colliding tectonic plates of Labour and Conservative, moving over each other, finally give rise to sudden shifts. In this sense, the Brown project, which I described above as being essentially forced, to try and centre the LP on the nationalist centre-right, may be precisely the political opportunity the left needs. The final, explicit centring of Labour, the moment when the cuckoo tries to change into a blackbird, is the time when a clear left formation could emerge just as a clear right formation may also develop if the Conservatives split up.

The problem with this is that although the broad idea of such a shift may be accepted its timing and scope remain the hands of others, in particular a notoriously secretive and manipulative other. Perhaps the key is that the next general election is likely to be both close and chaotic; chaotic in the sense that it will have a great variety of dynamic strands running through it whose interaction is very hard to forecast. 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. Others will continue to hold to the position that they cannot vote for a government, led by those who took us into an illegal and immoral war, and which still refuses to recognise its culpability. Still others will return to voting Labour on the age-hold grounds of keeping the Tories out or will never have left Labour though retaining grave doubts over the New Labour project. In Scotland and Wales, the formation of nationalist governments, albeit on a coalition or minority basis, means that old voting patterns are being dissolved with many on the left choosing to fight their corner inside the nationalist parties whilst there remains the hovering issue of just how the Scottish situation, in particular, will reverberate in England. These are just the confusions and dilemmas existing on the left. The more Brown pursues his big-tent theme opening up to all and sundry to the right, the more confusion will reign there too.

Within the Conservatives too, there seems to be talk of a similar strategy to Brown, this time of enticing away some current supporters of the Labour administration into a Conservative regime. This process is simplified by the very strategy used by Brown to debase democracy, the use of unelected peers in ministerial posts. These will remain in Parliament whatever the outcome of the next election and will be joined by another cohort of ditched Labour MPs. Without wishing to be too specific about names, it would not be surprising to see a number of Brown appointments popping up in Cameron's ministerial list. Peter Mandelson might find it difficult to abandon all his semi-regal titles. It was after all, Winston Churchill himself who initially gained parliamentary fame by first 'ratting', then 're-ratting', on his party loyalty in his search for ministerial position.

Even the Lib Dems are an integral part of this complexity. Despite the common wisdom that Brown is doomed, the forecasts are that Cameron needs a 10 or 11% lead over Labour to lead a majority government, something that is far from secure. The clever money is still on a complicated hung-parliament in which the Conservatives are the largest party with everything hanging on the precise way in which Cameron handles this. The Lib Dems seem to remain committed to this being the moment in which they enter into a kind of power-brokerage with little or no thought of wider aspiration.

The left has no obvious path through this maze, the difficulty being that although words like 'coalition' and 'unity' are in vogue on the left, it is far from clear that there is any agreement on what they mean. When Jon Trickett wrote about "*reconnecting with all parts of the coalition into a new historic block*" before disappearing into the Brown government, he failed to provide any details as to who exactly he envisaged as the membership of this coalition or indeed what it encompassed. The old New Labour electoral

block? Bits of the LP? Or a wider political coalition? Trickett, then part of the mysterious group of 'Compass MPs', wrote in the Delphic terms which have continued in all Compass, the main organising group of the Labour centre left, pronouncements ever since.[14] Meanwhile, the Labour Representation Committee, the main organising group of the Labour left, systematically refuses even to hint at the existence of left groups outside the LP. This silence appears to be a consequence of an almost paranoid fear of expulsion if they are seen to be collaborating in any way with such groups.

In nearly all left groups, inside and outside the LP, there is also a lack of any clear political strategy apart from the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales whose political target is clear; to blow away the Labour Party in their countries. The Green Party still clings to a kind of slow-motion electoralism gradually building up a council base whilst having hopes of snatching a couple of parliamentary seats. On the extreme left, there is talk of some kind of unity which then is blown away on rifts based upon arcane disputes often based on ancient history and, in any case, is based upon a definition of the 'left' which excludes any but residual Marxist-Leninists.

In Britain, there are only two past models for left unity. In the 1930s, popular fronts were assembled throughout Europe essentially based around opposition to some very real fascist threats and resting upon previous splits between socialist parties into Communist and Social democratic fractions, a split which, as we have seen, largely passed Britain by. A more recent phase was the 1970s when most of the left essentially grouped, though in diverse ways, around a project

[14] One of the problems of adopting this kind of neo-Gramscian language is that it fails to appreciate that much of Gramsci's writing was almost coded because of his incarceration in a fascist jail. Some Labour MPs may feel they operate under similar restrictions but it really isn't so,

base upon an alliance between Labour members and left unions to achieve a transformation of the LP, a project which was momentarily successful but which fell apart over internal dissension and a recovery of Labour's union base by the right. This kind of political path is now closed. Not only is Labour membership now much depleted and the unions essentially de-politicised, whilst retaining a crucial but basically bureaucratic role inside the party, but centralised control over the party machine is now effectively complete and beyond any democratic mobilisation.

The complexity of the problem is that unity needs to progress in two dimensions; bringing together both a semi-organised 'vertical left' and providing at least a bridge between this left and the 'horizontal left' with its disdain for electoral politics and its dislike of hierarchical organisation.

The latter is something which centres upon a complaint commonly heard that the organised left systematically refrains from giving action to resist climate change the priority which it deserves, a complaint which has a solid base. A search through the websites of the Labour Representation Committee and Compass reveals an almost complete absence of concern about climate change and whilst there is an occasional comment on the Socialist Unity website this is invariably derived from eco-socialists inside the Green Party.

There would seem to be two reasons for this lack of interest. One is a generalised sentiment, almost wholly without foundation, that the 'working class' is not concerned about the issue and that it is something of a liberal Guardian-reading matter. The second is that when it comes to specific campaigns, the unions have decidedly ambiguous attitudes. The most obvious of these are plans to expand airports and to build new power-stations whether nuclear or coal-fired. The problem is that in these and other matters, sectional interests in unions often rally to claims about jobs, ignoring wider

principles about the environment. The prominent support of Unite and the TUC for Heathrow expansion is a key and symptomatic example of this tendency.

It is hard to criticise the unions involved, seen just as defenders of sectional interests, but until the organised left is able to reject such sectional positions it will fail to provide the basis for arguing that environmental activists should see it as a political partner. In a sense this is one of the points where the complex historical intertwining of the unions with organised left politics starts to hit the buffers.

The second problem is how to bring together the disparate fragments of the organised 'vertical' left. Specifically, it is faced with the crucial issue of how to act in the forthcoming general election.

In Scotland and Wales[15], there is a fairly straightforward answer. The explicitly socialist position of Plaid Cymru and the important social-democratic component of the SNP suggests that the left should unite behind these parties. The obliteration of the Scottish and Welsh Labour parties, probably the most corrupt and conservative of any of the regional components of the national party, is both a desirable and an attainable goal whilst the collapse of the Union settlement could provide a boost to breaking the hold of the right in the English Labour party. In both countries, the Green Party, which has a foothold in their national assemblies, could reasonably abstain from standing in UK elections on the grounds that such a position enhances the possibility of the electoral reform in UK elections which it needs to obtain a parliamentary presence.

In England, the possibilities are much less clear-cut. In a handful of seats there is a reasonable chance of minority left candidates winning. The Green Party has hopes of one seat

[15] The author confesses to an almost total lack of knowledge about Northern Ireland's politics.

in both Brighton and in Norwich being within their grasp whilst one or two independent left candidates could offer significant challenges elsewhere. But overall, the election will inevitably come down for some to justifying the old 'hold your nose and vote Labour'[16] position. But clearly this tactic no longer has any real political purchase. In 2005, when Ms. Toynbee claimed it, her clinching argument was "*Vote Blair get Brown before long.*"[xiii] Well, she was right but perhaps without the hoped-for consequences. We have Brown and he is unquestionably the end-of-the-line for such arguments. One simply has to write 'Vote Brown get Cruddas before long' to realise this.

On the other hand, suggesting that the left in its current state should encourage voting for a string of hopeless and sometimes simply eccentric candidates on the grounds that they are true socialists runs straight into the buffers of the FPTP electoral system in which most ordinary voters decline, reasonably enough, to waste their votes.

There is one spark of hope, however, in the fact that there is sufficient recognition that the FPTP system is hopelessly corrupt to provide the basis for an examination of individual candidates and their political positions in the run-up to the election. The Vote for a Change campaign[xiv] is agitating for a referendum on polling day about electoral reform, a demand which will probably fail but which could lead to pressure on individual candidates to declare their position on this single issue. An extension of this would be to quiz candidates on their position with regard to a set of issues which can be seen as markers for the left, something like those set out above. This would, at least, enable voters to sort out candidates of whatever party into those able to claim to be on the left as

[16] I believe that this slogan was invented by the International Socialists in 1970 before being resurrected by Polly Toynbee without acknowledgement in 2005.

opposed to having the wider political affiliation of a party label.

It would be too much to hope that organised and systematic tactical voting based upon simple criteria for being 'on the left' could have any major impact in the likely circumstances of the next election. Certainly there is no possibility that the disparate elements which make up the left can be reconciled into any common voting at a national level at least at the next election. 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.

Inside the PLP, there are signs that some Labour MPs are starting to work on the reformation of the left after an expected Labour defeat. These include the unlikely double-act of Jon Cruddas and James Purnell, one having the Compass think-tank as his PR machine, the latter working out of a rather weird project in the Demos think-tank[17] which seeks to answer the question: What does it mean to be on the Left today? Both write freely about the 'left', without making much effort to define what they mean by this carpetbag word, and appear to be setting themselves up as Labour's pathfinders for its post-2010 world. One can expect much in the way of a 'narrative' involving 'paths to equality and individual empowerment' as well as ways to 'reclaim Labour's lost constituency' before the year is out. The problem with both Cruddas and Purnell is that they appear to see the left as an inchoate mass just waiting to be mobilised for Labour if only the right policy buttons can be pressed. They lack any apparent sense of the current structure of the left; political life is frozen for them perpetually in 1997 when, as Blair children, (both have been Blair aides), they

[17] www.openleft.co.uk

saw what seemed to be a united coalition of the left supporting Labour. Both seem to regard the early Blair as their exemplar, promising a new world without being too specific about the details and gathering around them a joyous mass of the left.

Meanwhile, on the lonely extremities of the Labour Party, there seem to be the first stirrings of revolt. John McDonnell, perpetual leadership contender if he could only raise enough MP votes to be nominated, suggests standing as "*Labour MPs making it clear at the next election that they stand on a policy platform of real change as 'change candidates*'"[18]. It remains uncertain as to just what this means. If mouthing off about the deficiencies of the leadership, then there's little new. If he means standing with a published manifesto different to that prepared by the central machine then it would mean deselection and expulsion. This encapsulates the central contradiction of the Labour Representation Committee which McDonnell leads and of its largely Labour membership. As the statement goes on: "*These would be Labour candidates binding together as a slate, committed within Labour, setting out the policy programme they will be advocating as a group and supporting in Parliament if elected. Only in this way can we demonstrate to the supporters that want to come home to Labour that there is the hope and prospect of change.*" In other words, setting up as an electoral faction, with a programme differing from the official line, not just of sitting MPs but also other prospective candidates to persuade supporters (of what exactly?) to "come home to Labour" knowing that such a move would result in instant expulsion from this same party and, presumably, setting up some kind of alternative political group in opposition to it. This is the nettle which the LRC has to grasp at some point and which could lead to an

[18] http://l-r-c.org.uk/press/labour-left-threatens-candidates-for-change-slate-if-policies-dont-change

organised group of left-Labour ex-members looking for some unity with other left groups.

These are all signs that some Labour MPs are already assuming that Labour will plunge to defeat in 2010 and that some plan needs to found to save the Labour Party in the ensuing bout of recrimination and reformation. One must expect more of this. Unless consumed by a much greater fire than seems likely, the old hulk will still sail on though without much rigging and with a mutinous crew. It will still a have formidable electoral machine, union finance and can rely, to a degree, on its old saviour ─ solidarity. The wider left will have to consider its options carefully in developing some kind of joint action on an agreed programme of reform and general policy principles such as listed above to enable the left to emerge as a significant force in national politics.

This is the perfect political storm combining economic recession with a crisis of legitimacy of the entire political system and, specifically, of the political vehicle which has for over a hundred years carried the aspirations of the British left. If nothing but business as usual emerges from this storm then the left will miss an historic chance to form a genuine left formation in British politics.

References

[i] M. Prior and D. Purdy, **Out of the Ghetto**, Spokesman, Nottingham, 1979 ISBN 085124 245 6 also at www.hegemonics.co.uk/docs/OutOfTheGhetto
[ii] Ross McKibbin, **The Evolution of the Labour Party**, OUP, 1974 p.1
[iii] *ibid*, p.247
[iv] Some of these may be seen at hegemonics.co.uk
[v] Dianne Hayter, **Fightback!,** Manchester University Press, 2005
[vi] Mike Prior, **Beyond Feelbad Britain**, 2009, ISBN 978-1-4092-5763-1 This can also be downloaded at www.hegemonics.co.uk
[vii] G. Eley, forthcoming
[viii] *ibid*
[ix] www.compassonline.org/ news/item.asp?n=1003
[x] http://www.compassonline.org.uk/news/item.asp?n=940
[xi] S.Rowbotham, L.Segal and H.Wainwright, **Beyond the Fragments: Feminism and the Making of Socialism**, London, Merlin, 1979
[xii] M. Prior and D. Purdy, *ibid*
[xiii] P. Toynbee, Guardian Election Blog, 13 April 2005.
[xiv] http://www.voteforachange.co.uk