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Richard W. Lyman

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The British Labour Party: The Conflict Between Socialist Ideals and Practical Politics between the Wars

The purpose of this paper is to set forth, somewhat arbitrarily, a composite view of the British Labour Party's history between the Wars, to be labelled the orthodox Labour interpretation, and then to set against it a contrasting view which has been expressed by several left-wing writers within the Labour Party. This examination of conflicting opinions can scarcely be dignified with the title historiographical inquiry. In the first place, there are other more or less coherent interpretations of Labour Party history in this period besides the two sketched herein, most notably a Communist view, expressed in such works as Allen Hutt's *The Post-War History of the British Working Class.*[1] Secondly, as Stephen Graubard has recently said in relation to the Fabian Society, much of the Labour Party history in this period is in fact autobiography.[2] Finally, as will soon become distressingly apparent, the interpretations that most writers have given of Labour between the Wars have been influenced by, connected with, even in some cases identical to the same authors' views on Labour today. History used to be called "past politics"; in this case it cannot entirely escape becoming "present politics."

I

According to the orthodox view, the Labour Party was emerging from its infancy in the 1920s, having established its claim to be considered a major contestant for power as recently as 1918. As Francis Williams puts it:

> With the acceptance of the new constitution and the endorsement of the international policy contained in the Memorandum on War Aims and the domestic programme contained in *Labour and the New Social Order,* the Labour Party finally established itself. The formative years were ended. Now at last it was an adult party certain of its own purpose; aware also at last of what it must do to impress that purpose upon the nation.[3]

1. Allen Hutt, *The Post-War History of the British Working Class* (London, 1937).
2. Stephen Graubard, review of A. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics,* in *A.H.R.,* LXIX (1963), 116-17.
3. Francis Williams, *Fifty Years March* (London, 1949), p. 284.

This "adult party" went on to make electoral progress, particularly in 1922, '23, and '29, which, though incomplete, far exceeded any prewar accomplishments. It even held office twice as His Majesty's Government. Granted, the interwar Labour Governments were something less than triumphs. But in each case, it is argued, Labour was hampered by inexperience, by lack of a clear majority in the House of Commons, by the increasing weariness and conservatism of some of its leading figures, and (especially in 1930-31) by a world economic crisis beyond the control of *any* British Government. At that, both minority Governments enjoyed significant successes, such as Ramsay MacDonald's conduct of foreign affairs and John Wheatley's Housing Act during the first Labour Government, and Arthur Henderson's foreign policy during the second. Williams even dares to praise the second Labour Government's efforts to help the jobless: "In normal times," he writes, "these schemes would have represented a notable offensive against unemployment – the greatest indeed ever made by any British Government."[4]

On the other hand, according to the orthodox view, Labour learned from its failures. After the General Strike of 1926 there were no more general strikes (indeed very few strikes of any kind); after the two minority Labour Governments there were no more minority Labour Governments (not as yet, anyhow). More than that, following the traumatic defeat and "betrayal" of 1931, Labour set about defining its program and reinforcing its socialist determination, so as to be ready to take over at last when the British electorate should have come to its senses and overthrown the "National" Coalition – which ought to have happened in or about 1940, but understandably got delayed until 1945. Labour then swept to power, backed by the superb political machine which Herbert Morrison had built while the Tories were not looking, and the ensuing Labour Government proceeded to put into effect the program prepared in the wilderness. Even the normally modest Clement Attlee, recalling his book, *The Labour Party in Perspective,* says, "In considering the future, I set out the programme which I thought a Labour Government in power should carry out. In 1945 I had the pleasure of seeing that programme implement-

4. Williams, *Fifty Years March,* p. 336. Cf. Élie Halévy, *L'ère des tyrannies* (Paris, 1938), p. 204: "Bizarre ironie! Le parti qui était censé détenir la clef du problème [of unemployment] se trouvait incapable de la résoudre. Je sais, naturellement, quelle était leur excuse: ils ne pouvaient rien faire parce qu'ils n'avaient pas la majorité absolue. Mais n'étaient-ils pas, au fond de leur coeur, ravis de ne pas l'avoir, parce que les responsibilités du pouvoir les épouvantaient?"

ed."[5] There was no more of the unseemly fumbling of the inter-war Governments, no more feeble imitation of the senior parties, no more doubt as to what the right socialist reading of Britain's economic tea leaves should be. The only reason why this did not lead to " 'the complete political extinction of the Tory Party, and twenty-five years of Labour Government,' " as Aneurin Bevan demanded,[6] was the bad luck of happening to inherit the postwar era of austerity. The electorate, mistaking wartime privation for socialist planning, reacted against both and sent Labour back to the wilderness, where the Party languished until 1964.

II

The left-wing view is somewhat different. It has been ably expressed in such recent books as Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism* and Michael Foot's biography of Aneurin Bevan. The failures of the 1920s are, of course, more frankly faced and labelled in this version; indeed, they are if anything exaggerated. But more important, the causes of these failures are seen, not as the result of inexperience or a few personal shortcomings, and still less of outside forces beyond British control.[7] Failure came, according to the Left, as the inevitable result of a more fundamental flaw in the British Labour movement, the error of Gradualism; or, if one gives it a slightly different emphasis, of Labourism;[8] or, if one wishes to become really unpleasant about it, MacDonaldism. Miliband even has a chapter entitled, "MacDonaldism Without MacDonald," thereby showing in one phrase what he thinks of Messrs. Attlee, Morrison, Ernest Bevin, *et al.* in the 1930s.

Gradualism was wrong, it is argued, because it assumed that the development of socialism could take place within the context of the ordinary political struggle of the Ins and the Outs, the traditional party parliamentary game. Gradualists imagined that socialism could be achieved by instalments, each instalment being accepted with no more serious obstruction on the part of the Conservatives than Labour oppositions generally gave to Tory governments. Each instalment would then remain, unharmed by inter-

5. Clement Attlee, *As It Happened* (London, 1954), p. 87.
6. Quoted in Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan*, I (London, 1962), 505.
7. The Labour Left, like the Tory Right, has generally tended to minimize the importance of such forces, from the days when it pictured Lloyd George as losing the peace in 1919 almost singlehandedly to those when it imagined that Mao Tse-tung and Gen. DeGaulle would tamely follow a British example in nuclear disarmament, were Britain to set one.
8. A word given currency by the title of T. A. Rothstein's *From Chartism to Labourism* (London, 1929), and revived by the New Left more recently.

ludes of Tory rule, and ready to serve as the foundation on which the next Labour government would resume construction of the socialist commonwealth. The Gradualists failed to recognize that socialism is not just an extension of state activity for the sake of providing more social services and an increased role for the government in economic life; it is not, as one bitter phrase put it, "merely capitalism plus the National Health Service." It is not just that the players must be different; the very rules of the economic, political, and social game must undergo sweeping alterations. Socialism by instalments, then, merely serves to warn the capitalist enemy, to give him time in which to prepare his defenses — and worse yet, his counterattack.[9] The Left argues that failure to see this, on the part of Labour Party leaders, weakened them at critical moments. It made them too quick to accept half a loaf, too confident that the other half could be acquired at the next turn of the political wheel.

But that is not all. Gradualism is also accused of having weakened Labour's appeal to the public, by removing its distinctiveness. Thus in 1935, especially, it became easy for the wily Stanley Baldwin to steal Labour's clothing and so win the general election. Since both parties proclaimed their faith in the League of Nations, and Labour's socialist message was allegedly blurred by love of compromise and parliamentary good manners, the electorate was left with no very compelling reason to evict the Government. To borrow an expression from mid-twentieth-century American politics, the Left charges the official leadership in the interwar years with "me-tooism" vis-à-vis the Conservatives. Finally and ironically, assert the critics, all this compromising did not save the Gradualists from the effects of Tory misrepresentation and manipulation of the electorate's fears and prejudices in 1924, 1931, and 1935.

III

It is time to look critically at these two interpretations, and first at some flaws in the orthodox view. For one thing, the failures in the 1920s not only owed a great deal to the failure to define the Party's economic program and policies — this the orthodox, safely post-Keynesian, will admit freely enough. But difficulties also stemmed from an excessive concern to appear respectable, so

9. See Arnold Rogow, *The Labour Government and British Industry, 1945-1951* (Oxford, 1955), esp. chs. vii-viii, for an effective analysis of the Conservative and business community response to the socialist threat in the later stages of the third Labour Government.

that the electorate would understand that Labour was indeed "fit to govern." The wound that Winston Churchill administered to Labour by suggesting in the early 1920s that they were *not* thus fit was indeed a lasting one. As late as 1936, when Hugh Dalton was lamenting in his diary the vacillations of the Party over rearmament, it was in those words that he recorded his exasperation: " 'Plenty of "consultation." Awfully wearisome. We *are* unfit to govern.' "[10] It was not only Ramsay MacDonald, with his love of Court Dress and his dislike of "The Red Flag," who was guilty of paying too much heed to such considerations. One sees the lengths to which the Labour trimmers would go demonstrated in the struggle that it took to get nationalization of the coal mines – the oldest of socialist proposals in Britain – included in the immediate program which the Parliamentary Party Executive drafted in February 1929 in expectation of a Labour government.[11] It can be argued that concern to appear respectable played some part in the biggest failure of all, concerning unemployment. True, most Labour people clung to fiscal orthodoxy mainly from an honest reluctance to challenge the supposed experts in an esoteric field. But there was also a failure to recognize that one could not very well hope to supplant capitalism while taking all one's financial advice from the banking and brokerage community. Perhaps a little of the inverse snobbery so beloved of the Left might have proven useful as a corrective to a surfeit of deference to Montagu Norman and his friends.

The orthodox interpretation also errs in taking too cheerful a view of Labour's recovery from the 1931 disaster.[12] It is claimed that the Party quickly set about providing itself with the program and the socialist determination that made possible the successful legislation of 1945-50.[13] This view greatly exaggerates the contin-

10. Hugh Dalton, *The Fateful Years* (London, 1957), p. 88.
11. Hugh Dalton, *Call Back Yesterday* (London, 1953), pp. 182-83.
12. Clement Attlee, in *The Labour Party in Perspective* (London, 1937), p. 59, goes about as far as one can go: "While the immediate shock was severe, the general effect on the Party was salutary. It led to a re-examination of its fundamental position. It caused a reaffirmation of its aims and objects."
13. See, e.g., G. D. H. Cole, *A History of the Labour Party from 1914* (London, 1948), pp. 278-79. "The Party Executive had made up its mind that such vagueness [as had characterized previous programs] would not do, and that the coming years of opposition must be devoted to working out a clear and concise policy which the Party would be pledged and able to translate into legislation when its chance came. This was unquestionably wise; and in fact the Policy Reports which were put forward at every Conference from 1932 onwards did serve as the foundation for the third Labour Government's legislative and administrative programme in 1945: so that the main difficulties over policy then arose in fields which had been surveyed inadequately, or not at all, or where the situation had changed so greatly as to make the programmes devised before 1939 no longer workable in the post-war

uity between proposals developed during the 1930s and those actually carried out in the later 1940s. Probably most people would agree that one of the most important achievements of the 1945 Government was the establishment of the National Health Service. Yet where in the documents laboriously ground out of the Party Conferences of the 1930s does this great scheme appear? The 1934 program, *For Socialism and Peace,* promises a State Health Service, and refers the reader to a National Executive Subcommittee Report bearing that title, and published as Appendix VI to the 1934 Annual Report. Following this lead, one encounters a document less than three pages long, making no pretensions to finality, setting forth only the most general outlines of a scheme, and warning not only that the service must needs be developed "by stages," but also that even the first stage could not be achieved immediately by a Labour Government. A more detailed report was promised for the next year's Conference. Dr. Somerville Hastings remarked, "The scheme is only in embryo [appropriate metaphor for an M.D.], and I do want to urge the Executive to carry on with what is admittedly a very difficult task."[14] Apparently the difficulty proved too great, or other matters too pressing; no further report was presented before the War.[15]

A similar tale could be told of most other aspects of the 1945 Government's work. As Arnold Rogow puts it: "In 1945 the policies and programme of the Labour Government were, to a large extent, inherited from the war time, Conservative-dominated Coalition Government."[16] This was especially true of the planning machinery. As for nationalization, everyone is familiar with Emanuel Shinwell's bland admission: " 'We are about to take over the mining industry. It is not so easy as it looks. I have been talking about nationalisation for forty years but the implications of the

world" (p. 279). The concluding words do provide an escape hatch, but the emphasis is clearly on the relevance of the planning of the 1930s to the post-1945 policies; discrepancies between the two are made to seem the exception rather than the rule.

14. Labour Party, *Report of the Annual Conference,* 1934, pp. 214-15. A pressure group within the Labour movement, the Socialist Medical Association, had prepared a more detailed scheme, published in 1933 as *A Socialized Medical Service.* But this differed significantly from the N.H.S. as finally enacted; see the summary of the S.M.A. proposals in Harry Eckstein, *The English Health Service* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), pp. 107-08.

15. See *A National Service for Health* (London, Labour Party, 1942-43). J. and S. Jewkes, *The Genesis of the National Health Service* (London, 1961), p. 3, point out that it was "not until the publication of the Government's White Paper on Health Services in 1944 that the vital switch of policy was made from the idea of the public provision of a *minimum* service to the provision of the *best possible* Health Service for all." Italics in original.

16. Rogow, *Labour Government and British Industry,* p. 2.

transfer of property have never occurred to me.' "[17] If one prefers to bypass Shinwell, with his record of fairly consistent eccentricity, there is the sober acknowledgement of Robert Brady that "with the partial exceptions of transport and steel, all of the nationalization, or seminationalization programs [of the 1945 Government] were based squarely on findings, and in large part on recommendations, which had been made by Conservative-dominated fact-finding and special investigating committees."[18]

The orthodox view tends also to paint a misleading picture of a steady and inexorable march towards power, once Labour had recovered from the immediate shock of 1931. According to Shinwell, for example, "The high expectations of the Party after the election of 1935 that within three or four years the Baldwin-Chamberlain combination would have failed in both economic and international affairs, and that another general election would bring victory to the Labour cause, was now to be frustrated by war."[19] Even G. D. H. Cole, not unduly disposed to overestimate the strength or unity of Labour between the Wars, makes the same point by implication: "The [wartime] Electoral Truce was from the first widely disliked by Local [Labour] Parties which saw themselves deprived of the chance of seats they hoped to win. Its effect was inevitably unfavorable to Labour, which had been the attacking party and was still seriously under-represented in the Parliament elected in 1935."[20] The continuing disunity of the Party is largely discounted as the persistent nagging of a tiny minority — the Socialist League and its friends — who are regularly voted down by the solid sense of the trade union delegates. Yet here is the view of R. H. Tawney, generally a cheerful and kindly man, as relayed by Sidney Webb in February 1934:

17. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 155. See also Emanuel Shinwell, *Conflict Without Malice* (London, 1955), pp. 172-73.

18. He proceeds to enumerate these. Robert Brady, *Crisis in Britain* (Berkeley, 1950), p. 41. As a crude measure of the distance between Labour's program in the 1930s and the policies actually carried out in 1945-51, see Attlee's comments on coal in *Labour Party in Perspective,* p. 186: "The internal price of coal need not be affected by the world price. It is a matter for decision as to how much coal we should sell abroad. . . . The Coal Board will get the best prices that it can, whether in competition or, preferably, by international agreement, but, whichever it is, there is no reason why it should affect the wage of the miner." It is significant also that when Charles Mowat, in "The Approach to the Welfare State in Great Britain," *A.H.R.,* LVIII (1952), 55-63, wishes to cover the interwar years, he does not discuss Labour Party programs and reports, but rather such books as those of Eleanor Rathbone, or Sir John Boyd Orr's *Food, Health, and Income* (London, 1937), and then moves on to the crucial contribution of Britain's experience in World War II.

19. Emanuel Shinwell, *The Labour Story* (London, 1963), p. 162.

20. Cole, *History of the Labour Party,* p. 399.

> Tawney said that the most serious thing was the total absence in the Labour party of any *common* mind – everyone insisted on his own particular views, magnifying all the differences. Cole was hopelessly uncooperative, and changeable at that. The younger intellectuals mostly supporting Stafford [Cripps]. The rank and file of Labour Conference impatient with the National Executive, which was itself incompetent and had no leadership. He agreed that we must not trouble about the next election, and look only to seven years hence.[21]

Certainly "the next election" did turn out to be a disappointment. Some recovery from the depths of 1931 was inevitable, but to wind up with only 154 seats "was a poor total," as Dalton said.[22] Nor was there much sign of forward movement in the later 1930s. David Butler, analyzing the by-elections, argues quite convincingly that Labour was, if anything, *losing* ground electorally after 1933.[23] It is at the very least extremely doubtful that Labour was headed for victory, had the expected election of 1940 not been postponed five years by the War.

The orthodox version of Labour's interwar history, then, errs on the side of overoptimism, underrates the disunity and blurred vision of the Party, puts too much emphasis upon extraordinary factors as the explanation for Labour's limited achievement in this period. But is the view from the Left more accurate or helpful?

IV

Underlying the left-wing interpretation there are two unresolved questions, which confronted the Left politicians at the time and have faced historians sympathetic with the Left ever since. First, how can one achieve a mandate for revolutionary change in a profoundly unrevolutionary society? And second, even if such a mandate is forthcoming, how can the cumbersome processes of parliamentary democracy, created to safeguard individual rights and to tame autocratic power, become the effective instruments for carrying out that change?[24] To Michael Foot or Ralph Miliband

21. London Library of Political and Economic Science, University of London, Sidney Webb to Beatrice Webb, Feb. 4, 1934, Webb Papers, II 3 (i), item 94. Quoted by kind permission of the Passfield Trustees.

22. Dalton, *The Fateful Years*, pp. 74-76.

23. D. E. Butler, *The Electoral System in Great Britain, 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1953), p. 184. See R. B. McCallum and A. Readman, *The British General Election of 1945* (London, 1947), pp. 266-67, for a suggestive analysis of the conditions prerequisite to Labour victory, most of which materialized as a result of the War.

24. The latter dilemma is eloquently stated, in another context, by Peter Gay in the preface to his *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism: Eduard Bernstein's Challenge to Marx* (New York, 1952).

or Raymond Williams it is distasteful, even perhaps immoral, for Labour to accept the role of a mere political party. They require a more exalted view than that. For them, Labour exists as a social movement, which aims at a fundamental reordering of society. It must be revolutionary in every sense but that of requiring violence at the barricades. From this it follows, for the Left, that Labour cannot afford to accept the conventional limits upon the activities proper for a British political party. To have done so was to have played the enemy's game. Indeed, the situation was worse than that, for the enemy, meanwhile, felt free to ignore these same conventions whenever it suited him; Labour, it is argued, has always behaved far more tamely in opposition than have the Tories.[25] Repeatedly, the moderate leadership of the Labour Party is castigated by the left-wing historians for excessive devotion to parliamentary methods and established canons of political propriety; indeed, this is the central thesis of Miliband's book.

Yet the critics, too, are committed democrats, and this does limit their freedom in suggesting alternative paths which Labour could have followed. Since Miliband has addressed himself to this question more directly than most — it is to his credit that he thus recognizes its importance — his retrospective advice deserves consideration. He is discussing the shortcomings of Labour's attack on Chamberlain's appeasement policy in the later 1930s:

> There were many things the Labour leaders could have done. They could, to begin with, have embarked on an unremitting campaign of meetings, demonstrations, marches, rallies and petitions, all designed to mobilize a body of public opinion sufficiently strong to force the Government on to different courses, or to force changes in its leadership, or to sweep it out of office. Secondly, they could have used, indeed abused, their parliamentary opportunities to harass the Government, to obstruct its business, to refuse to participate in that sedate parliamentary minuet which was the Government's best guarantee against effective challenge. They could, thirdly, have sought to mobilize their industrial strength and used that strength as a means of pressure upon the Government . . . And they could also have sought to bring about a grand alliance of all those who opposed the Government so as to break the frozen political mould in which Britain was imprisoned.
>
> Of course, all this might have failed. The point is that the attempt was not made. There were parliamentary debates: there were manifestoes, declarations, pamphlets, meetings,

25. Robert Dowse, "The Parliamentary Labour Party in Opposition," *Parliamentary Affairs,* XIII (1960), 520-29.

> and even half-hearted 'campaigns'. There was, in other words, little more than the traditional routine of Labour politics.[26]

In this quotation the essential barrenness of the left-wing case becomes quite clear. Consider its four main suggestions in order. The first closely approximates the Party's actual behavior in the 1930s, as the concluding paragraph of the quotation unintentionally makes clear; the difference is that "an unremitting campaign of meetings, demonstrations, marches, rallies and petitions" sounds very fierce, while "parliamentary debates . . . manifestoes, declarations, pamphlets, meetings, and even half-hearted 'campaigns' . . . little more than the traditional routine of Labour politics," sound feeble and futile. The contrast is more one of adjectives than of substance. No genuine devotee of revolutionary strategy and tactics could find anything very interesting in Miliband's first recommendation.

His second might at first glance appear more promising. But just how was the Labour Party, 154-strong, to have "refused to participate" in Parliament without being hammered by the cloture or dragooned by fresh tightening of the rules of procedure? Would it have been better for the Parliamentary Labour Party to have emulated the Foxite Whigs of an earlier day and simply withdrawn from Westminster? To ask the question is virtually to answer it. The point is clear: either organized parliamentary obstruction becomes a revolutionary act or it stops short of that, and ends in futility. In any case, the British public showed no sign of wanting a breakdown of Parliament added to their sea of troubles in the Nazi era. There is no evidence that they would have supported a party which resorted to such a strategy.

Miliband's third point, that Labour could have called on the trade unions to use their "strength as a means of pressure upon the Government," is no more realistic. Chastened by the humiliations of the General Strike, husbanding their strength through the ordeal of the depression, convinced that progress was more likely to be had by collaboration than by all-out war against employers and the Government, the British trade unions were not available for such adventures as Miliband suggests. This is quite aside from the question whether political strikes are not rather dubious tactics for a democratic party.

Finally, there is Miliband's clinching argument: Labour "could

26. Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (London, 1961), pp. 233-34.

also have sought to bring about a grand alliance of all those who opposed the Government so as to break the frozen political mould in which Britain was imprisoned." This is, in short, the Popular Front, which was certainly not without vocal advocates in the Britain of the 1930s. Whether Labour ought to have been more ready to collaborate with nonsocialist opponents of the Government may still be debated. But what is interesting in the present context is the flagrant contradiction between Miliband's fourth point and his previous three. Labour, he argues, ought to have adopted an all-out, raging, tearing campaign with no holds barred and scant regard for constitutional propriety; it ought to have behaved with the parliamentary manners of a Parnell and the industrial restraint of a militant syndicalist; and then it ought to have turned around and invited the wholehearted collaboration of the Churchillite Tories, the Samuelite Liberals, the nonparty moderates of the Five Years Group, and so on, in a Popular Front. In fact there was no practical hope of breaking "the political mould in which Britain was imprisoned" until the Tory critics of appeasement reached the point of being willing to come out in open opposition to the Chamberlain Government. This the Labour leadership understood, and said, at the time.[27] They understood also that neither Eden nor Churchill would find any appeal in a policy of Parnellism in the Commons and political strikes in the defense industries. Without the Tory dissidents, what is left of the Popular Front? It is hard to take seriously the suggestion that the National Government might somehow have wilted had Labour been willing to add the Communists and the dwindling I.L.P. at one end, and Herbert Samuel's little band at the other.[28]

The problem for the Left, in short, was to find an escape from Gradualism without losing sight of parliamentary democracy. It was never solved by the Labour Left politicians of the interwar years, and it has not been solved by their scholarly adherents since. The nearest that Sir Stafford Cripps, Harold Laski, and the rest ever came to a solution was in the years immediately following the 1931

27. See the National Executive's manifesto issued in May 1937 entitled "The Labour Party and the Popular Front"; relevant passages are quoted in Cole, *History of the Labour Party,* p. 354. It is clear that the attitude of the Labour leadership would have changed had a major Tory breakaway been likely—see Dalton, *The Fateful Years,* ch. xiv.

28. Yet after the War Cole could still say, in discussing not the Popular Front but the narrower United Front of Labour, Communists, and I.L.P.: "Even a strictly limited unity for the purpose of the common struggle against Fascism might have made a vital difference to the course of events." What this difference might have been he does not disclose. Cole, *History of the Labour Party,* p. 291.

debacle. This defeat suggested to them that any future socialist government, even though duly elected with a majority in Parliament, would meet desperate, last-ditch resistance, of an unconstitutional nature, from the defenders of the old regime. To counter this, Labour would have to resort to strong-arm methods of its own, in self-defense. Otherwise the people's will would be frustrated.[29] There is no doubt that to Cripps, at least, this pessimistic answer to the question, "Can Socialism Come by Constitutional Methods?"[30] was painful; it is most unlikely that he saw it as a means of reconciling loyalty to the democratic faith with advocacy of dictatorial powers for a future Labour government. But this was nevertheless the outcome, and it is hardly surprising that Tory propagandists had a field day with Sir Stafford's speculations about the necessity of the next Labour government's resorting to rule by ministerial decrees and perhaps prolonging the life of Parliament so as to ward off capitalist vengeance at the polls. Interestingly enough, Cripps's views did find partial expression in the paragraph on parliamentary government at the end of Labour's 1934 manifesto, "For Socialism and Peace." As several speakers pointed out at the time, however, the Party was careful to hedge its commitments concerning the possible need for special powers.[31]

The whole argument may have now a rather unreal air about it in the light of the calmness with which Britain took the Labour victory of 1945.[32] But it was highly significant of the division of opinion in the Party in the 1930s. To the Left, it was only natural to expect a crisis, not only because Labour had been the victim of considerable crisis-manipulation before, but also because they intended a Labour victory to represent more than an ordinary change of government. It was to be a revolution, bloodless (they hoped), but nevertheless fatal, in the very short run, for the existing order of society in Britain. Why should the titled, the property-owning, and the privileged *not* resort to desperate measures, if Labour meant business, and its business was the eradication of these elements in society?

But to the orthodox majority, it seemed equally self-evident that

29. See Harold Laski, *The Crisis and the Constitution* (London, 1932), and *Democracy in Crisis* (Chapel Hill, 1933).

30. Title of Sir Stafford Cripps's pamphlet, reprinted in Christopher Addison *et al., Problems of a Socialist Government* (London, 1933).

31. See *Report of the Annual Conference,* 1934, pp. 149-50.

32. But see Rogow, *Labour Government and British Industry,* esp. ch. ix, for evidence suggesting that the triumph of Gradualism may have been more apparent than real, and that Laski's fears of the 1930s may have been closer to the mark than his optimism towards the end of his life.

all the speculation about future resistance to a Labour victory was jeopardizing the chances for that victory in the first place. The delegate from the Penryn and Falmouth Divisional Labour Party, a young man named A. L. Rowse, asked the Conference in 1934, "Why should we go about the country giving everybody the impression that the moment there is a Labour majority declared in the country there is going to be a first-class crisis? It is very bad propaganda and tactics."[33] Politicians are normally the last people in the world to borrow trouble. And the orthodox majority in the Labour Party of the 1920s and '30s were in this, as in most other respects, normal politicians.

Is this, then, the nub of the "conflict between socialist ideals and practical politics"? Hardly, for both sides at the time were intensely preoccupied with what they took to be "practical politics," and not least the "practical politics" of winning a following for their respective points of view within the Labour Party. The conflict seems to have concerned issues of strategy and tactics to be used for attaining the socialist millennium, more than the shape of the millennium itself. Perhaps it is significant that, when Labour finally did come to power in 1945, it was that most outspoken member of the left wing, Aneurin Bevan, who carried through the most successful and, American Medical Association views to the contrary notwithstanding, one of the least ideological of the Government's achievements, the National Health Service. It will be interesting to see how Michael Foot, in his second volume, interprets this triumph of political pragmatism.

RICHARD W. LYMAN

33. *Report of the Annual Conference,* 1934, p. 162.