

# Martin Jacques: Embittered British Stalinist pronounces on death of the ‘left’

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Central to the propaganda of *Marxism Today* was the argument that we were now living in a “post-Fordist society,” one in which the decline in heavy industry meant that there could be no such thing as class-based politics.

The September 1988 edition of *Marxism Today*, entitled “Facing up to the Future,” asserted that “Thatcherism” with its “dynamic and in a sense radical” individualism “does not rely on a single class; it has constructed an alliance of diverse social forces.”

“Class in modern capitalism is not the product of a single polarisation between a ruling class, which owns the means of production and a working class of wage labourers....

“The development of post war capitalism has produced a great swathe of wage earners and the self-employed, who control some kind of productive assets—skills, knowledge, organisational power over production. They are both exploited and exploiters.... The importance of these contradictions within the workforce means that class cannot straightforwardly provide the collective interests for modern socialism.”

Instead, politics would now be based on a “sense of gender and ethnicity, as well as regional and religious attachments.” Labour could only come to power if it was successful in appealing to the same social layers as Thatcher and could argue that its policies would be even more successful in ensuring wealth and a plentiful supply of consumer durables.

So enamoured of the work of *Marxism Today* was the Labour Party leadership that Hobsbawm became an adviser to Kinnock and spoke alongside him at the 1983 Labour conference. Kinnock’s top adviser Brian Gould called for “Facing up to the Future” to be adopted by Labour and for the Euros to be welcomed into the party en masse.

In 1988 the CPGB officially split, and in 1991 the Euros around Jacques renamed themselves the Democratic Left.

Throughout what was to be 18 years of Conservative rule, the leading lights of Jacques group deepened their relations with an ever rightward-moving Labour Party. This is epitomised by their close relationship from early in his career with none other than Anthony Charles Lynton Blair.

It is indicative that Blair chose the pages of *Marxism Today* to lay down the first pointers of his New Labour project. As noted by Paul Richards in the *Guardian*, commenting on the collapse of Stalinism, Blair wrote in 1990, “Politics this century have alternated between the ideologies of fairly crude individualism and collectivism and that what is required today is to define a new relationship between citizen and community for the modern world; and that the task for the Labour party and the left of centre is to make itself a credible expression of that relationship.”

In 1993, Jacques, Charles Leadbetter and Geoff Mulgan of *Marxism Today* set up what was to become one of the most influential New Labour think tanks, Demos, and Mulgan himself went on to head for a time Blair’s Number 10 policy unit.

Jacques, however, having played such a key role in supporting Blair’s

ascendancy very quickly began to express disaffection. Only one year after New Labour came to power, he published a special edition of *Marxism Today* in which he criticised Blair for his failure to implement a radical agenda and his over-reliance on merely emulating what he viewed as Thatcher’s far more dynamic legacy.

The magazine had little of substance to say and is remembered, if at all, only for Mulgan dismissing his former friends’ criticisms as the griping and sniping of the “comfortable and secure middle-class Left from Oxbridge with their closed conversations,” while insisting that “in a market economy, where most jobs are created by private sector investment...you can be either pro-jobs or anti-business. But you can’t be both.”

His, too, was the message that Blair was “the only game in town”!

## Jacques and New Labour

Jacques has maintained a position as friendly critic of New Labour ever since. In an interview with *Tribune* in October 1998, he explained, “I’ve tried to give a generous berth to New Labour because I felt an empathy with Blair and got to know him quite well in the early nineties.

“I felt that traditional Labour culture was exhausted, that it needed to be transcended, and I recognised in Blair someone who understood that. I thought he would disorganise the Tories in many ways because they wouldn’t know where exactly he was coming from.”

He complained that the “Blair project...is more rhetoric than substance. I feel a sense of disappointment. New Labour had a great historic opportunity in 1997 to offer a really radical alternative because the Tories had imploded, and Labour had won a landslide victory.

“Instead I think that far from doing something with it, Blair has inherited most of the Thatcherite framework. He wouldn’t put it like that of course but, predominantly, that is what has happened.”

He has become openly more critical because he fears not only that Blair threw away an opportunity—for what, he never says—but because his finely tuned political antennae are responding to the growing dangers of a political movement developing against Blair.

Jacques opposes Blair for supporting the Iraq war and his too-close relationship with the Bush administration, as well as for his indifference to the deepening social and political contradictions within Britain.

In the July 20 edition of the *Guardian*, commenting on his 10th year as party leader, he warned that Blair “risks leading his party into an electoral wilderness.”

“Sooner or later, the electoral tide will turn: perhaps it already has. And New Labour could well face electoral oblivion just as the Tories have. Blair and Thatcher both led their parties away from their traditions and their historical moorings. When Thatcherism became unpopular, the party had nowhere to go and it has paid a huge political price as a consequence. The same fate may well befall the Labour party. Its route back to traditional Labourism is now surely blocked, its membership is withering and its links with the trade unions fraying.

“Sooner or later, the electoral wilderness beckons, perhaps for a very

long time. The price of New Labour—and Blair’s leadership—could be very high indeed.”

Jacques’s warning is issued not by someone concerned with the fate of the working class, but by a man worried that the political fall-out from the collapse of New Labour could threaten British capitalism.

He has become a respected and sought-after adviser to leading representatives of the bourgeoisie. As well as writing for the *Guardian*, *Observer*, *Sunday Times* and *Times*, and the now-defunct *European*, he was for a period the deputy editor of the *Independent*. He also advised the chief executive of BBC News, organising seminars for its senior editors and managers.

In his spare time, he has worked with Shell International, Tesco, BT and Boots. In addition, he has given talks at the Cabinet Office Top Management Seminar, the Office of Public Management, the Civil Service College, the Institute of Personnel Management, and many others.

It is in the interests of such forces that Jacques offers a critique of certain aspects of Blair’s policy while insisting that this must not, and cannot, result in the development of a left-wing or socialist opposition.

Jacques is an old dog who has learnt no new tricks. He surveys the continued break-up and decline in influence of the old social democratic bureaucracy and predicts that reaction will benefit. Far from being an impartial sage, however, he himself acts in the service of reaction by advancing a perspective based on nationalism and ethnicity.

In this Jacques continues a lifelong defence of the nation state, insisting in an October 23 article for the *Guardian*, “Despite globalisation, nation states show no sign of going into decline.”

He asserts, “For a generation or more, it has been an article of faith, at least in Europe, that the nation state is in profound decline. The rise of globalisation, growing economic interdependence, the spread of new international organisations and the power of multinationals, not to mention the European Union itself, suggested that the future lay in new forms of global and regional governance. This was a delusion. The opposite is happening. Nation states will be the decisive players in global affairs over the next few decades.”

Jacques’s sole addition to this unfounded claim is to add that the stronger nations will do better than the weaker nations, which bodes well for the United States and badly for Europe. He foresees any possible challenge to US hegemony emerging not from Europe, but from China and the rest of Asia—as well as from a reemergence of anti-colonial struggle in the oppressed countries such as Iraq.

Jacques serves up a fairly thin gruel and does no more than hint at the political conclusions to be drawn from his analysis. But there is an inherent logic to the positive advocacy of movements based on ethnicity and nationalism that should not be misunderstood as simply support for self-determination for oppressed peoples.

He is insisting that the contest between nation states and the defence of national interests, and not a struggle by the working class for socialism and internationalism, must be the basis of political life for the next hundred years. And, moreover, that capitalism as a world system will in fact be reinvigorated by the rise of China and India. He explains, “The emergence of the US as a unilateral superpower was a rude reminder of where power is really located.... The arrival of China as a superpower, and probably India a little further down the historical road, will only reinforce the underlying importance of the nation state. Nation states, not multilateral institutions, will be the decisive players of the 21st century.”

#### **The international growth of the working class**

The political line developed by the Euros in Britain was only one manifestation of the general political phenomenon of renunciationism. In response to the development of globalisation and the undermining of their ability to secure political support within the working class through policies based on national economic regulation, all the Stalinist and social democratic bureaucracies junked their old reformist policies and became

naked advocates of the market.

For a time, the parties that emerged out of the wreckage of the old labour movement were able to benefit from the confusion created by their own past betrayals and the hostility amongst workers to the Conservative governments of the 1980s and early 1990s to maintain a certain level of support, while attracting a new social base amongst the more prosperous layers.

But their relationship with the working class had nevertheless undergone a fundamental and irreversible shift.

New Labour under Blair is perhaps the most developed expression of the transformation of the old social democratic parties into direct representatives of an international financial oligarchy, dedicated to the enrichment of this layer at the direct expense of the mass of the population. It is not, as Jacques maintains, because Blair is insufficiently radical that the government faces electoral meltdown. It is because no amount of clever packaging by spin-doctors and semi-official advisers of the Jacques type can provide a popular base for a government that acts solely in the interests of the super-rich.

The ideological nostrums proclaimed by the Euros in the 1980s and 1990s have had a very short shelf life. Hence Jacques’s strivings to help lay down the framework for new political mechanisms for the suppression of the working class.

Contrary to his claims, however, there are powerful objective factors pointing towards not a resurgence of the old labour movement, but its renewal on socialist and internationalist foundations.

The working class has not declined numerically. It has grown vastly both in numbers and as a global presence, as this “expert” on Asia knows full well. The types of jobs many workers do may have changed, but the fundamental antagonism between the interests of billions of working people the world over and the narrow elite in whose interest economic and political life is organised has become more pronounced than ever before.

Furthermore, Jacques may dismiss the impact of globalisation on the nation state as a “delusion.” But one cannot so easily wish away the painfully evident crisis of the old nation state system, nor the fact that the division of the world into antagonistic nation states has become both an absolute fetter on the rational development of production and a threat to the very survival of humanity.

The Iraq war is the harbinger of a renewed struggle by the imperialist powers, with the US at the head, to divide the world between them. This has already ignited powerful anti-imperialist and anti-war sentiment all over the world. It is these conditions that provide the objective impulse for the construction of the type of Marxist world party that Jacques has opposed all his life. And the very phenomenon that causes him such consternation and on which he bases his assertion that there is no alternative to Mr. Blair or capitalism as a system—the collapse in support for the old bureaucratic and nationalist “left”—only confirms how conditions are ripe for such a development in the political consciousness of the working class.

*Concluded*



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