

An exchange of letters on the British elections and Labour lefts

1 June 2005

Below is a letter to the WSWs editorial board prompted by the May 14, 2005 article “Britain: Blair lurches to the right, dismissing calls for resignation”, followed by a reply by Chris Marsden, the author.

Whereas it is true that 66 seats is a good working majority, the majority is composed of largely disaffected MPs who are not persuaded by Blair’s apology. Many of the majority represent constituencies who are basically socialist in their makeup and detest Blair the way they detested Thatcher. Blair may not want to go, but his future will be in the hands of decent people who will push him if he does not go next year at the latest.

Regards,

FA

Dear FA:

We disagree strongly with your assertion that opposition to the incoming Labour government of Prime Minister Tony Blair and its right-wing political agenda will come from disaffected or left-leaning Labour MPs or the Constituency Labour parties (CLP) they represent.

This assumes two things:

One, that the political degeneration of the Parliamentary Labour Party, expressed as it is in Blair’s New Labour project, has left the party itself unaffected. And two, that the left MPs constitute a socialist opposition.

In the first instance, it must be stressed that Labour’s right-wing evolution has been accompanied by a drive to insulate the party tops from any check on their actions in the service of the financial oligarchy that sets Labour’s political agenda. The abandonment of Labour’s old reformist programme was accompanied by measures to end the already limited influence of the party membership over party policy. The CLPs and the annual party conference now have no say whatsoever over policy, which is formulated by think tanks answerable either directly to Blair or to his cabinet.

The absence of inner-party democracy is epitomised in the near impossibility of getting a leadership challenge off the ground. On this question the Labour Party is even more rigid than the Conservatives. Calling such a vote requires the support of 20 percent of Labour MPs and then this has to be supported by a majority at the Labour Party conference, in which the trade unions still wield the block vote.

Moreover, it is the programme that builds the party and Labour’s programme has helped build a right-wing political vehicle. Those within it who maintain any commitment to socialist principles—even if of a reformist character—are a declining, ageing and dispirited layer. Years of witch-hunts combined with the repelling power of Labour’s policies have led to a haemorrhaging of working class members from the party. And the new forces that have been attracted to it are largely from a prosperous social layer—many of them careerists cast in the New Labour mould.

This does not mean that there will be no opposition to the Blair government from within the party branches, but its impact will be extremely limited. The essential arena in which opposition must be mobilised, however, lies amongst the millions of workers and young people who have turned away from Labour in disgust and who would never countenance continuing membership of what is essentially a

Thatcherite formation that is Labour only in name.

More fundamental still, the key task is not to rely on a few “decent people” to change the course of the Labour Party but to understand that the degeneration of the party is rooted in developments at the economic base of society that have rendered impotent Labour’s old programme of securing social reforms based on national regulation by the state.

It is the constant refrain of the Labour lefts that if only Blair had not hijacked the party, then all would be well. New Labour would become Old Labour once again, and things would return to the way they were in the immediate post-war period of the welfare state.

As the octogenarian leader of Labour’s left, Tony Benn, told the *Guardian* immediately prior to the election, “I joined the Labour Party on my 16th birthday and I’ve seen Labour swing from left to right many times in my life. The important thing is the recovery of the Labour Party.

“New Labour has nothing to do with the Labour Party. New Labour is a Thatcherite programme, best friends of Bush, Berlusconi and Murdoch. New Labour has reached its sell-by date.

“I don’t see any prospect of improving conditions in Britain without the Labour Party. New Labour was a sort of takeover bid by a group who thought the only way they could win was by adopting Thatcherite policies and that’s what they did.”

It is on this basis of insisting that New Labour is not the “real” Labour Party that the lefts continue their historical role of opposing a political break by the working class from both Labour itself and social reformism. They can no longer make much of a defence of what Labour is, so they rely on a promise of a possible return to a supposedly glorious past. On this basis, in the here-and-now, the lefts have been able to resign themselves to every fresh turn to the right by the party. This has remained the case even in the face of participation in illegal wars, colonial-style occupations, the constant erosion of fundamental democratic rights, the abandonment of social welfare policies and a scale of privatisations that the Tories could only dream about.

During the election campaign, the party’s left functioned as the government’s crudest apologists. Under conditions in which millions were turning away from Labour as a result of the Iraq war and their contempt and distrust of Blair himself, those MPs who opposed the war raised the issue only insofar as they feared losing their own seats. At the same time, most insisted that it should not be an issue on which voters should deny Labour a third term, let alone one over which they themselves should break from the party.

Most backed this up by painting Labour as a socialist party, and Blair as an accidental figure. And they attempted to substantiate these claims by discovering that Labour had somehow implemented progressive policies on education, the National Health Service, welfare and trade union rights.

Benn was actually called on by the party leadership to campaign for Labour amongst voters considering abandoning the party over Iraq.

He admitted to the *Guardian* that his calls to a list of potential switchers had been hard going. “I am president of the antiwar coalition so there is no point saying Iraq has been anything but a disaster. I have been

campaigning for 63 years and I will always support Labour. It is a trade union party and socialist party. It has done good things.”

He continued, “I am voting Labour and hope others do the same.... I disagreed and still disagree with the government over the war in Iraq, but I have never even considered leaving Labour.”

Benn, it should be added, is not above self-deception as well as deceiving others. He said the fact that the party headquarters had called him was a sign Labour was in recovery. “To have them ring me to help them out, well it shows this election means Labour is returning to what it was.”

Robin Cook resigned from Blair’s cabinet over Iraq. Yet he too went out on the stump for Labour during the election campaign. He wrote a number of articles in the *Guardian* urging a Labour vote. In an April 19 piece, he argued that “vulnerable people in Britain must not be made further collateral damage of the Iraq war by being denied a Labour government.”

Cook too focused his attentions on making sure voters opposed to the Iraq war stayed loyal to Labour. He spoke alongside Islington North MP Jeremy Corbyn at a public meeting entitled, “Why Islington residents who opposed the Iraq war should vote Labour.”

Corbyn, who is another prominent left, told of voters asking “why they should vote Labour when it was Tony Blair as a Labour prime minister who took us into an illegal war in Iraq”:

“My reply is that the alternative to a Labour government is not a left one; it is a Tory government, led by Michael Howard, who has never renounced any of his Thatcherite past. To the credit of the Labour government, there are some very important achievements that we should remember:

“A defeat for Labour in this election would be a disaster for the community and for socialist values of Britain.”

He concluded: “The Labour Party is the only socialist party in Europe with direct trade union links.... The organic link between Labour and the trade unions has meant that there are now rights to join a union in Britain.”

Corbyn is a member of Labour Against the War, a group of 20 or so MPs whose main concern was to distance themselves from Blair and Iraq, while championing Labour.

They stated at their March 29 election launch that disgruntled party workers should pound the streets for antiwar MPs, rather than not campaign at all. They drew up a hit list of 10 antiwar MPs who could be beaten and where support was most needed. The group’s chairman, Alan Simpson MP, said: “Activists should actively support those candidates who opposed the war. Indeed, as peace campaigners, there is a moral case that they must canvass for those opponents of the war.”

Simpson advocated “Antiwar Labour candidates ... making explicit where they stood on the war.” Spelling out his practical motivation, he added, “In some cases, it could make the difference between success and defeat.”

Diane Abbot, MP for Hackney North and Stoke Newington, is another prominent member of the group. She not only stated that the issue of Iraq was not important enough to break from the party, but defended Blair from Conservative Party leader Michael Howard. “Attacking Tony Blair in very personal terms, accusing him of being prepared to lie to win, shows that Mr. Howard has run out of things to say on issues that really matter to voters such as schools, hospitals and public transport,” she said.

“It is no secret that I too have had policy differences with the Labour leadership, but the election should not be turned into a referendum on Blair’s trustworthiness. What is at stake in a general election is much wider than that.”

Writing in *Socialist Appeal*, Abbott also applauded what she called the “united front” between Blair and Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown for “signalling cooperation” that was “undoubtedly to be preferred

in a general election campaign.”

The one leading Labourite who resigned from the party was National Executive Committee member Brian Sedgemore. But he chose to do so only after he retired as an MP. Sedgemore joined the Liberal Democrats. He wrote in the *Independent* of April 26: “I’ve been a Labour MP for more than a quarter of a century. In my last speech in parliament, I described New Labour’s descent into Hell and added that Hell was not a place where I wanted to be.

“I am going to leave the Labour Party and join the Liberal Democrats so I can help them in this election campaign. To my former comrades, I say, ‘Sorry but all nightmares have to end.’”

Sedgemore went on to insist, “I am not alone. A small group of us—all MPs who are standing down—decided we would leave the Labour Party immediately after the election.”

We are still waiting. Even amongst retiring MPs, people with nothing to lose career-wise, loyalty to Blair and Labour remains the watchword.

By far the most important thing about Sedgemore’s resignation, which was both too late in the day to count for much and only served to boost the credentials of the Liberal Democrats, was the criticism it met from the party’s left.

Peter Kilfoyle, MP for Liverpool Walton and a critic of the Iraq war and Blair, said: “Brian Sedgemore is trying to cause maximum damage and embarrassment to the prime minister. But this isn’t about the election of Tony Blair—it’s about the election of a Labour government.”

Abbott said: “Although I share some of his political differences with Tony Blair, Labour has a lot to be proud of and now is not the time to be leaving the party.”

Corbyn insisted: “If you are serious about political change, it’s only going to come through the Labour Party.”

Two retiring MPs spoke out against Sedgemore and urged loyalty to the party. Malcolm Savidge, who has called for Blair to step down, said: “I’ve never discussed the subject of joining another party with [Sedgemore]. It’s not something I intend to do—I intend to fight for what I believe within the Labour Party.”

Tam Dalyell, the father of the House of Commons who has since retired as an MP after 43 years, stated, “I personally urge everybody to vote for a Labour government because, whether I’m naive or optimistic or not, I believe the Labour Party and Labour MPs can deal with the situation once the election is over.”

Such was the role of the left during the election campaign. The need for unity and loyalty to the party was held up as more important than questions of principled political differences, even one as important as the illegal war against Iraq and the occupation of the country.

But what about after the election? Would the left deal with Blair now that Labour was safely back in power and there was no question of the return of the Conservatives?

After Labour was returned on a much reduced majority, many commentators made a similar prediction to your own: that the lefts would be able to mount an effective opposition to Blair, deny him a majority for his more controversial right-wing policies and even mount a campaign for his removal.

Such hopes have come to nothing. The question of a leadership challenge was to all intents dead in the water within a matter of days.

By the time Blair met with the parliamentary party on May 11, the calls for his resignation or early retirement had been all but silenced. It was clear that he enjoyed the support of a majority of MPs, and that most of the lefts were not about to rock the boat now that they were comfortably ensconced in Westminster once again.

Only the little known backbencher John Austin offered to stand in a leadership contest against Blair, and he described himself as a “stalking horse,” suggesting that he would give way to the arch right-winger and architect of Labour’s pro-big business economic policies Gordon Brown

should he decide to stand.

And the prospects of the lefts defying Blair on policy questions look equally remote.

The May 17 Queen's Speech outlined a legislative programme for the privatisation of education and health provision alongside further draconian attacks on civil liberties. The government intends to adopt into law 45 bills that include policies that are supposedly anathema to the lefts and which Blair described as "quintessentially New Labour." These include the introduction of identity cards, more anti-terror legislation, a clamp down on asylum and immigration, and measures targeting invalidity benefit claimants for attack.

In the past, the lefts opposed cuts in incapacity benefits and ID cards and, with Labour's majority slashed to 67, they could indeed block such measures. It would take only 34 rebels to defeat the government and there are 60 Labour MPs in the Commons who defied the whip at least 10 times in the last parliament.

But the response to the apparent weakening of Blair is the very opposite of a determination to inflict blows against the government. Indeed the possibility that a revolt may succeed has proven to be the best guarantee of political loyalty from the Labour lefts.

As we have previously noted, the *Guardian* described their response to the Queen's speech as "if not a whimper, then hardly a bang." It consisted essentially of yet another pledge of loyalty, masquerading as a commitment to unity and responsible government. John McDonnell, chairman of the Campaign Group of Labour MPs, explained that all the left wanted was "to negotiate for the best deal possible."

"We have to get serious," he told BBC Radio 4's "World this Weekend." "We have to aim at consensus."

What does this mean in practice? As one Labour backbencher explained, "With [the introduction of] tuition fees [for universities], most of us voted for it in the end because they changed [the legislation]. Everyone is hoping they will consult earlier."

That is the most that can be hoped for from the Labour left.

The reasons for the right-wing evolution of Labour cannot be sought in the subjective actions of individuals such as Blair. It cannot be remedied by his removal. And one cannot look to any section of the party bureaucracy to lead a renaissance of the party.

The Socialist Equality Party sought to explain the underlying causes of Labour's right-wing evolution and to prepare the way for the construction of a genuinely socialist party. We wrote in our election statement of the essential significance of the collapse of the old social democratic and Stalinist workers' organisations in the 1980s and 1990s and their transformation into avowedly pro-capitalist formations. We explained that this marked the end of an era in which economic life was still largely organised on the basis of nation states:

"Underlying the outright betrayal of the working class by its old organisations was the development of globalisation—the organisation of all aspects of production, distribution and exchange on an international basis—which stripped the ground from beneath the nationally-based labour organisations.

"The labour bureaucracies could no longer combine their defence of the profit system with the advocacy of limited social reforms. Globally organised capital, manifested in the form of huge transnational corporations and financial institutions, was able to shift production around the world and dictate policy to national governments. To a hitherto unprecedented degree, economic success in the advanced capitalist countries now depended on the need to attract international investment and ensure competitiveness on world markets by slashing public spending and driving down wages and working conditions toward the levels in Asia and Eastern Europe.

"The development of Blair's 'New Labour' and the transformation of the unions into appendages of corporate management represent the labour

bureaucracy's response to these demands of capital."

In opposition to the Labour lefts, we insisted, "It is not possible to answer the decay of the labour movement by seeking a return to the past. Calls for national economic regulation are as reactionary as they are impotent. They cannot combat the rapacious demands of big business and only serve to divide the international working class.

"The Socialist Equality Party bases itself on a fight to unify the working class in every country and across all national borders, irrespective of language, nationality or skin colour. This provides the essential foundation for combating the drive towards militarism and war.

"We advance a programme for the complete reorganisation of society in the interests of working people. To this end, we advocate the creation of a new social and economic order, based on the needs of the vast majority, not private profit. Only this provides the basis for utilising the extraordinary human and technical resources that are now available to end poverty and provide decent living standards and a safe environment for all."

The degeneration of the Labour Party is of a root-and-branch character precisely because it is the product of these profound objective processes. And these same processes demand the construction of a new party that bases its programme on the realities of globally organised economic life and seeks to mobilise the working class against the profit system internationally.

This is what must be understood by all those such as yourself who detest Blair and everything he stands for.

Yours sincerely,
Chris Marsden



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

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