# Britain’s Chancellor Alistair Darling and the International Marxist Group

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When Britain’s Chancellor Alistair Darling was interviewed by Decca Aitkenhead in the August 30 edition of the *Guardian*, his comments created an international furore.

His admission that the economic times we are facing “are arguably the worst they’ve been in 60 years” led to accusations that he had undermined confidence in Britain’s economy and prompted a run on the pound.

In some rather more limited circles, there was at least a measure of incredulity at how Darling had so blatantly lied about his political background.

The interview reports, “There was no teenage radicalism, and he would have been astonished, he says, if he’d known his future lay in politics. Studying law at Aberdeen, he stood for election in the student union, but not for a party. ‘I was just quite interested in getting things done.’ His manifesto favoured ‘strictly bread-and-butter issues, things like food prices in the student refectory’. When he joined the Labour party in 1977, he never expected to be more than a member. ‘I was enjoying becoming a lawyer.’ He’d simply realised, he explains, that ‘if you want to make any changes, there’s only one way you can do it, and that’s by getting into a position where you can influence things. And the obvious thing to do seemed to be to join a party.’”

He was then asked by Aitkenhead, “Why Labour?” He replied, “Just... I suppose, overall, I thought the Tories were unfair. They were only for one side, and not for everyone. The Labour party just seemed to reflect my outlook on life—you know, that we were better working together—fairness, helping everyone to get on, rather than just a few.”

Giving his sole attempt at providing political context for his decision to join, Darling added, “The Labour government in 1977 was in a terrible mess, and I was getting fed up looking at all these things on the television, and thinking, God, surely we can do better than that. I wanted to do things. But I was never really interested in the theory of achieving things, just the practicality of doing things.”

When this author read Darling’s comments, I found it difficult to understand why someone would even join the Labour Party in 1977.

I wrote that “This was a year during which Labour was in coalition with the Liberals and imposing IMF-dictated austerity measures that met with fierce resistance from the working class, and ended with the 1979 ‘Winter of Discontent’ and the election of the Conservatives.” (See “Alistair Darling and the implosion of the Labour government”)

Millions of working people were bitterly angry towards the Labour government and had turned against it. And within the party, there was a move by Labour’s left wing against its right wing that saw the election of Michael Foot as leader, and the adoption of the Alternative Economic Strategy as party policy. Over the next years there was a period of ideological and political warfare in the party that eventually proved to be a last gasp for social democratic reformism and ended with the triumph of the right wing. I thought, how could Darling not be involved in this?

As it turns out, Darling was intimately involved. Like so many others, he is in fact someone who has traversed the political spectrum from left to right to end up as a loyal supporter of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown.

According to informed sources, his early years were not spent as the apolitical young man he professed, but as a member of the International Marxist Group, then the British section of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International. He must also presumably have stood in the Students Union as an IMG member and joined the Labour Party in 1977 while either still a member or under the IMG’s political influence. Certainly in the early 1980s he was still on the left of the Labour Party.

The satirical magazine *Private Eye* was almost alone in responding to Darling’s dissembling, by drawing attention to a March 10 column in the *Daily Record* by the former Labour MP and now leader of Respect Renewal, George Galloway.

Galloway, who is sympathetic to the Stalinist Communist Party of Britain, has no love lost for any of the various middle class radical groups which he always refers to as “Trots,” even though many work with him politically. Neither has he forgotten how he was forced out of the Labour Party by Blair and Brown. Therefore he was not averse—and clearly took some pleasure in—trying to cause Darling some political embarrassment when he recounted his first meeting with Darling.

“When I first met him 35 years ago,” Galloway states, “Darling was pressing Trotskyite tracts on bewildered railwaymen at Waverley Station in Edinburgh. He was a supporter of the International Marxist Group, whose publication was entitled the Black Dwarf.

“Later, in preparation for his current role he became the treasurer of what was always termed the rebel Lothian Regional Council.”

Galloway continues, “Red Ally and his friends around the Black Dwarf were for a time a colourful part of the Scottish left. The late Ron Brown, Red Ronnie as he was known, was Alistair’s bosom buddy. He was thrown out of Parliament for placing a placard saying hands off Lothian Region on Mrs Thatcher’s despatch box while she was addressing the House. And Darling loved it at the time.”

Galloway also states how “The former Scottish trade union leader Bill Speirs and I were dispatched by the Scottish Labour Party to try and talk Alistair Darling down from the ledge of this kamikaze strategy...”

Clearly, in the long-run at least, Galloway and Speirs must have been persuasive as to the merits of collaboration rather than

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confrontation with Labour's leadership.

Naturally the *Guardian* would also have been well aware of Darling's past, but chose not to raise it and instead allowed him to present himself as a somewhat pragmatic liberal. Its only acknowledgement of its "error" came the following week in the form of an aside in the blog of political editor Michael White in which he stated that "Alistair Darling doesn't do red meat politics, though—as *Private Eye* pointed out this week—he did have a Trot phase in his political youth as a turbulent member of Lothian regional council, defying Margaret Thatcher's calls to cap the rates."

Aside from this brief passage, and a side-swipe from arch Tory Peter Hitchens in the *Daily Mail*, the story then died the proverbial death.

This is extraordinary. If what is said about Darling is true, we have someone who was once a member of a supposedly Marxist and even Trotskyist group who has held five ministerial posts and is today Chancellor of the Exchequer, the second most powerful position in British political life. Yet not only is this not considered as an obstacle to holding such high office, it is not even mentioned by anyone in the media—other than a few disgruntled political mavericks like Galloway.

Such silence in the media can only be explained by the fact that no one within ruling circles wants to politically embarrass Darling, because he is such a key figure in government. It must also be surmised that the security services, who will have vetted Darling long ago, must have determined that no issue should be made of his youthful excesses. It is, at the same time, an indication of how the IMG itself was viewed by the security services.

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, the IMG established a certain base amongst radicalised students, often coming into conflict with the police in its work around the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign and its support for the IRA in Northern Ireland. A 1974 protest against the National Front at Red Lion Square resulted in the death of the student Kevin Gately. Its other major activity was to regularly denounce the International Committee of the Fourth International and its then section, the Socialist Labour League, later the Workers Revolutionary Party.

By the 1980s the IMG's revolutionary posturing and flirtations with "direct action" were to give way to total submergence into the Labour Party and support for the party's left wing led by Tony Benn. The British state was happy to make full use of the IMG during its radical protest phase and, together with the Labour Party bureaucracy, appears to have unreservedly forgiven its former supporters for the follies of their youth, welcoming those such as Darling and others, such as journalist Tariq Ali, as trusted members of the political establishment.

Along with the silence of the media, at no time, either now or in the past, has anything been said of Darling's political history and evolution by the United Secretariat itself.

Naturally, it can never be excluded from possibility that someone on what passes for the left can end up on the political right—especially when he or she comes from one of myriad radical groups characterised by opportunist and essentially reformist politics that have provided decades of slavish loyalty to Labour and the trade union bureaucracy. So-called "entry work" in the Labour Party, apparently in Darling's case "deep, deep" entry, and holding positions within the trade unions are frequently the starting point for personal career advancement in which early alliances are easily shed. Thus today not a few former radicals now sit alongside former Stalinists at Labour's top table.

Even so, Darling's political passage seems to have been smoother than most. Neither the United Secretariat, nor the IMG and its various splinters have ever felt it necessary to explain the political evolution of someone who is easily their most prominent ex-member in Britain. And there is no record of political struggle against him, either when he broke from the group or at any point when he was making his way up the ranks of the Labour Party.

For his part, Darling has also kept silent about his past rather than seeking to earn his spurs by denouncing his former comrades and railing against Marxism. By way of a contrast, the former cabinet member Stephen Byers was once a supporter of the Militant group. But like many others, his march to the right involved him participating in the political attacks on the group in his position as deputy leader of North Tyneside Council from 1986 to 1992.

Another prominent former member of the IMG within Labour's leadership is the arch-Brownite Secretary of State for Health, Alan Milburn. As an IMG member in the 1980s he ran the "Days of Hope" radical bookshop in Newcastle. A June 3 2000 interview with the *Independent* reports him stating that he "left the IMG 'by 1984', although there is some vagueness as to when he joined the Labour Party: 'after the 1983 election' is about as exact as it gets, leaving open the intriguing possibility that Milburn was an entryist."

Milburn too has never felt the need to attack the IMG as, like Darling, he moved effortlessly to the right of the Labour Party and took up high office in the process.

Such a pact of silence regarding such renegade members could only be maintained by an organisation that is rotten to the core. The leaders of United Secretariat clearly not only understand, but indeed sympathise with, Darling's actions in securing a place for himself within Labour's highest echelons. They would not take issue with him in any event for fear of alienating their many friends in the party and trade union bureaucracy—and thus closing off avenues for exerting their political influence and hopefully securing their own political careers.

Once again the United Secretariat and its affiliated groups have proved themselves to be the training ground for individuals considered worthy of being entrusted with the most fundamental interests of the bourgeoisie—in Darling's case, control of Britain's economic policy.

In addition, it should be noted that the rest of the radical left has also kept quiet about Darling's past. They must calculate that, as the old adage insists, "People in glass houses should not throw stones." Like doyens of a West End gentlemen's club, they have decided that it is best not to point out the disreputable behaviour of one of their number for fear of a retaliatory citing of their own reprobate members' misdeeds, past and present.

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