

COMMENTARY

Clause 4

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'Come on lads – we all prefer nice things to nasty': this desperate moral appeal, delivered above the chaotic mania of classroom rebellion, was the habitual resort of an old schoolmaster of mine. For those of us close enough to hear, it evoked peals of derisive laughter. Of course, I feel guilty about it now. But the story is really quite tragic. Had 'Foddy' been born into a later generation he might have reached high office – perhaps become a Labour Party leader, even drafted a new constitution for it. For catch-all, tautological emptiness, Blair's replacement for the Party's notorious 'clause 4' comes close to Foddy's entry into the competition, but it loses out disastrously on the test of conciseness.

There has been some derisive laughter, of course, off stage left, and even from the form prefects, but it has been timid, half suppressed laughter, with a tinge of palpable nervousness: perhaps this moment symbolizes the end of serious politics, the final triumph of the media soundbite. But this is to recognize that the battle over clause 4 was just one battle in a long-drawn-out war, the focus of which has indeed been the nature and direction of the Labour Party, but whose strategic targets are much more ambitious. A much earlier battle, fought on exactly the same terrain – Gaitskell's attack on clause 4 – resulted in ignominious defeat for the revisionists. Thirty-five years later, Blair was able to inflict a crushing defeat on the Left. What, exactly, has changed? Has capital become more benign? Have reforming Labour governments shown that poverty, ecological destruction, crime, mass unemployment, racism, the oppression of women, and exploitation at work can all be tackled successfully without taking on the power of private capital?

In fact, such evidence as we have about public opinion suggests massive opposition to further privatizations, and deep disquiet about the abuses of power, job losses, price rises, losses of public services, ecological damage and other widely understood costs of past privatizations. At the same time, the disintegration of the National Health Service under the weight of underfunding and commercialization is almost universally condemned. The perfect time, one might have thought, for Labour to press home the socialist case for common ownership.

Of course, no one seriously expected the Labour leadership to do this. The reasons are not hard to find. The Labour Party is not the party it was in Gaitskell's day, and the external context in which this new battle for the 'heart and soul' of the Party was fought is profoundly different. The democratic reforms to the Party constitution which were won in the late 1970s, together with a newly radicalized trade-union and popular base, led to a crisis in the leadership of the Party at the end of that decade. Portrayed as a crisis of governability, of the authority of the state itself, that moment set the terms of, and provided the conditions for, the project of Thatcher and the 'new' Right. Since that time each Labour leader has been required by a media consensus to demonstrate the will and the nerve to dominate both the Party and the wider movement – to demonstrate that any future Labour government would 'stand up to the unions' and exclude from influence the radical voices in its ranks. Kinnock complied with campaigns of vilification against the 'entrist' left in the Party, while Smith continued the task of disassociating the party from the trade-union movement. So far had these leaders gone, in fact, that Blair was left with only what the *Guardian* (11 March 1995) referred to as the 'symbolic

gesture' of an attack on clause 4 to demonstrate his political manhood. The central media concern with the whole debate has, indeed, been the question of Blair's capacity to exert his authority over the Party – an interesting criterion of success, in a form of democracy which legitimates itself in terms of the role of political parties as *representatives* of their members and supporters.

Party activists are now less likely to live or work in a favourable environment, and less likely to feel that they can influence the direction of the Party at national level. The great majority have, indeed, left the Party altogether. In this setting, it is remarkable how strong the internal resistance to the leadership onslaught was. It is widely assumed that the new wording for clause 4 includes some elements of compromise aimed at the Left, and the leadership was forced to divert very considerable energy and resources to campaigning against a sizable section of their own membership.

A sense of purpose

Well, so much for the context. What about clause 4 itself? Throughout the campaign it was hard to come by a serious argument for change. There were plenty of manifestly weak or banal ones. For some advocates of change, the clause was an election-loser. In twenty-odd years of campaigning for Labour, I never heard it mentioned once. Almost invariably the clause was denounced as a commitment to wholesale 'nationalization'. Of course, the clause doesn't mention nationalization. The commitment is to common ownership, and to 'the best obtainable system of popular administration': a far cry from the practice of the actual nationalized industries.

By far the most influential element in the case for reform has been the identification of ditching the clause with the mission to 'modernize' the Party: one 'grand narrative' that seems to have lost none of its appeal. In this, as in so many other areas, the leadership have simply adopted the Thatcherite inversions of the political discourse of the Left. Socialism is no longer a vision of the future good society, but a relic of past delusions. Perhaps a little closer to the mark was Blair's own admission, in his speech to the Scottish Labour conference, that the clause should be dropped simply because 'we' do not believe in it. The problem with this is that, while Labour governments have shown little inclination to implement the clause, a significant proportion of the Party membership has been reluctant to say goodbye to its socialist aspiration. Even the *Guardian*, a consistent Blair-supporter, had to concede (leader, 11 March) that Blair's victory owed more to rank-and-file fear of rocking the electoral boat than to genuine conviction.

But it would be wrong to say that there were no good arguments on the side of reform. These came out more strongly as the 'soft' Left slowly joined the leadership bandwagon. The clause can be damned for its glaring omissions. There is no mention of the environment, of women's rights, nor of the scourges of racism and bigotry. Although the old clause does commit the Party to 'promote the political, social and economic emancipation of the people', this is then qualified by a more specific commitment to those 'who depend directly upon their own exertions by hand or by brain'. Similarly, the key section 4 of the old clause 4 sets out the purpose of 'common ownership' in terms of redistribution of the product to the said 'workers by hand and by brain'. There are at least two strong objections to this as a statement of socialist aims. The first is that it appears to give priority to the needs of waged or salaried workers over those who, whatever their social contribution, as parents, carers, citizens, or whatever their condition of life, should be included within the universalistic values of any socialism worthy of the name.

The second objection is that it suggests that the main purpose of common ownership is distributive justice. This is, indeed, an important socialist aim, but it is not the only one, nor, indeed, the most important. The values asserted in the Blair version of clause 4 include an ideal of community in which people 'live together freely, in a spirit of solidarity, tolerance and respect'. The new text also advocates the taking of decisions 'by the communities they affect', and includes a new commitment to environmental protection and enhancement. These commitments do, indeed, capture much of the core value-content of the socialist tradition.

Where the old clause 4 was inadequate was in its failure to spell out the arguments which link each of these values with common ownership. In the end, what is definitive of socialism is not so much its value-commitments (these are almost universally shared), as its diagnosis that they cannot be realized in an economic system governed by market forces and the rate of profit.

But, whatever its failings, the old clause 4 had one great strength: it was an eloquent and unequivocal statement that Labour was about the creation of a radically new order of society – a socialist society, in which social wealth would be in the hands of the people, and its use governed by democratic institutions ('popular administration and control'). It is true that Labour governments rarely, if ever, took this vision seriously, and it may also be that for activists on the left to have believed that one day they might was a delusion. But, equally, no one should be in any doubt about the profound social importance of symbols. For hundreds of thousands of Labour activists the clause has been a binding and mobilizing force – the guiding vision and sense of purpose which motivated years of sacrifice and kept them going through all the defeats and betrayals. The new clause has no such unifying power. Blair and his allies may well turn out to have won a hollow victory.

Yet, important as they are, symbols are not enough. To be effective, a socialist vision has to be translated into popular and practicable policies and strategies. A merely defensive, 'traditionalist' response to the 'modernizers' will be self-defeating. It is important, here, to distinguish the critical, diagnostic side of the socialist project from its creative, transformative side. We live in a world dominated by the power of unregulated, globalizing capital: an economic form which sows despair, division, sickness, death, poverty and destruction wherever it takes hold. It now possesses the technical power to convert the very bases of life itself into the raw materials of its own ruthless self-expansion. Serious analysis of the causes of recurrent famine, the global distribution of environmental pollution, deforestation, endemic poverty and socio-cultural fragmentation cannot escape the key role of an economic system out of control, and answerable to no one. Even when, as in some Western countries since World War II, the bleak negativity of modern capitalism has been offset by ameliorative reform, this has rested on two (vulnerable) preconditions: economic imperialism, and the threat of socialism. The critical, diagnostic side of the socialist case against capital is well-nigh unanswerable.

So, there is a paradox. As the case against capital becomes ever more powerful and urgent, socialism is at its lowest ebb for a century or more. The challenge for socialists is to create and communicate a feasible alternative. If common ownership does not mean nationalization and centralized economic direction, what does it mean? Can economic decision-making be decentralized and democratized without sacrificing a wider social interest? Can the tyranny of market forces be overcome without losing the benefits of market exchange? How do we define 'community' and 'solidarity' in a world of global interdependencies and dislocations? How can liberty be reconciled with the strengthening of community, when community is so often identified with homogeneity, closure and bigotry? How can local action be effective in a world of global forces?

These are all deep and difficult questions. They are all questions which are presumed solved without even being posed in the bland glosses of the new clause 4. But to come up with answers to these and many other questions is the challenge which must be faced by a diverse and imaginative movement of the Left if we are to have a serious alternative to the seductive smile of Tony Blair. The sheer scale of Blair's victory is a harsh reminder, if any were needed, that Labour is no longer the focus of activity for the Left which it once was. The cutting edge of radical politics is now in the social movements and 'single issue' campaigns, where mistrust of the orthodox political parties is well-nigh universal. Whether a new force to the left in British political life can be forged from these roots remains to be seen. If it cannot, we face the bleak prospect of a political system and culture in which the critical voice of the Left is no longer heard.

I have benefited greatly from discussions with friends in the Red-Green Study Group and the UK editorial group of the journal Capitalism, Nature, Socialism – though the views expressed above are my personal ones.