

Chapter 1 : Labour Left Forum: Faces of Bevanism (Part Two): The Parliamentary Bevanites

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For a fundamental and irreversible shift in the balance of power and wealth in favour of working people and their families Friday, 8 June Faces of Bevanism Part Two: When the three dissenting Ministers left the Cabinet they attended Keep Left Group meetings and the group quickly expanded. Any analysis of the parliamentary Bevanites must first consider the Keep Left Group which came into being as a small self-conscious entity in Parliament in , expanded in , and transformed into the Bevanites in From the start it included those who were later to be leading Bevanites such as Crossman, Foot and Mikardo. One of the primary ways in which this group operated was via the circulation of policy documents. These often concerned a full range of issues from foreign affairs to home policy matters. Certain Bevanites would specialise in certain matters Thomas Balogh on the economy, Fenner Brockway on colonial matters, Crossman on the Cold War, etc. Ian Mikardo would appear to have been the primary organiser, especially when Keep Left expanded to be the Bevanite Group. There were also administrative secretaries, Rose Cohen and Jo Richardson. While some have suggested a sexist division of labour here, later Barbara Castle and Jennie Lee went on to play key policy and propagandist roles in the group. Links between Keep Left and Bevan did exist before the resignations of Donald Bruce an author of the original Keep Left manifesto had been in consultation with Bevan and others in the Cabinet over the Korean War and re-armament. While before Keep Left had been a rather small group of MPs averaging perhaps ten regular attenders it rapidly expanded when it began the Brains Trusts. These were meetings which were organised firstly by Keep Left and later by the Bevanites with the support of Tribune, where Keep Left or Bevanite speakers would form a panel at various meetings around the country. The organisation and success of the Brains Trusts really belong to another chapter, but they were part of the what caused Keep Left to prosper in the period leading up to the ministers joining its ranks. By the time those three rejoined the backbenches, Keep Left was the obvious focus of parliamentary left-wing organisation. This plan includes a map of Britain with the location of all Bevanite or prospective Bevanite seats with the name of the candidate and his or her majority or minority written next to it. From there it goes on to organise who should go and speak at which constituency. At this stage this was not constituency foot-soldiers but well-known figures like A. Taylor and Lord Stansgate. There were occasions where group members seemed to put the group before the party. While Acland did not emerge from a Labour tradition he had been a Liberal Party member, then a leading light of the Common Wealth Party even Crossman considered the benefits to be gained from losing the election. In each case the offending sentence in his paper was crossed out. There was some discussion at the start of as to whether the Bevanites should organise with the Left in other countries. This was an idea about which both Mikardo and Brockway were very enthusiastic. Brockway suggested that there was a lot of international interest, hope and enthusiasm for Bevanism, and there was a proposal for an international monthly review. Not much appears to have come of these suggestions. Other examples of parliamentary Bevanite organisation are documents produced by the secretaries about finances and Brains Trust matters. There are income and expenditure accounts in the archives. It is not always clear who the group members were. By summer there were around 30 regular attenders. Although Brains Trusts are of more interest for a later section, they did form part of the parliamentary organisation too. The two secretaries produced a list of the large number of towns which had had Brains Trust meetings between and 42 towns in total and some had had more than one visit and which had requested meetings that had still to be scheduled. Although the period is divided in half before and after April there is clear general organisational continuity between Keep Left and the Bevanites. One reason for dividing the list in half was not to do a disservice to newer members who could not have spoken at as many Brains Trusts. By the start of there had been Brains Trusts and there were 40 still pending organisation. Bevan was frequently absent from Group meetings. Mikardo was the first chair of the Bevanite Group, a role later taken by Harold Wilson. Effectively the Bevanite Group was the Keep Left Group, but with the additional prestige and notoriety which the inclusion of

a top parliamentarian like Bevan gave. Another aspect of parliamentary Bevanism was a social one. What were the main issues for the PLP during the Bevanite period? There were the resignations of April already mentioned. There was a showdown between Attlee and Bevan over the H-bomb in , the rebellion 62 MPs led to Bevan having the whip withdrawn fairly briefly on this occasion. But the Bevanite Group began its slow disintegration from this time on, dividing into a number of factions, mainly over the issue of the bomb. For example, the 65 MPs who demanded parliamentary approval before the manufacture of the H-bomb did not include a unanimous vote from the Bevanites though it did include the leading lights such as Bevan, Mikardo and Crossman but it did include a large number of other left-leaning MPs or those with strong views on the bomb, such as Tony Benn, Tony Greenwood and Maurice Edelman. The new centre-left accused of defection from the Bevanites were characterised by Richard Crossman and Harold Wilson. This was when the group was still at the height of its strength: The group had been formally disbanded in it had been operating in a clandestine way from that time on, as one of the worst-kept secrets in the PLP! There was a significant realignment of the left in , even though the group existed in some form until at least summer In fact it was in that parliamentary rebellion began to increase again, particularly on defence , with many of the old Bevanite faces involved Richard Crossman had to resign from the Shadow Cabinet. This was a bigger PLP challenge to the leadership than at any time during the height of parliamentary Bevanism. Nye died the following week, on the 6th July, How extraordinary was the anti-Bevanite disciplinary reaction it met? There is no evidence that the Bevanites exercised any kind of internal discipline even though accusations of them having whips were common. In fact, a record of how Bevanites voted on the various divisive issues of the period, as we have seen, shows that the group rarely acted as one and while some drifted away from the group there is no evidence of anyone being asked to leave. Dear Fenner, Just a note to let you know that I would prefer to postpone any decision on the question you asked me on Tuesday. Parliamentary factions were not uncommon and it was not beyond the memory of s politicians when the Labour Party had been made up of official Parties within the Party in a political confederation e. But Party managers certainly did seem to over-react to rebellions. Even at its height its membership never reached 50 MPs.

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Confronted by the stabilisation of capitalism, the continued vitality of reformism, the expansion of Stalinism and the consequent marginalisation of Trotskyism, the Internationals leaders had become deeply disoriented. In an attempt to overcome the movements isolation, this leadership in particular its secretary, Michel Pablo began to jettison some of the main planks of the Trotskyist programme. Although the Fourth Internationals political collapse really dates from , when a wholesale capitulation to Stalinism in its Titoite form took place, it was at the Ninth Plenum of the International Executive Committee, in November , that the International first embraced those programmatic revisions which Healy would later furiously denounce as Pabloism. Healys own organisation in Britain, however, had already anticipated this slide into Pabloite revisionism by several months. The perspectives document adopted by the Club at its national conference the previous August had defined the basic antagonism in the world today not as the class struggle internationally, but as the conflict between US imperialism and Soviet Stalinism. A developing economic crisis, Healys document insisted, compelled the USA towards an armed showdown with the Soviet Union and the colonial world. With imperialism forced to prepare for, and then embark upon, a world war under extremely unfavourable conditions for world capitalism, the stage was set for an international civil war in which the Fourth International would be able to lead successful revolutionary struggles. In a manoeuvre which Ted Grant condemned as Zinovievist trickery, Healy presented the conference with an entirely new document, while claiming that it was merely an amended version of the original, and quite different, draft. This put forward the perspective that with the outbreak of another world war, which was held to be both imminent and inevitable, the counter-revolutionary character of Stalinist parties outside the USSR could be transformed. Following the supposed examples of the Yugoslav and Chinese CPs, some of these parties could be expected to break with Stalinist politics and project a revolutionary orientation. For, while they were enthusiastic supporters of the ISs pro-Stalinist line on Yugoslavia and China, they balked at its application to France, where the PCI had its base in the anti-communist Force Ouvriere trade union confederation. Needless to say, the French received no support from Gerry Healy. On the contrary, when Pablos bureaucratic action was narrowly endorsed by five votes to four by the IS, Healy sided with Pablo. Before chairing a meeting of Vietnamese comrades who were about to return from France under orders to enter the Viet Minh, Healy approached his fellow IEC representative Peng Shuzi who was to address the meeting, and persuaded him to remain silent about the Mao regimes persecution of Trotskyists in China. Peng was left in no doubt that this was an instruction or suggestion from Pablo. Meanwhile, in Britain, the Club continued to pursue Healys unprincipled approach to entry inside the Labour Party without any noticeable success. As Jock Haston had pointed out, Healys technique of deep entry kept the Trotskyists politics secret from the Labour Party rank and file, but failed to fool the bureaucracy, who were well aware who the entrists were. In a letter to the NEC, the Socialist Fellowship national committee explained that the now liquidated Fellowships supporters were loyal members of the Labour Party who have never had any interests separate and apart from the Labour Party. The proscription of the Socialist Fellowship was followed by Aneurin Bevans resignation from the Labour government in protest at the decision to cut Health Service expenditure in order to finance a massive armaments programme. After discontent had been further fuelled by Labours defeat at the general election, Bevan became the focus for rank-and-file opposition to the Labour Party leadership and its right wing policies. In contrast to the mere front organisation which the Socialist Fellowship had become, Bevanism was a genuine left wing movement with a real base of support in the party. It was undoubtedly necessary for Trotskyists to develop a political orientation towards this movement and carry out work inside it. But Pablo, ignoring Bevanisms organisational amorphousness and unambiguously left-reformist character, greeted this development as the beginnings of a centrist tendency which could be won to a revolutionary programme. Trotskyists could best promote such an evolution of the Bevanite movement, Pablo wrote, by penetrating it and helping it from the inside to develop to its last resources and consequences, thereby accelerating its left

centrist ripening. Bevans election to the NEC on a record vote, and the replacement of right wingers Dalton and Morrison by the Bevanites Harold Wilson and Richard Crossman, the front page editorial stated, was the clearest indication that the rank and file wanted socialism. Yet, by Socialist Outlooks own admission, Bevan had done no more than defend political positions which were commonplace in the Labour Party before , and he had made it plain that he had no desire to wage a serious struggle against the right wing. Not only did Healy accept Bevans reformist conception of the working class advancing to socialism through the gate of parliament,¹⁸ but in doing so he shamelessly echoed the patriotism underpinning Bevans political philosophy. Great Britain, Healy wrote, can never regain its position of world leadership under capitalist auspices Britain, however, can rise to a newer and higher level of world leadership, provided the Labour movement resolutely carries its struggle for Socialism to victory here in the coming period. The chief conditions for success, as enumerated by Healy, were: Complete reliance on the organised power of the working class. No confidence in Britains capitalists or Americas imperialists. Finish without delay the job of nationalising, democratising, and reorganising industry along socialist lines. Put into effect a Socialist and democratic foreign policy. This programme, which was to be implemented by a future Labour government, was, Healy wrote, the only road to workers power and Socialism in Great Britain. But this only reveals the problem in using the term Pabloism in reference to politics which had general support within the Fourth International. Indeed, for all Healys later fulminations against Pabloite liquidationism, if he had any difference with Pablo in this period it was that Healy favoured a more thoroughly liquidationist course within the Labour Party. After all, the FI leadership did take the view that, in addition to Socialist Outlook, the British section should publish a theoretical organ, openly defending revolutionary Marxism²¹ only to have their repeated requests to this effect ignored by Healy. Cannon, Healy was scarcely in a position to take a political stand against Pabloism. His response was merely one of anxiety that the dispute in the SWP might spill over into the International, which according to Healy was making great strides under Pablos leadership. Some very serious work in the mass movement is being done now, Healy wrote to Cannon in February , and in France in particular. Everyone wants to get on with the job, and the nearness of the war adds to their determination. My first feeling, therefore, is one of extreme worry are we threatened with another international split? If so we must avoid it at all costs. Our movement must not go into the war smashed up and divided! The American section had failed to oppose the turn towards Tito in , endorsed with only minor reservations the decisions of the Third World Congress, and in had assisted Pablo in expelling the recalcitrant majority of the French section, against whom Cannon had defended Pablos political positions as completely Trotskyist. He is a genius politically and organisationally, and even informed Pengs daughter that Pablo should think of himself as the successor of Trotsky! Cannon in particular, was never in serious doubt. It was, after all, the SWP leaders who had raised Healy from his position of ignominy within the Workers International League in , and had guided his subsequent struggle for control of the British section. The publication of Socialist Outlook, which by had become a professional-looking weekly, would have been impossible without financial backing from the SWP. In aligning himself with the SWP majority, Healy performed his usual trick of simply shifting his political position without explanation or self-criticism. At the IEC Plenum of May , during discussion of a draft resolution on Stalinism, Healy suddenly announced that it would be a mistake to become over-optimistic about developments in the Stalinist parties following Stalins death, citing the example of Yugoslavia and the failure to anticipate Titos capitulation to imperialism over the Korean war. And at the end of the meeting the other British delegate, Socialist Outlook editor John Lawrence, was taken away by Pablo for a two-hour talk. Healy, however, completely misjudged the intensity of the factional struggle which was about to erupt in the International. He saw no incompatibility between acting as an advocate for Cannon and maintaining comradely relations with Pablo, whose support for the SWP minority Healy explained as a consequence of political impatience, due to lack of experience in leading a national section. Healy was convinced that Pablo could be dissuaded from making serious errors in relation to the SWP. In July, he agreed that The Rise and Decline of Stalinism, Pablos draft document for the forthcoming Fourth World Congress, should be sent out to the sections in the name of the IS, and failed to record any differences with its political adaptation to liberalising tendencies in the Stalinist bureaucracy. It was this experience, following as it did the emergence

within the Group of an organised Pabloite faction headed by Lawrence, Hilda Lane, Fred Emmett and Audrey Wise, which brought home to Healy that a fight was unavoidable. Pablo, only yesterday a man whom Healy had felt extremely close to and had grown to like considerably, was now found to embody all the old cominternist vices. Pablos methods, so Healy told Cannon, sickened me to the point that it almost made me physically unwell. He complained bitterly that the FI leadership wanted an International of spineless creatures who will accept revisionism to the point where they become the left cover for Stalinism. In the absence of a critical evaluation of his own contribution, and that of the tendency he led, to the Fourth Internationals political degeneration, the fight which Healy proceeded to wage in the Group had the character of crude factional manoeuvring, devoid of political principle. Thus, at the Groups National Committee meeting later in September, Healy used as a pretext for his attack on Pablos supporters the publication in Socialist Outlook of an article arguing that a future world war would be an openly-declared war of ideologies, Communism against capitalism, with the world split into two warring camps. This, the very same line which he himself had been instrumental in imposing on the British section, was now held up by Healy as evidence that the whole Pablo gang are capitulatory from top to bottom. When he proposed to remove Fred Emmett from his full-time post on the staff of Socialist Outlook and replace him with Bill Hunter, both Ratner and Bob Pennington indicated that they would vote against this, and Healy was forced to adjourn the meeting until the next day in order to bully his erring supporters into accepting Emmetts sacking. The SWP leaders, however, had other ideas. Ignoring a succession of letters from Healy urging that they should campaign for an Emergency Conference of the FI rather than provoke a split,⁴⁰ in November the SWP issued the famous Open Letter, publicly denouncing Pablo for having betrayed the Trotskyist programme and declaring that no compromise is possible either politically or organisationally with the FI leadership in Paris. Confronted with this fait accompli by the SWP, Healy moved quickly to carry out a purge in the Group. In this he was assisted by Pablo giving his British followers the Internationals authority to defy the discipline of the national section. The result was that many members took sides because of personal allegiances rather than on a political basis. The not exactly world-historic issue around which the Healyites and Pabloites waged their initial public fight was Lawrences proposal to launch a petition demanding that the Tory government resign. And the mass working class action which Healy counterposed to the circulation of petitions was discredited by the familiar Healyite practice of exaggerating the existing level of consciousness in the working class. Already many workers are asking, Healy supporter Jim Allen insisted, not "will there be a general strike" but "when? The theory of permanent revolution, Lawrence asserted, had found confirmation in China where the Communist Party is Mao Zedong, according to Lawrence, was acting although not consciously as a Trotskyist. At the IEC Eleventh Plenum of April, he himself had argued vigorously for a resolution on the Chinese revolution which incorporated an identical analysis to that now put forward by Lawrence. Thus Healy was able to make some correct points against Lawrences attitude towards the popular frontist Paris Peace Congress against German rearmament of March. At the LPS annual general meeting in May, the Healy faction were able to defeat the Pabloites and take over the management committee and editorial board. It just happened that we were better organised, worked harder and got round to more people. Indeed, throughout the fight with the IS and its supporters, Healy following his mentors in the SWP continued to protest his adherence to the very Third World Congress decisions on which the Pabloites policies were so evidently based. In the face of such confusion and downright political dishonesty, the split in the International, far from upholding the continuity of Trotskyism, could serve only to deepen the political disorientation of the movement. This was one aspect of Pabloism which Healy had no intention of challenging. In September, at the very time that he was flaying the capitulatory politics of the Pabloites, Healy was telling Socialist Outlook readers that the forthcoming Labour Party conference presented an opportunity to deliver the knock-out blow to the bureaucracy. And how was this to be achieved? It is to be hoped, Healy wrote, that the Bevanites on the platform will join forces with the rank and file on the floor and thus guide the conference in a real Socialist direction. Healy evaded this difficulty with his usual political dishonesty. Thus he denounced as a shameful cover for the hideous facts of class collaboration Lawrences endorsement of the Paris Peace Congress,⁵⁸ yet he refused to criticise Jennie Lee for having attended the same conference. Bevans resignation from the shadow cabinet in April, in protest at Attlees support for US

warmongering in South East Asia, prompted a breathless eulogy from Healy. Implicit in the position put forward by Bevan, Healy wrote, is the recognition that what the world faces today in its struggle for survival is an international class struggle. Implicit in the statement of policy he proposes is a rallying cry for international working class action. Implicit in his attack on the counter-revolutionary plans of American Big Business is an appeal to the great and traditionally militant American working class. Our task is to aid in spelling out the programme for Labour implied in his stand. Healy's Group, small though it was, represented an obstacle to the Stalinists' aims. It was scarcely accidental, therefore, that in March the CP weekly *World News* published an attack on Trotskyism which included potted political biographies of Healy and other former RCPers involved with *Socialist Outlook*. The Labour Party right wing gratefully accepted the political ammunition provided by the Stalinists, and the following month the National Executive Committee pronounced that anyone associated with *Socialist Outlook* was ineligible for membership of the Labour Party. Still read *Socialist Outlook*64 and he was able to rally broad support within the labour movement, in particular among the Bevanites, who were themselves under threat of expulsion. It was in co-operation with the Bevanites paper that Healy carried out his intervention in the Blue Union struggle of In the course of this struggle thousands of dockers in the northern ports, disgusted by their union officials' collaboration with the employers, deserted the Transport and General Workers Union and joined the National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union known as the Blue Union because of the colour of its membership cards. The NASDU leadership proceeded to lead successful actions against compulsory overtime and against attempts to deny its members employment under the Dock Labour Scheme.

Chapter 3 : Socialist Labour Group - Wikipedia

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