

Archive: Power Politics and the Labour Party

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That external factors would one day dominate British politics was never conceived by the founders of British Socialism. Apart from one reference to the foreign policy of the Manchester School, the original volume of *Fabian Essays* never mentions the world outside Britain except to point to a domestic moral. Indeed, this sort of parochialism was the Fabians' greatest strength. They found socialism wandering aimlessly in Cloud Cuckoo land and set it working on the gas and water problems of the nearest town or village. The modern Welfare State is their monument.

But the very success of Fabianism as an instrument of domestic reform condemns it as a guide to world politics. The world as a whole has never resembled the delicately integrated democracy which Britain developed in the three centuries following the Civil Wars – nor have more than a tiny minority of the states within it. *Leviathan* is still a better handbook for foreign policy than *Fabian Essays*.

An understanding of the power element in politics is the first necessity for a sound foreign policy. The trade union movement, as the other main contributor to British socialism, can still, as so often in the past, go some way towards filling this gap in Fabian theory. But the trade union movement is even more afflicted by parochialism, and it tends to intervene in the formation of foreign policy to correct errors rather than to give positive direction.

The major positive influences on Labour Party thinking about world affairs have come from neither the Fabians nor the trade unions, but from the liberal-Nonconformist wing with its bias towards pacifism, and the neo-Marxist wing, stemming from continental Social Democracy and Communism.

Because the Party lacks any systematic theory of world affairs, it has too often fallen victim to the besetting sin of all progressive opposition movements – utopianism. In particular, it tends to discount the power element in politics, seeing it as a specific evil of the existing system rather than a generic characteristic of politics as such. The liberal utopian believes that if left to themselves men will automatically act for the common interest. The Marxist utopian exaggerates the influence of economic factors on human behaviour and believes that all social evils stem from a bad system of property relations. In both cases depreciation of the power factor entails an inadequate understanding of the techniques of power.

Conservative movements which represent the ruling class have the opposite temptation. For them the exercise of power easily becomes an end in itself and the sole aim of all political activity. In Mannheim's words: 'The Conservative type of knowledge originally is the sort of knowledge giving practical control. It consists of habitual orientations towards those factors which are immanent in the present situation.' Thus it makes for obsolescent administrative techniques serve as a substitute for policy in a changing world.

The foreign policies of the British parties bear out these generalisations. The Conservatives have a congenital grasp of the rules for protecting British interests as defined in the Victorian heyday. But they are slow to recognise changes in those interests and even slower to understand changes in the world within which their rules of thumb must be applied.

The Labour Party, on the other hand, has always been more alive to change in world affairs than to continuity. It is highly sensitive to the economic factors in international life. But it tends to see power politics as a disease peculiar to capitalism and to under-estimate or misjudge the power factors in a given situation. At worst it is so little conscious of Britain's national interests that its attention can be attracted to world affairs only by high-flown formulas which quickly lose their relevance. Particularly when the Labour Party is on office, foreign policy becomes the last refuge of utopianism.

For the utopian, Heaven is always around the corner, every evil has a single cause and this a single cure – there is always 'One Way Only.' Socialist attitudes to war provide many examples. Esperanto has always been popular among socialists on the grounds that nations would cease to fight one another if they all spoke the same language. Though war is at least 3,000 years older than capitalism, many socialists

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believe that capitalism is the only cause of war, and that therefore the Soviet Union could not commit aggression because it has a 'socialist' economy. Others maintain that the only serious danger of war springs from disparities between the living standards of the peoples; yet it is difficult to find a single war in modern times which was caused primarily by such disparities.

Between the wars this type of utopianism had a damaging influence on Labour's attitude to world affairs. Despite the contribution of the two Labour Governments towards the maintenance of collective security through the League of Nations – above all in the Geneva Protocol – the first great crisis of collective security in Manchuria swept the Party into an ostrich-like policy of total war-resistance. In 1934 the trade unions forced the Party back to collective security and in 1935 Bevin led a crushing attack against the pacifism of Lansbury and the pseudo-revolutionary naïveté of the Socialist League. Yet much Labour propaganda continued pacifist in spirit right up to the outbreak of war, and the Party's attitude towards rearmament remains equivocal.

Most British socialists had been preaching for years that war was the inevitable consequence of capitalism and that no capitalist government could be trusted to use power for peaceful ends. This belief made nonsense of the Labour Party's policy for maintaining collective security through the League of Nations, which was indeed from that point of view an 'international burglars' union,' as Sir Stafford Cripps maintained. But the bulk of the Party, while believing in the intrinsic wickedness of capitalism, expected capitalist states in the League to behave more altruistically than states have ever behaved in history. The League of Nations failed, as Arthur Henderson said, not because its machinery was imperfect, but because its members would not use the machinery against their own conception of their national interests. But when have states ever shown such altruism?

Parochialism also played its part. The shortcomings of British conservatism always stood between the Labour Party and the foreign scene. In the 'twenties many English socialists thought Britain more responsible than Germany for the First World War. In the 'thirties they thought the City of London responsible for Hitler. This sort of parochialism survived the Second World War: in the 'fifties a Labour Party Conference cheered the statement that Churchill was responsible for Stalinism in Russia. And it is not confined to socialists in Britain: Republicans in the US maintain that the Democratic Administration is responsible for Communism in China.

These criticisms of the Labour Party's attitude to world affairs do not apply to the foreign policy of the two brief pre-war Labour Governments and still less to the post-war foreign policy of Ernest Bevin, a man whose qualities of character, judgement and imagination go to make a great Foreign Secretary. But they are still valid for the bulk of the Party membership. Indeed, Bevin's foreign policy never obtained wholehearted approval from the more enthusiastic socialists in the Party, and many of those who did approve it believed that it was not to any significant degree a socialist policy. Thus the party as a whole gave only reluctant support to the Government's handling of Great Power relations, though it took genuine pride in the Government's Commonwealth and Colonial policy – above all, the transfer of power in India.

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The essence of British socialism lies not in its contingent analysis or techniques, but in its determination to apply moral principles to social life. It belongs to that stream of Christian thought which, while insisting that the individual human personality is an end in itself – indeed the only temporal end in itself – believes that all men are brothers, and must realise their brotherhood in this world by creating a society in which they enjoy an equal right and duty to freedom and responsibility. It is in this sense that socialism is inseparable from democracy.

As a political programme, socialism developed during the nineteenth century in a number of industrialised European democracies as a protest against economic conditions which prevented working men from enjoying the freedom Liberalism claimed to have won for them in the political field. The analysis it made of those economic conditions and the techniques it invented to change them are still relevant to societies which resemble the industrial capitalist democracies of the nineteenth century, but elsewhere they have less guidance to offer. Confronted by American capitalism and primitive peasant societies, socialists must make a new analysis and develop new techniques by which to fulfil their moral principles. This is even more necessary when dealing with the world as a whole.

By choosing the phrase 'Social Democracy' to distinguish their policy from that of other parties, socialists assume that society has already realised political democracy. But in world affairs the political foundations on which the theory of Social Democracy is built have yet to be laid. Indeed the basic problem which socialists face in the world as a whole is almost the opposite to that which they have hitherto

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faced in national societies. Instead of adjusting the economic system to realise a community already established in the political field, they must adjust political relations to realise a community already established in the technological field. They must build a world society before they can build a socialist world.

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What then is the most hopeful path towards a world society?

Orthodox Labour theory maintains that a world society can best be created by establishing the rule of law through a universal organisation like the League of Nations or the United Nations; within this general framework of international order nations can be brought into closer and more lasting co-operation through regional or functional institutions like OPEC or the Atlantic Pact.

At the present time international order is at once more necessary and more difficult to establish than ever before. Modern technology has both united and shrunk the world. Nation states are becoming ever stronger and closer to one another. Events in one part of the world immediately affect power relationships in all other parts. In particular, any local war in which new weapons of mass destruction threaten even the survival of the human race. All states have – and recognise – a powerful common interest in preventing war and economic crisis.

On the other hand, many parts of the world are undergoing revolutionary changes on a scale which occurs only once in a millennium. In non-communist Asia and Africa, the peoples are growing faster than their food production. They are demanding at once national independence, freedom from white control and a rapid rise in living standards. The rest of Asia and Eastern Europe is organised under a totalitarian regime which believes itself destined to rule the world. The United States of America, economically the most powerful of all countries, has leapt in a few years from isolationism to active participation in world affairs.

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While these great changes are still in progress there is a danger in creating international institutions which attempt to set a rigid pattern for relations between the powers. Unless international institutions allow for major changes, they will not only break down, but will even increase the danger of world conflict. The juridical

approach to international affairs is especially dangerous, since international law reflects a pattern of power which is changing daily. An international system must be founded on recognised common interests or a stable pattern of power – or both. It may then develop habits of co-operation which enable it to survive when the basis of interest or power has disappeared. But the development of common interests or the establishment of a stable power pattern must precede and not follow the creation of rigid legal or institutional forms.

The United Nations assembly, for example, has assumed a universal authority, although decisions may be taken by a majority of states with little knowledge of or interest in the issues at stake and representing a minority both of people and of power. By its handling of the problems posed by Chinese intervention in the Korean War, the United Nations had already weakened its prestige throughout Asia. On the other hand, when Britain asked the Security Council to uphold her rights in Persia under international law, the majority of countries were not prepared to support international law. In a case which seemed contrary to their sense of justice and history. By claiming a type of authority it is unable to exercise, the United Nations risks discrediting the very idea of international order.

One way out of the dilemma is to create regional institutions linking countries which are likely to have a continuing common interest however the major changes in the world develop. This is a wise course for small states which cannot hope separately to influence world affairs. But it carries dangers for a world power like Britain, which needs close co-operation with states in every region. For regional groups can exist only by discrimination against states outside their region. A regional federation does not necessarily contribute towards the creation of a world society. Indeed, the most dangerous conflicts in the world at present lie primarily between the two great continental federations, the United States of America and the USSR. The Commonwealth is the exception which proves this rule. Membership of the Commonwealth does not limit co-operation with states outside it precisely because the Commonwealth has no separate institutions.

Throughout its period of office, the Labour Government was severely handicapped by the absolute and relative decline in Britain's power. Peace found the ruins of Britain's nineteenth-century imperium strewn throughout a power vacuum which was flanked by two jealous continental super-states, each immensely stronger than before the war. But for the first few years Britain's weakness was masked by the prestige of victory, by the even greater decline of other European states, by Russia's

exhaustion, and by America's readiness to accept Britain's advice until she found her feet. Thus, though even Britain's survival as an independent state was in jeopardy, the skill, patience and understanding of the labour Government made British foreign policy the main constructive element in world affairs. And it was largely British statesmanship which not only carried the world through the emergencies of the post-war crisis, but also laid some foundations for a lasting world order...

...Germany remains the most dangerous problem for British policy in the future. Britain cannot ignore the possibility that Germany may seek national unity either by war with Russia or by alliance with Russia. It has been fashionable to see the answer in integrating Western Germany into some form of West European union. Britain herself has been unwilling to join such a union for fear of losing her independence outside Europe. But it is already obvious that if European unity is built without Britain it will be dominated by Germany. As Germany revives Britain may be compelled to integrate herself more deeply with Europe than is compatible with her other economic and political interests. Indeed, America is the only state with sufficient power to spare for correcting the balance in Western Europe. But many Americans believe that Germany's revival would justify their withdrawal from Europe instead of requiring them to play a more active part in Europe themselves.

Relations with the United States have thus become the central problem of British foreign policy. But material and moral factors severely limit the range of choice. Strategically, Britain needs America more than America needs Britain. Economically, though Britain may dispense with direct American aid at home, her plans for economic development abroad demand large-scale dollar aid. Politically, America's interests are far closer to those of Britain than the interest of any other present or potential ally; indeed, the Commonwealth would not survive a rupture between Britain and the USA. Morally, as a progressive democracy America is far closer to Britain than is Western Europe, southern Asia, or, of course, the Soviet Union. Anglo-American unity is indeed a condition of Britain's survival. (...)

One thing at least is certain. The situation of 1945-50, in which the Labour Party's foreign policy came of age, has gone for good. Too many minds are still dominated by the picture of two continental super-states glowering at each other over a power vacuum in which Britain is the only strong state. The emergence of Germany, Japan and China as independent powers has already changed that picture. Within a few years southern Asia, the Middle East and Africa may also take the stage in their own right. Thus the vision of a world shaped almost exclusively by Anglo-Saxon

policy is fading at the very moment when it seems most likely to become reality. It is much more probable that the future will bring a return to a world of many powers in which decisions are made by the methods of traditional power politics. If this is so, conventional diplomacy will come into its own again and the adjustment of national differences by negotiation and compromise will become more urgent than the construction of international institutions or the execution of moral blueprints.

These suggestions are offered without excessive confidence. The known facts are always so small a proportion of total reality that the fruits of scientific method should never be taken as rational grounds for defeatism or over-confidence. Three predictions are at least fairly safe. Britain's influence on world affairs in the immediate future will depend more than ever on her material power to help a friend or harm an enemy. Britain's fundamental interest in unity with the United States will remain supreme. And an understanding of power politics will be more than ever necessary to a successful socialist foreign policy.

Denis Healey was born in 1917. After serving in North Africa, Sicily and Italy in World War Two, he became International Secretary of the Labour Party from 1945, working closely with the Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin. A member of parliament from 1952, he served in the Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s, and as the Party's Deputy Leader from 1981 to 1983. He is the author of several books, including a memoir, *The Time of My Life* (1989) and a wonderful anthology of poetry and prose, *My Secret Planet: The Books of My Life* (1992).