

The formation of the Labour Party-the voice of the organized working class 1880-1914?

Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* 1961

Of political parties claiming socialism to be their aim, the Labour Party has always been one of the most dogmatic - not about socialism, but about the parliamentary system.

Empirical and flexible about all else, its leaders have always made devotion to that system their fixed point of reference and the conditioning factor of their political behaviour. This is not simply to say that the Labour Party has never been a party of revolution: such parties have normally been quite willing to use the opportunities the parliamentary system offered as one means of furthering their aims. It is rather that the leaders of the Labour Party have always rejected any kind of political action (such as industrial action for political purposes) which fell, or which appeared to them to fall, outside the framework and conventions of the parliamentary system. The Labour Party has not only been a parliamentary party; it has been a party deeply imbued by parliamentarism. And in this respect, there is no distinction to be made between Labour's political and its industrial leaders. Both have been equally determined that the Labour Party should not stray from the narrow path of parliamentary politics.

the Labour Party remains, in practice, what it has always been- a party of modest social reform in a capitalist system within whose confines it is ever more firmly and by now irrevocably rooted.

Theodore Rothstein writing in *The Social Democrat* 1908

[In the 1880s] the English working-class was no longer a raw material which one might help to shape according to one's better light. It was well organised in trade unions, it had behind it a long and very pronounced historical experience, it had its traditions and acquired habits of mind – in short, it was a manufactured article, as it were. And what was still more important, those traditions and habits of mind were thoroughly bourgeois – not negatively-bourgeois as is the case with a working-class still unripe, but positively-bourgeois as comes from over-ripeness. In these circumstances what could and should have been the policy of the Socialists? The principles laid down in the *Communist Manifesto* were correct as ever – only they were in the English conditions of the eighties utterly inapplicable. By no permanent and intimate co-operation with the masses, such as was urged by Marx and Engels, could the Socialists have hoped “to revolutionise them from within”; on the contrary, what would have been achieved was merely the adaptation of the Socialists to the mental level of the masses which spelt not confusion” not theoretical unripeness, but Liberalism. Those who doubt this need only turn to the fate of those numerous ex-Socialists who have left the S.D.F. and “gone over” to the masses, but are now to be found in the ranks of the two bourgeois parties. The English working-class was not to be revolutionised from within, as many attempts, started with the blessings of Engels. himself, have proved by their dismal failure. Indeed, the International itself, in so far as Marx, in starting it, had the hope of “revolutionising” the British trade

unions, was a ghastly failure – not only did the trade unions prove obstinate in their Liberalism and bourgeois Radicalism, but they ultimately withdrew, and the whole business collapsed.

No, however lamentable it may appear now, a certain intransigence, a certain modicum of impossibilism, was in those days not only inevitable but really necessary, if the Socialist movement was to subsist. It was all very well for Engels – and the idea is still entertained largely even now – to ascribe the impossibilist tendencies of the S.D.F. of that time to the baneful influence of Hyndman and other leaders; rather were Hyndman and his colleagues themselves semi-impossibilists only because the condition of their work demanded it. No other organisation, with totally different men at the top, would have conducted itself differently; if it had, it would have disappeared where the S.D.F. had survived.

Beatrice Webb 1895

Last night we had an informal conference with the ILP leaders. Ramsay MacDonald and Frank Smith (who are members both of the Fabians and the ILP) have been for some time harping on the desirability of an understanding between the two societies. To satisfy them Sidney (Webb) arranged a little dinner of Keir Hardie, Tom Mann, Edward Pease and George Bernard Shaw and the two intermediaries. I think the principals on either side felt it would come to nothing. Nevertheless, it was interesting.

Tom Mann said the Progressives on the LCC were not convinced Socialists. No one should get the votes of the ILP who did not pledge himself to the 'Nationalisation of the Means of Production'. Keir Hardie, who impressed me very unfavourably, deliberately chooses this policy as the only one which he can boss. His only chance of leadership lies in the creation of an organisation "against the government"; he knows little and cares less for any constructive thought or action. But with Tom Mann it is different. he is possessed with the idea of a 'church' - of a body of men all professing exactly the same creed and all working in exact uniformity to exactly the same end. No idea which is not 'absolute', which admits of any compromise or qualification, no adhesion which is tempered with doubt, has the slightest attraction to him. And, as Shaw remarked, he is deteriorating. This stumping the country, talking abstractions and raving emotions, is not good for a man's judgment, and the perpetual excitement leads, among other things, to too much whisky.

I do not think the conference ended in any understanding. We made clear our position. We were a purely educational body, we did not seek to become a 'party'. We should continue our policy of inoculation, of giving to each class, to each person, that came under our influence the exact dose of collectivism that they were prepared to assimilate.

Robert Blatchford *Merrie England* 1894

Socialists do not propose by a single Act of Parliament, nor by a sudden revolution, to put all men on an equality, and compel them to remain so. Socialism is not a wild dream of a happy land, where the apples will drop off the trees into our open mouths, the fish come out of the rivers and fry themselves for dinner, and the looms turn out

ready-made suits of velvet with gold buttons, without the trouble of coaling the engine. Neither is it a dream of a nation of stained-glass angels, who always love their neighbours better than themselves, and who never need to work unless they wish.

Socialism is a scientific scheme of national organization, entirely wise, just, and practical. It is a kind of national cooperation. Its programme consists, essentially, of one demand, that the land, and all other instruments of production and exchange, shall be the common property of the nation, and shall be used and managed by the nation for the nation.

Keir Hardie, *From Serfdom to Socialism* 1907

This generation has grown up ignorant of the fact that socialism is as old as the human race. When civilization dawned upon the world, primitive man was living his rude Communistic life, sharing all things in common with every member of the tribe. Later when the race lived in villages, man, the communist, moved about among the communal flocks and herds on communal land. The peoples who have carved their names most deeply on the tables of human story all set out on their conquering career as communists, and their downward path begins with the day when they finally turned away from it and began to gather personal possessions. When the old civilizations were putrefying, the still small voice of Jesus the Communist stole over the earth like a soft refreshing breeze carrying healing wherever it went.

The programme of the ILP 1893

ILP declaration of aims

'the interests of Labour are paramount to, and must take precedence of, all other interests, and that the advancement of these interests of Labour must be sought by political and constitutional action...our programme aims to secure the collective and communal ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange'

<https://radicalsocialistbritishplanning.files.wordpress.com/2016/07/ilp-programme-and-policy-1893.pdf>

Declaration adopted by the LRC 1900

the objectives of the LRC were to form 'a distinct Labour group in Parliament, who shall have their own whips, and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to cooperate with any party which for the time being may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interests of labour.'¹

Manchester Guardian Report of the formation of the LRC

London, Tuesday evening

The Labour party are following the example of the Irish. The unity meeting held at the Memorial Hall this afternoon marks a most important point in the Parliamentary history of the different Labour and Socialist groups. The warfare between those

groups has been injurious all round both to themselves and to the Liberal party. No fewer than 30 seats were affected in one way or another at the last election by these unfortunate struggles. The Liberal party cannot be expected to deal with a number of isolated groups who would be as ready to throw over one another as the larger party of progress. But this afternoon's meeting marks an important step forward.

Mr Burns's defeat of the policy of excluding middle-class men was especially significant of a larger and wiser tolerance than has been hitherto shown. If the party of progress is grown weaker in Park Lane, it is obviously growing stronger where its real strength is to be ultimately sought – in the homes of the poor.

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/28/founding-of-the-labour-party-1900>

Keir Hardie outlines the philosophy of the LRC in 1900 as Labourism rather than socialism

The theory and practice which accepted the possibility of social change within the existing framework of society; which rejected the revolutionary violence and action implicit in Chartist ideas of physical force; and which increasingly recognised the working of political democracy of the parliamentary variety as the practical means of achieving its own aims and objectives

Lib-Labism?

Ramsey McDonald 1903 argued for

a united democratic party appealing to the people on behalf of a single, comprehensive belief in social reconstruction. The party may not be called Liberal, and will be as far ahead of Liberalism as Liberalism itself was of its predecessor Whiggism.

Ralph Miliband 1961

The only issue on which the Labour Party was unambiguously pledged was the legislative reversal of the Taff Vale decision of 1901, which had seriously jeopardized the unions' right to strike, but which had also been of crucial importance to the LRC, since it was this above all else which had persuaded more unions that they did indeed require independent representation in the House of Commons, and who therefore agreed to affiliate to the LRC. The Trades Dispute Act 1906 ... ultimately met the Trade Unions' demands could legitimately be claimed as a success for the Parliamentary Labour Party.

1900 Labour Party General Election Manifesto

Adequate Maintenance from National Funds for the Aged Poor
Public Provision of Better Houses for the People
Useful Work for the Unemployed
Adequate Maintenance for Children
No Compulsory Vaccination
Public Control of the liquor Traffic

Nationalisation of Land and Railways
Relief of Local Rates by Grants from the National Exchequer
Legislative Independence for all parts of the Empire
Abolition of the Standing Army, and the Establishment of a Citizen Force
The People to decide on Peace or War
Graduated Income-Tax
Shorter Parliaments
Adult Suffrage
Registration Reform
Payment of Members

The object of these measures is to enable the people ultimately to obtain the Socialisation of the Means of Production, Distribution, and Exchange, to be controlled by a Democratic State in the interests of the entire Community, and the Complete Emancipation of labour from the Domination of Capitalism and Landlordism, with the Establishment of Social and Economic Equality between the Sexes.

1906 Labour Party General Election Manifesto

This election is to decide whether or not Labour is to be fairly represented in Parliament.

The House of Commons is supposed to be the people's House, and yet the people are not there.

Landlords, employers, lawyers, brewers, and financiers are there in force. Why not Labour?

The Trade Unions ask the same liberty as capital enjoys. They are refused.

The aged poor are neglected.

The slums remain; overcrowding continues, whilst the land goes to waste.

Shopkeepers and traders are overburdened with rates and taxation, whilst the increasing land values, which should relieve the ratepayers, go to people who have not earned them.

Wars are fought to make the rich richer, and underfed schoolchildren are still neglected.

Chinese Labour is defended because it enriches the mine owners.

The unemployed ask for work, the Government gave them a worthless Act, and now, when you are beginning to understand the causes of your poverty, the red herring of Protection is drawn across your path.

Protection, as experience shows, is no remedy for poverty and unemployment. It serves to keep you from dealing with the land, housing, old age, and other social problems!

You have it in your power to see that Parliament carries out your wishes. The Labour Representation-Executive appeals to you in the name of a million Trade Unionists to forget all the political differences which have kept you apart in the past, and vote for [candidate name].

January 1910 Labour Party General Election Manifesto

A general election has been forced upon the country by the action of the House of Lords rejecting the Budget. The great question you are to decide is whether the Peers or the people are to rule this country.

Each Session since the last general election important Bills, upon which the House of Commons had spent much time, have been mutilated or destroyed by the House of Lords, an irresponsible body which represents nothing but its own class interests. Not content with this, they now claim the right to decide what taxes shall be paid, upon whom they shall be levied, and for what purpose they shall be spent. They also claim to dictate the date at which Parliament shall be dissolved. The time has come to put an end to their power to override the will of the Commons.

The country has allowed landowners to pocket millions of pounds every year in the share of unearned increment, and yet they object to pay a small tax upon what, in justice, should belong to the State. They wish at all costs to preserve their power to plunder the people.

The Labour party welcomes this opportunity to prove that the feudal age is past and that the people are no longer willing to live on the sufferance of the Lords.

The issues you have to decide are simple. Our present system of land ownership has devastated our countryside, has imposed heavy burdens upon our industries, has cramped the development of our towns, and has crippled capital and impoverished labour.

The Lords must go

At this crisis the Labour party merits your support. It comes with great achievements and with a determination to do much more.

In 1906 it pledged itself to restore to trade unions the same liberty as capital enjoyed during trade disputes.

THAT PLEDGE HAS BEEN FULFILLED

It pledged itself to insist upon old-age pension.

THAT PLEDGE HAS BEEN FULFILLED

It pledged itself to help drastic housing reform.

THAT PLEDGE HAS BEEN FULFILLED

It pledged itself to work for the relief of the burdens on persons of small or moderate means by the taxation of unearned incomes and land values.

THAT PLEDGE HAS BEEN FULFILLED

It pledged itself to pay special attention to the unemployed, and to compel any and every Government to contribute to the solution of this problem.

THAT PLEDGE HAS BEEN FULFILLED

The experience of the last four years has demonstrated the value of the Labour Party acting on independent lines. There still remain many problems to be solved.

- The right to work has still to be won, but is now well within the range of practical politics.
- The Poor Law must be broken up and pauperism abolished.
- Old-age pensions must be extended and increased on their present non-contributory basis.
- Restrictions upon the franchise, including the sex bar, must be swept away.

The working and middle classes are still overburdened with rates and taxes. All these problems will demand the attention of an active, determined, and independent party, drawn from the people and in touch with the people. The Labour Party, therefore, appeals to you to renew your confidence in it, to add to its ranks, and increase its power. Vote for the Labour candidates. The land for the people. The wealth for the wealth producers. Down with privilege. Up with the people.

December 1910 Labour Party General Election Manifesto

You are again being asked to return a majority pledged to remove the House of Lords as a block in the working of our Constitution. Do it, and do it emphatically.

The Lords must go

But you ought not to allow this to cover up the questions in which you are specially interested.

The iniquitous Osborne Judgement

The iniquitous Osborne Judgement, which deprives organised Labour of the power to protect itself by political action, either locally or nationally, must be reversed.

Do you think that you protect yourselves if the doors of the House of Commons are closed to You?

The Osborne Judgement is only the latest example of Judge-made Law, from which you have already suffered so much.

Payments to members

You should also support payment of Members which, with the reversal of the Osborne Judgement, is now the Charter of the Trade Unionist.

The New Parliament, will be called upon to deal with the right to work; sickness insurance, land reform; adult suffrage; Poor Law reform; factory inspection; medical treatment for school children.

None of these subjects can be properly considered unless there is a strong and independent Party of Labour sitting in the House of Lords.

Let all petty differences go to the four winds. Now is the time to unite. The poverty of one is the poverty of all. Let those who suffer join to remove their suffering. It can be removed in no other way.

The Labour Party appeals to you to stand by yourselves and vote for the Labour candidates.

Colne Valley Guardian 1907

It is somewhat of a paradox but nevertheless true, that the measure of its discontent, and the higher the wages, the more eager is the straining after the chimerical ideals of Socialism. For the last seven or eight years the Colne Valley has enjoyed an unparalleled period of commercial prosperity. That has not been due entirely to the manufacturers, nor yet to the mill-workers but to both combined."

Victor Grayson election leaflet

I am appealing to you as one of your own class. I want emancipation from the wage-slavery of Capitalism. I do not believe that we are divinely destined to be drudges. Through the centuries we have been the serfs of an arrogant aristocracy. We have toiled in the factories and workshops to grind profits with which to glut the greedy maw of the Capitalist class. Their children have been fed upon the fat of the land. Our children have been neglected and handicapped in the struggle for existence. We have served the classes and we have remained a mob. The time for our emancipation has come. We must break the rule of the rich and take our destinies into our own hands. Let charity begin with our children. Workers, who respect their wives, who love their children, and who long for a fuller life for all. A vote for the landowner or the capitalist is treachery to your class. To give your child a better chance than you have had, think carefully ere you make your cross. The other classes have had their day. It is our turn now."



Will Dyson, *The Daily Herald* (1913)

ON THE WAY TO NOWHERE

Ramsay MacDonald (leading the Labour Party into the Land of Compromise):

"Forward, my four-footed brother, forward, and in spite of all they say, let us continue to take advantage, in the devilish diplomatic way we are at present doing, of the fact that the Old Party is going in the same direction!"

John Bruce Glasier 1911

"I noticed that Ramsay MacDonald in speaking of the appeal we should send out for capital used the word 'Democratic' rather than 'Labour' or 'Socialist' as describing the character of the newspaper. I rebuked him flatly and said we would have no 'democratic' paper but a Socialist and Labour one - boldly proclaimed. Why does MacDonald always seem to try and shirk the word Socialism except when he is writing critical books about the subject."