

Narratives of Delusion
in the Political Practice
of the Labour Left
1931–1945

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By

Roger Spalding

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For Susan and Max

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PREFACE

The principal impulse to write this work came from a desire to understand why Labour's left-wing, the Labour Left, had, until 2015, effectively disappeared. This study is primarily an examination of the metropolitan leadership of the Labour Left, the figures who played the principal role in shaping the concerns and attitudes of the Left. The Labour Left is a difficult entity to define in precise terms, this is, in part, because it has no sharply defined body of doctrine; it did have, at particular times a set of shared outlooks, but even then individuals often placed their own particular stress on the elements within that set of positions. It is for this reason that this work contains three studies of prominent members of the Left, illustrating the varied contributions defining this grouping, and the nuanced nature of their individual political outlooks. On one issue, though, the Labour Left has always taken a clear position: that it was vital to remain within the Labour Party. This attitude distinguished it from left-wing individuals and organisations that joined the Party for short-term tactical reasons, like, for example, the covert Communists who formed the leadership of the Party's Labour League of Youth in the late 1930s.¹ Combined with this loyalty to the Party was an equally strong commitment to the use of electoral methods for the attainment of power. This is clearly apparent, for example, in an interview that Tony Benn gave to Alan Freeman, at that point a journalist on the Trotskyist paper, *Socialist Challenge*.²

Outside of commitments to the Party and to constitutional forms of action, the Left has defined itself in relation to the party leadership, and changing political contexts. For most of the 1930s the Left opposed rearmament under a Conservative-dominated government on the grounds that this would be placing weapons in the hands of the class enemy. As the Labour Party, post-1935, fearful of the growing power of the European dictators, moved towards support for rearmament, so the leadership's relationship with the Left became increasingly fractious, a process that culminated in

¹ Mervyn Jones, *Michael Foot* (London: Victor Gollancz 1994) 54.

² Alan Freeman, *The Benn Heresy* (London: Pluto Books, 1982) 152 – 187. Tony Benn, Ruth Winstone, *Conflicts of Interest: Diaries 1977 – 80* (London: Arrow Books Ltd 1991) 43.

the dissolution of the Socialist League, the Left's organisational expression, in 1937. In 1940, after Dunkirk, the Left became increasingly concerned with the imminent military threat posed by German forces; Michael Foot and his co-authors, in *Guilty Men*, lambasted the governments of the inter-war years for failing to produce sufficient arms to guarantee the nation's security. At the same time, through their commitment to the war effort, the Left moved closer to the Party leadership. The Left was chronically unreflective about its policy shifts, as *Guilty Men* demonstrates. In practice the Left was defined by where its leading figures stood in relation to the leadership and wider developments at any one time; to a large degree, then, the definition of the Left, in terms of policies has to be seen as fluid and constantly changing, sometimes to positions diametrically different from those held but a short time before.

In the past the Left had offered sustained and organised opposition to the policies of the Party that were perceived as non-socialist, both in opposition and in government. Trade Union reform, Harold Wilson's support for American policy in Vietnam, nuclear disarmament, and proposed changes to the Party's constitution, had provoked particularly sharp and prolonged periods of internal Party conflict in the 1950s and 1960s.³ Indeed, according to one "Blairite" view, the loss of the 1951 general election was the direct result of internal party divisions.⁴ Compared to the bitter arguments generated by Hugh Gaitskell's unsuccessful attempt to jettison Clause 4 of the Party's constitution in the 1950s, Tony Blair's successful re-writing of this clause met only tepid opposition. In October 1994 the *Guardian* noted that the *Tribune* rally, at the Party conference of that year "passed off with scarcely a mention of Clause Four and no rhetoric of betrayal". In 1974 the newly-formed Wilson government, well aware of the hostility of Trade Unionists and the Left to government regulation of Trade Unions, committed itself to repeal the 1971 Industrial Relations Act, a measure passed by the previous Conservative government. In October 1994 the *Guardian* noted Tony Blair's refusal to commit himself to the repeal of Conservative Trade Union legislation passed by the governments of Mrs Thatcher. When in office Blair maintained this position, but did not face the kind of

³ Anne Perkins, *Red Queen: The Authorised Biography of Barbara Castle* (London: Macmillan 2007) 323. K. O. Morgan, *Michael Foot: A Life* (London: Harper Perennial, 2008). Susan Crosland, *Tony Crosland* (London: Coronet Books, 1983) 102 – 104. Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan 1945 – 1960* (London: Paladin, 1975) 637 – 646.

⁴ Joe Haines, "Labour: 100 years of struggle" *Inside Labour* February 2000.

opposition that Harold Wilson had when he tried to introduce his own Trade Union legislation, based on the document, *In Place of Strife*. This was put together by Barbara Castle, with a title that paid homage to Aneurin Bevan's political testament, *In Place of Fear*, in the late 1960s. In the 1990s it appeared that the days when Labour's Left could have a direct impact on party policy had gone. The profile and size of Labour's Left had also shrunk. In 2007, according to one account, the Campaign Group of left-wing Labour MPs, formed in 1981 as an alternative to the *Tribune* Group, had 24 members⁵. In 2011 the Group's permanent membership was estimated at 14 MPs.⁶ The *Tribune* Group of MPs, once a mainstay of the parliamentary Left was in an even weaker position, a situation typified by the difficulties of the paper *Tribune*, from which it took its name.⁷ Neither of these groupings could consider touring the country to address large and enthusiastic gatherings at the rate of 4 or 5 a week, as the Tribunites had with their "Brains' Trusts" in the first half of the 1950s.⁸

The decline of the Left can, perhaps, in part be understood as one of the consequences of the collapse of Soviet communism and the Eastern Bloc. The idea that this development had a major impact on the way that political prospects could be imagined has found wide currency in both academic discourse, and discussion in the wider world.⁹ The belief that the events of 1989 undermined the case for Socialism can also be seen as one of the elements of former Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron's response to Ed Miliband's 2013 conference speech. Labelling Miliband "Red Ed", and talking about Labour returning to 1970s style socialism were clearly references meant to identify the Opposition as bent on returning to a discredited past. The *Daily Mail's* assault on Miliband's deceased father, Ralph, in the same year, an attack which conflated adherence to Marxism with support for the Soviet Union, was also intended to link the Labour leader to the political oppression practiced in that discredited regime.¹⁰ The collapse of the Soviet Union clearly did have an impact on the political atmosphere; against that, however, is the

⁵ Alex Nunns, "What Became of the Labour Left?" *Red Pepper* September 2007.

⁶ Amber Elliot, "What's Left of the Labour Left?" *Total Politics* June 28 2011.

⁷ "Tribune Magazine to Close" *New Statesman* October 25 2011.

⁸ Mark Jenkins, *Bevanism: Labour's High Tide* (Nottingham: Spokesman Books 1979) 171 – 3.

⁹ Richard J. Evans "Prologue: *What is History Now?*" in *What is History Now?* Ed. David Cannadine (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2002) 6. Alexi Sayle, "The writing was on the wall" *Sunday Times Magazine* May 3 2009.

¹⁰ "The Man Who Hated Britain" *Daily Mail* September 28 2013.

fact that the Labour Left had made quite clear, since at least the 1940s, the differences it had with Russian Communism. Here, for example, Michael Foot used the pages of *Tribune* to support Britain's pro-Western stance at the outset of the Cold War.

Whatever follies have been committed by American policy...the major purpose *and the major result* has been to provide aid without which recovery from the war would have been infinitely more arduous. The major purpose of Soviet policy has been the complete subjection of as many countries as possible to the Soviet will... These broad distinctions...made it inevitable that Britain should develop closer ties with the United States than with the Soviet Union.¹¹

The Left has always, since the Bolshevik Revolution, had to deal with the charge that they were essentially Communists under another name; this has taken many forms from conspiracies publicised by the *Daily Mail*, to lone individuals shouting: 'Go back to Russia.'¹² Having survived several decades of this type of ill-informed abuse, it seems difficult to believe that the Left should succumb to a heightened version of this kind of pressure, particularly in response to the collapse of a regime from which it was so publicly disengaged. Indeed, the linkage of Soviet Communism to the Labour Left assumes that left-wing politics are simply a matter of degree along a continuum of political thought. The socialism of the Labour Left is not simply less extreme than other varieties, it is different in kind.

Other accounts stress the roles of Tony Blair and Neil Kinnock in curbing the strength of the Left and, as Joe Haines put it, "making Labour electable".¹³ Other, more radical voices, describe essentially the same process, a little differently:

But how did the left reach this state of apparent weakness on the one hand and vulnerability on the other? Any explanation must be set against the context of a decades-long beating at the hands of Neil Kinnock and then Blair. Since Kinnock's 1985 Conference speech and the expulsion of the

¹¹ Michael Foot, "Socialists and the Atlantic Pact" *Tribune* May 20 1949

¹² See the publication of the "Zinoviev Letter" in the *Daily Mail* October 25 1924. In 1952 Hugh Gaitskell claimed: "about one-sixth of the constituency delegates [to the 1952 Party conference] appear to be Communist or Communist-inspired." Jones, *Michael Foot* 192.

¹³ Haines, "Labour: 100 years of struggle".

Militant Tendency, the Labour leadership has sought to delegitimise the left.¹⁴

It is difficult to deny that this has happened, that New Labour achieved its objective of marginalising the parliamentary left. This conclusion, though, simply raises another question: Why was Labour's leadership able to do this at this point? In the early 1960s, in the aftermath of defeating the party leader, Hugh Gaitskell, at conference on the issue of Unilateral Nuclear Disarmament, the Labour Left of the time found itself subject to a great deal of pressure. The Campaign for Democratic Socialism (CDS) was established to campaign in the constituencies to reverse Gaitskell's defeat. At least one historian has suggested that the CDS was funded by the CIA.¹⁵ One of Gaitskell's close supporters, Tony Crosland, wrote to him suggesting that "20 hard-boiled extreme left" figures should be expelled from the parliamentary party.¹⁶ Despite the intensity of this conflict, which in the short-term Gaitskell won, when the vote was reversed at the following, 1961 conference, the Left did not buckle under the pressure. In 1964, following Gaitskell's sudden death, Harold Wilson, then still regarded by many, due to his resignation in 1951 over health charges, as a man of the Left, was elected Party leader.

The philosophical consequences of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the organisational impact of Tony Blair and his precursors undoubtedly played a part in the decline of the Labour Left; the contention here is that they are not the decisive factors in that process. The origins of the present parlous situation have to be sought, it will be argued, much further back in the Party's history. It will also be argued that the current problems of the Left have to be seen as the product of long-term developments, beginning in the early 1930s, rather than developments wrought by Tony Blair and other "modernisers". Joe Haines referred to Gaitskell as the "first moderniser"; a turn of phrases designed to demonstrate Blair's lineage within the Party.¹⁷

The election of Jeremy Corbyn in 2015 may seem like a reversal of the trend outlined above, the Left that secured his election is though very different from the Left discussed in the main body of this work: One of the key characteristics of the Left of the 1930s and 1940s was its loyalty to the

¹⁴ Nunns, "What Became of the Labour Left?"

¹⁵ A. J. Davies, *To Build Jerusalem* (London: Michael Joseph 1992) 296.

¹⁶ Crosland, *Tony Crosland*, 104.

¹⁷ Haines, "Labour: 100 years of struggle".

Labour Party. For Bevan, as Michael Foot frequently states in his biography of his mentor, Labour Party membership was non-negotiable; this belief flowed from the view that the Party and the Trade Unions were the organisations of the working class, and no serious socialist could move away from that.¹⁸ John McDonnell, Labour's current shadow chancellor, is reported to have said in 2012:

I'm not in the Labour Party because I'm a believer of the Labour Party as some supreme body or something God-given or anything like that. It's a tactic. It's as simple as that. If it's no longer a useful vehicle, move on.¹⁹

When Aneurin Bevan was expelled from the party in 1939, he did his level best to get re-admitted as soon as he could. When the fellow-traveller, D. N. Pritt was expelled in 1940 he was, apparently quite blasé about it, declaring that the party no longer stood for socialism. McDonnell's attitude seems much closer to Pritt's than to Bevan's, the great icon of the traditional Labour Left.

Some elements of the Left that has coalesced around Corbyn also exhibit ideological positions that are much more explicitly linked to the views of classic Marxist thinkers; McDonnell, for example, has named Marx, Lenin and Trotsky as his "most significant" political influences.²⁰ A recent article on the Labour Party Marxists' website has called for the abolition of the "standing army" and its replacement by a popular militia.²¹ The argumentation for this view, as the author acknowledged, comes directly from the works of authorities like Marx, Engels and Lenin. In his 1871 pamphlet, *The Civil War in France*, for example, Marx argued that the state, including the armed forces, was "an engine of class despotism", used by the bourgeoisie to dominate the mass of the population. He therefore noted with approval that: "The first decree of the Commune, therefore, was the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people".²² This article could be seen as simply the work of an individual, but as someone once said, "no man is an island", a context has to exist within which this work could be produced, a milieu had to be extant within which the author believes that such ideas would be seriously

¹⁸ Michael Foot, *Aneurin Bevan 1897 – 1945* (London: Paladin 1975) 310 – 311.

¹⁹ *Daily Telegraph* March 15 2016.

²⁰ *Daily Telegraph* March 15 2016.

²¹ Labour Party Marxists "A working class military programme". Accessed March 1 2016, <http://labourpartymarxists.org.uk/aworkingclassmilitaryprogramme/>.

²² Karl Marx, "The Civil War in France" (1871) in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels Selected Works* Vol 2 (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1973) 220.

considered. Aneurin Bevan, presented by his biographer, Michael Foot, as a consistent Marxist, did not routinely frame his arguments with reference to Marxist texts neither did he view the state as essentially a compromised class-based body. Bevan's analysis of what he claimed were the three principal forces in society, Poverty, Property and Democracy, were premised on the value of parliamentary democracy and the neutrality of the state.²³

Another distinctive feature of this 21st century left is that it is made up of a multitude of inter-connected groupings consisting of people who are and are not members of the Labour Party, often making extensive use of social media. Momentum, which developed out of the campaign to elect Corbyn as leader is perhaps the best known of these groupings, which often share personnel, for example, at the time of writing, Stan Keable, the secretary of Labour Party Marxists, was also Momentum's organiser in Hammersmith and Fulham. According to the *Daily Telegraph* Jon Lansman, a veteran Bennite, is, at the time of writing, sole director of Momentum Campaign Ltd.²⁴ Lansman also heads up Left Futures, an "independent online network" promoting "Forward thinking for the democratic left".²⁵ The important thing about Momentum is that it is an outward facing organisation, aimed at the wider community, not just Party members. Perhaps its key objective is to mobilise "the mass campaigning movement that we need to get Labour into government".²⁶ The Red Labour Facebook page, set up in 2011, which also played a large part in securing Corbyn's election, has a similar grassroots orientation.²⁷ One of its activists drew a sharp distinction between it and similar groupings and the Labour left as they existed in 2011:

At that point, in 2011, the situation of the traditional left of the party couldn't have been more different. Absolutely without influence, centred around the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) – the 'red' part of the

²³ Aneurin Bevan, *In Place of Fear* (London: William Heinemann Ltd. 1952) 3.

²⁴ *Daily Telegraph* December 19 2015.

²⁵ Left Futures www.leftfutures.org accessed August 4 2017.

²⁶ People's Momentum <http://www.peoplesmomentum.com> accessed August 4 2017.

²⁷ Red Labour <https://www.facebook.com/redlabourhq/> accessed August 4 2017.

Party had been marginalised by the concentration of power in the Parliamentary Labour Party.²⁸

Using a variety of forms of social media, Ben Sellers and his fellow activists created a virtual campaign that, during the leadership election period was reaching between 1.5 – 2 million people per week on its Facebook page alone.²⁹ The Corbyn Left has benefitted enormously from its ability to utilise social media, combined with the constitutional changes that enabled people to register as supporters, for a payment of £3.00, and thereby gain a vote in the leadership campaign; 400,000 people did this in a two month period.³⁰ This book will argue that the Labour Left of the 1930s and 1940s formed an enclosed grouping, with a strong focus on Westminster as the fulcrum of political life; at the same time this Left created a set of narratives concerning the beliefs and aspirations of the working class that they allegedly represented; narratives that provided a sustaining mythology for the Left. There was, it will be argued, often a radical rupture between those narratives and the actuality of working class experience; all too often, even figures like Jennie Lee, and Aneurin Bevan, who both came from working class backgrounds, appeared anxious to limit their social encounters with the working class.³¹ There was certainly a rupture between the public personas of the leading Labour Lefts and their private lives. These practices continued to mark the Labour Left down until almost the present-day. There are many differences between that Left and the Corbynite Left, the most marked of which is the real connection with the political grassroots that the various elements of that movement are building, both within and without the Labour Movement, in the general population and in a range of activist movements, like the Stop the War Coalition. In a very real sense the new, IT savvy, Left is not a continuation of the old Labour Left but a response to its failings and weaknesses. The emergence of the *Corbynistas* does not invalidate the thesis of this book, it enhances it.

Many people have contributed to the production of this work; foremost among them Professor Geoffrey Searle of the University of East Anglia. Professor Searle played a major role in my development from a rather raw

²⁸ Ben Sellers, “#JEZWEDID: From Red Labour to Jeremy Corbyn: A tale from social media” in *Corbyn’s Campaign*, ed Tom Unterrainer (Nottingham: Spokesman Books 2016) 28.

²⁹ Sellers “#JEZWEDID” 37.

³⁰ Chris Williamson, “After the 2015 General Election” in *Corbyn’s Campaign*, ed Tom Unterrainer (Nottingham: Spokesman Books 2016) 49.

³¹ Pat Hollis, *Jennie Lee* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998) 208 – 209.

and no doubt irritating undergraduate, to, hopefully, a reasonably competent professional historian. I am also grateful for the support of my colleagues at Edge Hill University, in particular Professor Alyson Brown, who has patiently waited for the appearance of this work. I must give thanks to numerous librarians and archivists; I should particularly like to thank the Marx Memorial Library. This institution was founded in protest against the burning of books by the Nazis, and remains a treasure house of material from the 1930s. On many occasions I have been able to clarify my thoughts on long walks with my energetic Labrador/Collie cross, so Dido also merits a mention. Finally, and most importantly I must give thanks to my wife, Susan Gardner, who has lived with Stafford Cripps for a long time, and to my son, Max the conqueror of “Munros” in the Scottish highlands. They are the sheet-anchors of my life, and what I owe them cannot be measured. Needless to say the faults and flaws of what follows are all my responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

The political crisis of 1931 was a turning point for the Labour Left. The collapse of the second Labour government called into question the viability of Labour's gradualist approach, and for many Party members suggested that, in conditions of economic and political collapse, the ruling class would resort to extra-parliamentary sabotage against any government perceived to threaten its interests. The Independent Labour Party (ILP), one of the founding organisations of the Labour Party, disillusioned with the failures of that body, took the decision to disaffiliate from it in 1932. The specific disagreement between the ILP and the larger party had focused on the operation of the Labour Party's Standing Orders in the Houses of Parliament. The leadership of the ILP felt that these restricted their freedom of action. The circumstances of the ILP's departure are quite involved, and have been dealt with fully by other historians.¹ The key points about the ILP, for this study are that: By the early 1930s the ILP had become the principal organisation of the Labour Left. It also had a significant working class membership and following. Consequently, its departure had a fundamental impact on the character of the Labour Left.

The Socialist League was formed in the autumn of 1932 from the ILP Affiliation Committee and those members of the Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda (SSIP) who were prepared to join the new organisation. The ILP Affiliation Committee, led by Frank Wise and Patrick Dollan, consisted of those members of the ILP who did not wish to leave the Labour Party, after the ILP voted to disaffiliate. The Cambridge-educated Frank Wise was at this time an economic adviser to the Central Union of Russian Cooperative Societies (*Centrosoyuz*), a position he held until his death in 1933; prior to that he had been a senior civil servant, and between 1929 – 1931, MP for a Leicester constituency. Dollan was a long-term Labour movement veteran, a journalist by profession he was also a Glasgow city councillor. In 1932 he was expelled from the ILP for acting to undermine the conference decision to disaffiliate from the Labour Party; in response he formed the Scottish Socialist Party, a Scottish version of the

¹ Gidon Cohen, *Failure of a Dream: the Independent Labour Party from Disaffiliation to World War II* (London: I. B. Tauris 2007).

Socialist League, affiliated to the Labour Party. The SSIP, largely the creation of the Oxford-based academic and Labour activist, G. D. H. Cole, was not an affiliated organisation. It had principally concerned itself with research activities on behalf of the Labour Movement, rather than “political” activities in the style of the ILP.² In the event a resolution calling for the SSIP’s incorporation into the Socialist League failed to secure a two-thirds majority. However, the SSIP did pass a resolution to dissolve itself, and those who wanted to become members of the Socialist League, which had affiliated to the Labour Party in October, did so.³ The Socialist League became the principal expression of Labour Left views until it dissolved itself in 1937.

The Labour Left of the 1930s has generated a significant amount of debate and strongly held opinions, both for and against. In the introduction to his 1977 study, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* Ben Pimlott argued that: “...the Labour Left was consistently wrong on tactics”.⁴ This theme is a key element of his argument, at the heart of which is the idea that the Conservative-dominated National Government could have been successfully opposed by a broad, progressive alliance drawing on the support of “Keynesian” intellectuals and anti-appeasers from all parties. The reason why such a broad united opposition, did not develop, Pimlott argued, was principally down to the disruptive and ultimately futile activities of the Labour Left.⁵ The central thrust of Pimlott’s work is therefore principally concerned with what he saw as the negative impact of the Left’s activities. He does, though, in pursuit of his argument discuss the nature of the Left’s politics, in the course of which he claims that the Left had a clear tactical vision, a view that will be challenged here.

How did the League define its role? There were, it has been argued, two possible models for it to use. It could, like the SSIP, have concentrated on research and propaganda work for the Labour Movement at large.⁶

² Patrick Seyd, “Factionalism within the Labour Party: the Socialist League 1932 – 1937” in *Essays in Labour History* ed. Asa Briggs, John Saville (London: Croom Helm 1977) 206 – 207.

³ R. E. Dowse, *Left in the Centre* (London: Longmans Green & Co. 1966) 171 – 184. Margaret Cole “The Society for Socialist Enquiry and Propaganda” in *Essays in Labour History* in ed. Asa Briggs, John Saville (London: Croom Helm 1977) 82.

⁴ Ben Pimlott, *Labour and the Left in the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1977) 5.

⁵ Pimlott *Labour and the Left* 202 – 203.

⁶ Margaret Cole, *The Story of Fabian Socialism* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press 1961) 223.

Alternatively it could, like the ILP, have concentrated on winning the Labour Party to an advanced programme.⁷ Patrick Seyd, Ben Pimlott and Michael Bor have argued that, initially, the League operated as a propaganda and research organisation. They also argue that the League's role changed to one of challenging the politics of the Labour leadership.⁸ The League's own definition of its role tended to be vague and, at times, to cover both positions:

Members of the League are pledged to work within and through the wider movements and to place all their talents, their energies and their devotion at the disposal of the movement for one specific purpose, the making of socialists...⁹

The League was also to:

...further by propaganda and investigation the adoption by the working class movement of an advanced programme and a socialist outlook....¹⁰

The apparent confusion, within the ranks of the Socialist League reflects the fact, it will be argued here, that the division of roles suggested by Bor, Pimlott and Seyd does not really describe the reality of the Socialist League's political practice. It will also be argue that, rather than there being a substantive shift in the role of the League, there was a fundamental continuity in the political practice of the Labour Left, that extended, as will be demonstrated, well beyond the dissolution of the Socialist League.

There has always been a left-wing of some description within the Labour Party. What marks out the Left of the thirties, the Socialist League, is the belief held by some historians, that it was a Marxist left. In such circles the Socialist League is regarded as a Left that was committed to unconstitutional and undemocratic modes of political activity. Hence Stephen Haseler claimed:

⁷ Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left* (London: Allen & Unwin) 198.

⁸ Michael Bor, *The Socialist League in the 1930s* (London: Athena Press 2005) 389. Seyd, "Factionalism within the Labour Party" 207. Pimlott, *Labour and the Left* 50 – 51.

⁹ Allen Hutt, *The Post-War History of the British Working Class* (London: Left Book Club 1937) 241.

¹⁰ Pimlott, *Labour and the Left* 48.

Except for a brief period in the 30s the fundamentalism of the Left has not been concerned with a challenge to the existing political arrangements.¹¹

In a similar vein Patrick Seyd has claimed that the Socialist League was “ambivalent” about the idea that political power could, and should, be achieved through the ballot box.¹² Ralph Miliband refers to the League’s fears that a parliamentary majority would not be enough to secure “...a smooth transition from a capitalist to a socialist society”. He continued:

These ideological stirrings could not be confined to a questioning of the assumptions underlying parliamentary gradualism. The doubts were bound to produce, at the very least, a markedly more sympathetic view of Marxism, in many cases an espousal of Marxian doctrine, or what was taken to be Marxian doctrine.¹³

Unconstitutional, Marxist and inclined towards extra-parliamentary activities, these then are some of the verdicts passed on the Socialist League. It is quite easy to see how some historians have arrived at these judgements for, at first sight, it would seem that the League almost went out of its way to acquire a reputation for being “revolutionary”. Cripps, the League’s chairman, in particular, made a number of statements calculated to alarm and outrage the Left’s enemies, and indeed to alarm some of its friends. For example, in 1934 Cripps told a student audience in Nottingham:

I do not believe in private armies but if the Fascists started a private army it might be for the Socialist and Communist Parties to do the same.¹⁴

In the same year William Mellor, a member of the League’s National Council declared:

The League should not become a mere umbrella for “loyal grouzers” but an instrument for co-ordinating what I should call Marxist opinion and action within the Labour Party and Trade Union Movement.¹⁵

¹¹ Stephen Haseler, *The Gaitskellites* (London: Macmillan 1969) 5. Mowat referred to Cripps as a representative of the “intellectual and semi-revolutionary” section of the Labour Party”. C. L. Mowat, *Britain Between the Wars* (London: Methuen 1968) 551.

¹² Seyd, “Factionalism within the Labour Party” 215.

¹³ Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (London: Merlin Press 1972) 198.

¹⁴ *The Times* January 8 1934.

¹⁵ William Mellor, “Southport and After: The Task for Socialists” *The Socialist Leaguer* October/November 1934.

Also in 1934 J. T. Murphy, an ex-communist who became the League's General Secretary, wrote what appeared to be a complete endorsement of extra-parliamentary activity. Murphy called for:

...a complete change in the strategy of the movement from mere electioneering to that of a complete mobilisation of all possible forces at its disposal for all forms of action...¹⁶

When it was first published, in 1934, Murphy's book, *Preparing for Power*, in which the above passage appeared, was accompanied by an uncritical foreword written by Stafford Cripps. Not surprisingly statements of this kind provoked vigorous responses. One correspondent to *The Times* declared, with reference to the League's plan for the drastic reform of parliamentary procedure (the abolition of the House of Lords and the extensive use of Orders-in-Council, amongst other things), that:

In short the object is really indistinguishable from the Nazi ideal. What Great Britain is to become is a Totalitarian state...¹⁷

Herbert Morrison had predicted that such responses would be forthcoming only the year before, in 1933.

If the Socialist League point of view were approved by the Party it would drive us to defend ourselves for the greater part against Tory allegations of Bolshevism and dictatorship.¹⁸

The two principal areas of debate that have developed around the Socialist League, and, more broadly of the post 1937 Labour Left, focus on the nature of its political role, and the degree to which it could be seen as revolutionary, Marxist in orientation. The view that the League moved from being a propagandist organisation to being one that was more directly political seems questionable, particularly given the fact that within weeks of its formation its members were successfully proposing wide-ranging resolutions, to, for example, nationalise the entire banking system, at the 1932 Labour Party Conference. The pamphlets produced by the League in the first year of its existence are assertive and speculative in character. They state, as if it were an absolute and indisputable fact that the election of a future Labour Government would provoke an economic

¹⁶ J. T. Murphy, *Preparing for Power* (London: Pluto Press 1972) 280.

¹⁷ Letter to *The Times* October 6 1934.

¹⁸ Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* 209.

crisis.¹⁹ These pamphlets do not seem like the product of detailed research, and they were not published to inform the Labour Party's policy-making process, but to promote policies that the League had already formulated. These policies included detailed proposal for emergency powers to deal with the economic disruption and political opposition that would occur in the wake of a Labour victory at the polls. Sir Stafford Cripps discussed this possibility at some length and elaborated a number of plans to meet a range of hypothetical situations. He argued that these plans should be placed in Labour's election manifesto, and put before the people so that a mandate could be obtained for them.²⁰

The Labour Left's discourse continued to be characterised by the same assertive, speculative style throughout the 1930s. Before 1938 it was an absolute article of faith for the Labour Left that all capitalist governments would inevitably move towards fascism. In 1935, *The Socialist*, the then paper of the League, carried a cartoon showing Hitler, Mussolini and Stanley Baldwin, over the caption 'Führers All'.²¹ This view rested on an all-embracing definition of fascism as "a form of government produced by the pressure of a capitalist society in decay".²² As it was axiomatic for the League that Capitalism as an economic system was in general decay, it followed that all capitalist societies would move in that direction. This view of the nature of fascism was a development of the earlier view expressed in 1932/33 that an incoming Labour government would face extra-parliamentary opposition. These two elements were brought together by Stafford Cripps in his pamphlet, *National Fascism*, where, according to one reviewer, he exposed the National label of the government formed in 1931 as the "Fascist cloak that it really is".²³

The political practice of the League did not really change throughout the course of its existence. At a national level it developed all-embracing political analyses, often with limited supporting evidence, and then demanded that Labour's political programme be adapted to incorporate

¹⁹ Sir Charles Trevelyan, *The Challenge to Capitalism* (London: Socialist League 1933) 5. Frank Wise, *Control of Finance and Financiers* (London: Socialist League 1933) 2.

²⁰ Sir Stafford Cripps, *Can Socialism Come by Constitutional Methods?* (London: Socialist League 1933) 6.

²¹ *The Socialist* No. 3 December 1935.

²² *The Socialist Leaguer* July/August 1935.

²³ R. George, "Counter Revolution" *The Socialist Leaguer* June 1935. G. R. Mitchison, "Corporate State or Socialist Plan? *The Socialist Leaguer* November/December 1934.

them. It is certainly true that the League talked about developing a new style of politics following the defeat it suffered at the 1934 Party conference²⁴. In December 1934 Stafford Cripps published an article entitled: "On the Basis of a Policy of Class Struggle". This called for the unity of industrial and political struggles, increased political agitation and the recruitment of more members to the League.²⁵ The ultimate objective of these aspirations was extremely vague: the "Will to Power". In the event the League did not intervene in the class struggle or engage in political agitation, and it did not dramatically increase its membership. It continued to do what it had always done, campaign for changes in Labour's programme. The phrase 'The Will to Power' in itself indicates why the League did not manage to develop a programme of agitation. This is a form of political activity in which specific short-term demands are used to mobilise support for a longer-term objective.²⁶ The class composition of the Socialist League, especially of its leadership also, in part explains why so few of the objectives outlined by Cripps were achieved. In 1936 Cripps wrote:

Those who have read such books as Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*, or seen the play adapted from it, will have no difficulty in realising the stark tragedy of life to the younger generation today.²⁷

Cripps does not appear to be addressing those with direct experience of working class life, and, by implication, does not appear to have much direct experience of it himself; not a good starting position for a campaign of agitation amongst the wider Labour movement.

If the development of the Socialist League cannot be understood as a movement between the roles outlined by Pimlott, Seyd and Bor, then we are left with the question: What exactly was it attempting to do? The answer to this is likely to be located in the gap between the organisation's statements and its actions. The same point might be made of the League's, and, more broadly, the Labour Left's relationship to Marxism. Throughout his two-volume biography of Aneurin Bevan, a long-term member of the Labour Left, Michael Foot, also a long-term member of the Labour Left,

²⁴ William Mellor, "Southport and After: The Task for Socialists" *The Socialist Leaguer* October/November 1934.

²⁵ Stafford Cripps, "On the Basis of the Class Struggle" *The Socialist Leaguer* December 15 1934.

²⁶ V. I. Lenin, "For Bread and Peace" Dec 1917 in *Lenin Selected Works* Vol 2 (Moscow: Progress Publishers 1970) 510.

²⁷ Sir Stafford Cripps, *The Struggle for Peace* (London: Victor Gollancz 1936) 40.

constantly referred, in a positive fashion, to the Marxist beliefs of his subject; on many occasions, though, Bevan's statements and actions depart from anything recognisable as Marxism²⁸. In 1952, for example Bevan wrote:

The first function of a political leader is advocacy. It is he who must make articulate the wants, the frustrations and the aspirations of the masses.²⁹

This seems like a reasonable account of the role of an elected representative, but it does not appear entirely satisfactory as a description of how a Marxist might see their role. If class struggle is the ultimate "motor" of history, then surely the "Marxist" leader would work to raise class consciousness to the point where "the masses" take direct action to alleviate their own wants and frustrations, and achieve their aspirations? To take another example, as we have seen, in 1935, Stafford Cripps called for the Socialist League to move forward on the basis of the class struggle. In the same year, Cripps, MP for Bristol East, made the following intervention in the House of Commons, in a debate on currency speculation:

I hope the Right Honourable Gentlemen will consider as part of these negotiations, a method by which this attack by speculative financiers upon Governments, who may be in the middle of important international negotiations, can be stopped by the combined action of the whole world.³⁰

In this passage, Cripps is asking a government, which he has already identified as rapidly moving towards fascism in order to defend the capitalist system, to regulate the action of speculators. In doing this he is, apparently, viewing it as an entity above and independent of the financial system. It is difficult to reconcile this request with Cripps's stated commitment to the class struggle. Indeed, it will be argued that one of the peculiarities of the Labour Left was that, even in the extreme circumstances of the 1930s, their MPs continued to act as conventional elected representatives; furthermore it is possible to see them compartmentalising their lives and commitments to the point where their leisure activities seem divorced from their political lives. One of Stafford Cripps' biographers noted this duality of outlook:

²⁸ Foot, *Aneurin Bevan 1945 – 1960*, 17 – 18.

²⁹ Aneurin Bevan, *In Place of Fear* (London: Heinemann 1952) 17 – 18.

³⁰ 302 HC Debates 5s Col 1454 May 31 1935.

As a hard-working, if highly-paid professional man, Cripps claimed some degree of exemption from his own strictures on the rentier class.³¹

On occasion, these activities, away from the “class struggle”, could threaten political embarrassment. In 1942 a fire at Cherkley, the country house of the Conservative press baron, Lord Beaverbrook caused one house guest, Aneurin Bevan considerable concern about whether his presence would be reported in the press.³² Whatever passion they may have expended on the platform, at the end of the working day these professional politicians appeared quite happy to clock off from the class struggle, and enjoy the finer things of life, often in the company of the class enemy.³³ The passion the Labour Left expressed in the 1930s was largely contained in their analytical publications.

The political crisis of 1931 had dealt a massive blow to the confidence of the Labour Party, even Gaitskell, who would, of course become the epitome of the Labour Right, was moved to declare:

The Labour Party tried to get better conditions out of capitalism...leaving the economic power in the hands of the same people as before...were...that policy to be pursued again, it would have a second collapse much more serious than the first.³⁴

Like Gaitskell, at that stage in his career, at least, the Labour Left argued that the British economy should, in very short order be brought under public control. The necessity for this rested on a schematic four-part analysis that consisted of the following elements: Firstly that capitalism, as an economic and social system had entered its final crisis; secondly, that, in an attempt to sustain capitalism the ruling classes would turn to extra-parliamentary forms of action; thirdly, that any attempt to maintain capitalism would inevitably involve a turn to fascism; and, finally, this could only be avoided by the election of a Labour government, equipped with Emergency Powers to deal with its opponents, and committed to the

³¹ Peter Clarke, *The Cripps Version: The Life of Sir Stafford Cripps 1889 – 1952* (London: Penguin Books 2003) 58.

³² Simon Hoggart, David Leigh, *Michael Foot: A Portrait* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1981) 76.

³³ Michael Foot also had a long professional and personal relationship with Lord Beaverbrook, stretching from 1937 to 1964, the year of Beaverbrook's death. Mervyn Jones, *Michael Foot* (London: Victor Gollancz 1994) 69.

³⁴ Philip Williams, *Hugh Gaitskell* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd.1979) 40 – 41.

establishment of a socialist state within no more than the term of one Parliament, five years.³⁵

This alarming analysis did not lead the Socialist League to begin a programme of agitation within the general body of the Working Class, their political focus was always on the programme of the Labour Party, a reflection in large part, of their social composition.³⁶ A clear socialist programme it was argued would bring support at the polls and thereby create a mandate for the sweeping social change that the League promoted. This view was sometimes combined with a measure of economic determinism.

The electorate will move towards Socialism as it becomes clear that economic improvement is less and less obtainable under Capitalism.³⁷

Whatever emphasis was employed, and sometimes they were combined, the focus of the Left's work was always contained within the party. Their analysis gave them a rationale or, what might also be seen as a sustaining narrative. Michael Foot unconsciously touched on this in the first volume of his biography of Aneurin Bevan. Referring to the economic situation in the mid-1930s he wrote:

According to the economic historians, the year 1934 was a year of economic recovery. No one noticed this at the time...³⁸

The reality is that it was noticed, and by people within the Labour Party. At the 1934 conference, A. L. Rowse made a speech in which he claimed that the crisis of 1931 was a one-off event that was unlikely to recur:

The responsibility for 1931 was the crisis brought about by the depression in world trade, but there is no reason to suppose we shall ever be caught in such a vulnerable position again.³⁹

³⁵ Wise, *Control of Finance and Financiers* 2–3. “The Issue Before the Labour Party” *The Socialist Leaguer* August/September 1934.

³⁶ E. M. Forster mused after visiting the Mitchisons (Dick and Naomi) both supporters of the Socialist League: “I enjoyed myself but couldn’t help reflecting that the left wing either knows no working class people or else doesn’t regard them as suitable guests.” Naomi Mitchison, *You May Well Ask* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1986) 105.

³⁷ Harold Laski, *The Labour Party and the Constitution* (London: Socialist League 1933) 5.

³⁸ Foot *Aneurin Bevan 1897 – 1945* 200.

³⁹ *Labour Party Annual Report – LPAR* (London: Labour Party 1934) 162.

Foot's reluctance to acknowledge a measure of economic recovery reflects the fact that the Left's self-identity and self-defined political role in the 1930s rested on an absolute belief in the imminent collapse of capitalism.⁴⁰

Another core belief of the Left was that there was a receptive working class, waiting for a political lead, in the form of an uncompromising socialist manifesto.

So when the world knows by our action what they did not know yet, that there is a Labour Government that stakes all on socialism: when they really know that then while they may be mocking laughter of mixed horror and dread in the country houses and drawing rooms, and in the articles of the capitalist press, there will be stirring of a new hope in the dead mining villages.⁴¹

The passage above, from a speech by Sir Charles Trevelyan, is notable for the political passivity that it unconsciously attributes to the working class. The inhabitants of the "dead mining villages" are waiting upon the Labour Left to secure the programme that will offer new hope. No contact with the working class was required by the style of political work embedded in this extract. The presence of an audience receptive, at least in the view of the Left, to its political initiatives was also a vital element of its rationale for existence; it was another of the Left's sustaining narratives. The exact nature of that audience would vary slightly over time, but it always had to be present in some form. The disaffiliation of the ILP in 1932 meant the departure of many of the Left's activists, significant numbers of whom were located in working class communities.⁴² The Socialist League lacked this kind of social implantation and, almost of necessity, focused its attention on campaigning within the Party and the House of Commons. The latter sphere of activity would become increasingly important after 1945, when the number of "Left" MPs grew significantly; in the inter-war years the ILP had placed a greater emphasis on grassroots campaigning

⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that many of the studies by left-wing authors, of working class deprivation, were written and published after 1934: Wal Hannington, *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* (London: Left Book Club 1937); George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Left Book Club 1937); Ellen Wilkinson, *The Town that was Murdered* (London: Left Book Club 1939).

⁴¹ *LPAR* (London: Labour Party 1932) 162.

⁴² Cohen gives a figure of 16,773 for the ILP's membership in 1932. Socialist League membership hovered around 3,000 throughout its five years of existence. Cohen, *Failure of a Dream* 31.

and agitation. At times members of the Labour Left came close to presenting this distance from their constituency as inevitable.

When the franchise was extended the diehards among the Tories predicted disaster for the well-to-do classes...These fears over-estimated the intelligence of the people...⁴³

In this passage Bevan strongly suggests that “the people” cannot stand up for themselves, and that, consequently, people like himself have to take on that role.⁴⁴ Distanced as they were from the mass of the working class, the validity of the Left’s role rested on the belief that the “workers” could, in the right circumstances, and with the right leadership be mobilised.

The contention that is being presented here is that the Labour Left was in a relatively fragile position. It sustained itself with a number of inter-locking narratives, presented as analyses, which justified and rationalised its positions and arguments. The most important of these was the claim that the working class were ready and waiting for a radical political leadership. This belief varied in form but continued to be applied right up to the 1980s. Like all sustaining narratives it had to rest on some level of empirical evidence, in this case the existence of a large and apparently strong Labour Movement. When that movement went into decline, both numerically and in terms of its political weight, in the second half of the 1980s, the remnants of the Labour Left increasing found themselves without a credible role. The rest of this work will explore the development of the narratives that both sustained the Labour Left and gave it a political role, at least, in its own eyes. Perhaps one of the most moving parts of Tony Benn’s diaries, his description of weeping at the 2000 Durham Miners’ Gala, provides testimony to the existence of this relationship between the Left and its imagined constituency:

...I stood there and I wept and wept. I thought to myself that if Caroline goes, I shall be left to spend the rest of my life alone, and I shall miss her so much if anything happens. So I wept for her, and I wept for the miners,

⁴³ Aneurin Bevan, “Tories in Extremis” *Tribune* December 31 1943.

⁴⁴ John Campbell suggested that in the 1930s: “...Bevan was increasingly coming to see himself as superior, in the hierarchy not of class but of intellect and imagination, as a patrician, a natural aristocrat in the original Greek sense of the word, a member of the cultivated elite.” John Campbell, *Nye Bevan: A Biography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1994) 67.

and I wept for myself, and I wept for all the problems in society, but it was deeply moving.⁴⁵

Benn's wife Caroline was gravely ill at the time, so he had good cause, on that count alone to feel emotionally raw. His tears for the miners do, though, suggest some recognition that the decimation of the Labour movement, represented by the remnants of the once mighty miners, had rendered the role of the Labour Left redundant. His tears for all the problems of society seem emblematic of the Left's impotence. In 2013 Benn gave an interview to *The Guardian* which made clear that he recognised the diminished status of the Left, he stated:

I made a lot of mistakes and tried to learn from them, but I never presented myself as the answer to the party's problems. I was simply someone with a point of view, which I put forward regardless.⁴⁶

In an interview given in 1982 Benn gave a very different view of his role, describing his decision to stand against Denis Healy for the deputy leadership, in 1981 as being "about the presentation of a total alternative to what was being argued by the then deputy leader".⁴⁷ Perhaps the last word on the decline of the Labour Left has been provided by Chris Mullins, an erstwhile "Bennite". In a review of a collection of Benn's speeches and articles, published posthumously, Mullins claimed that in his later years Benn had become that most emasculated of entities, a "national treasure".⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Tony Benn, Ruth Winstone, *Diaries 1991 – 2001: Free at Last!* (London: Arrow 2003) 616.

⁴⁶ Stephen Moss, "Interview with Tony Benn" *The Guardian* October 28 2013.

⁴⁷ Freeman, *The Benn Heresy* 15.

⁴⁸ Chris Mullins, "Review of *The Best of Benn*" *The Daily Telegraph* September 29 2014.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BANKERS' RAMP

In the summer of 1931, under pressure from the rapidly declining economic situation, Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government attempted to secure loans from American bankers, to maintain the value of the pound. The British government was told that such funds would only be made available if the recommendations of the May Committee were implemented. The May committee, under the chairmanship of Sir George May, of Prudential Assurance had been set up by the Government earlier in the year to enquire into the state of the public finances; its report proposed large reductions in public expenditure, including the cutting of wages and salaries to public employees, and the reduction of Unemployment Benefit. The last item was particularly difficult for a Labour Government to consider as rates of unemployment, which were rising rapidly, were highest in the old industrial districts of the North and the West, in Labour's heartlands. It is, therefore, not surprising that Ramsay MacDonald, and his Chancellor, Philip Snowden, failed to secure unanimous support in Cabinet for these measures. This, the second Labour Government was, like the first, a minority administration; so, faced with disunity in Cabinet, and a hostile combined Conservative and Liberal majority in the Commons, MacDonald left number 10 to see the king, George V.¹ MacDonald's colleagues assumed that he was going to tender the resignation of the Government. In the event he resigned as Prime Minister of the Labour Government, but immediately accepted appointment as Prime Minister of a coalition National Government, the principal parliamentary support for which came from the Conservative Party; only a handful of Labour MPs joined MacDonald in this Government. Later that year, in October, a general election was called; the campaign was conducted in an atmosphere of crisis and panic; Philip Snowden, Chancellor of the Exchequer in MacDonald's Labour government, denounced the policies of his former

¹ Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2001) 65 – 68.