



Eric Hobsbawm interviews Tony Benn

Eric Hobsbawm Well, first, it's a great pleasure, of course, to have you here. I would just like to say that I don't see this meeting of ours either as a confrontation or as an equal dialogue. I see my function rather as that of drawing you out, possibly pinning you down, chiefly because your reactions to the questions we are about to discuss are of considerable public interest, in view of your position in politics.

I would like to begin by saying that those of us who have been around a long time tend to have a sense *of deja vu*. We are back again in a period of a major crisis of world capitalism, combined with a very dangerous international situation and this is, of course, the general setting within which the specific and very grave problems of Great Britain, the British economy and British politics are being played out.

The first thing I'd like to ask you is how do you see this present world capitalist crisis and the present international situation. How would you compare it with the last time round?

Tony Benn By way of introduction, may I explain that I am not a Marxist, academic or historian, but a practising politician trying to understand what is happening. I too am struck by the similarities between the situation now and the situation in the 1930s, in that, as far as this country is concerned, we are locked into a virtual collapse of our industry which has proceeded more rapidly than people expected and which has been coming for some time. It is a decline beginning at a lower level of activity than we had in the 1930s. It's part of a world capitalist crisis which is at the moment also deepening with 8 million unemployed in the United States and about 7½ million in the EEC.

It looks at the moment as if the Government, far from trying to revive the British economy, is using this crisis in order to secure certain very clear political objectives. Namely, if possible the destruction of trade union power in the land by three processes: by stimulating unemployment to frighten working people away from trade unionism; by legislation through the Employment Bill to make effective trade unionism very difficult, if not impossible; and by the utilisation of the media in a very sustained campaign to persuade the British public that the trade union movement is responsible for our

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problems and has got to be weakened if we are to recover from them. It would also be true to say that in this slump we have a government that no longer has a patriotic element in its capitalism and actually sees a future for the people they represent in the success of international capitalism even at the expense of the United Kingdom becoming the sort of Northern Ireland of the Common Market.

On the other hand, the trade union movement is much stronger than it was in the 1930s in terms of numbers. Also, a lot of people are clearer in their own mind about what is happening. The option of war as a solution to the problem of the slump has been rendered absurd, though not impossible, because of the development of nuclear weapons, and I think these factors make the situation slightly different.

I must just add one other point. If you look at the defeat of the Labour government in May 1979, the more I think about it, the more I think it was a surrender rather than a defeat. For 20 years non-political trade unionism had been preached and it's turned out to be a cul-de-sac, and non-socialist Labourism had been preached, and it's also turned out to be a cul-de-sac. One could argue that Mrs Thatcher and the Conservative Party won last year, with very little opposition to the ideas that she preached. Much of the ground had been conceded before the election. But the crisis bears very strong resemblances to what happened in the 1930s. Indeed, what we are witnessing is an attempt to use this crisis to put the clock back to a much earlier period.

EH I think one might disagree with you about whether it was a defeat or a surrender, but we can return to that in a moment.

One point on which I think I would like to push you a little further. It seems to me that in this crisis, both in the world as a whole and in Britain, it is also to some extent a crisis of the political and social structures which have grown up during the period of capitalist expansion, in the long and short term. During the last crisis this took the form of fascism. In the present crisis it probably does not. But is there an analogy? An analogous expression of difficulties, tensions, breakdowns in the traditional political and social structures of the old established Western countries and particularly Britain?

TB Yes I think there is. But this problem is not confined to the Western world. One could argue that the industrial development of

technology as it has been applied, particularly military technology, has centralised power in both Eastern and Western societies, and that if we are talking about the crisis of political structures we must also include the crisis of bureaucratisation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

I think that one could reasonably argue that in no major country in the world is the government absolutely certain that it carries the consent of its own people. For as society becomes more interconnected and hence more vulnerable, the pressure for central power and central control gets stronger. To this extent I would argue that a democratic socialist challenge would be a challenge to all existing power structures, both in Eastern Europe and in Western Europe. And to the extent to which the state has become bureaucratised, the trade unions have become incorporated, and the whole labour movement has become incorporated in a declining consensus that is becoming more authoritarian. Part of the crisis lies in the fact that people have lost their confidence in the power of the state to solve the problem in a way that would preserve their independence and their freedom and liberty.

There are a lot of parallel crises going on at the same time and that is why I think we have to look at them not only in terms of a socialist analysis, but also in terms of a direct sustained democratic challenge everywhere in the world to the secretive exercise of centralised power working through bureaucracy. This is what gives an added dimension to the argument, in respect both to the development of capitalism and the development of communism.

EH You said that the trade union movement today is stronger than it was, say, in the 1930s. That may be so. But would you say that on the whole the socialist movement, the democratic movement, the people's movement, have shown themselves to be strong enough to mount an effective challenge, both to the crisis itself, and to the forces such as Thatcherism, which it has brought out?

TB If you mean 'have we yet succeeded in building a winning coalition of people who understand what is happening and recognise the role of trade unionism and socialism in preventing the disaster from overwhelming us?' No, clearly we have not. If you mean 'is there a residual strength and a potential strength in the instruments of democracy, the instruments of trade unionism and the ideas of socialism, capable of being mobilised and developed to prevent this from reaching its ultimate form of repression?' I think the answer must be Yes. Otherwise I would be wholly pessimistic about the prospects.

This is what I meant by 20 years of surrender. Since 1959, the parliamentary leadership of the Labour Party at top level has been going along with the idea that the post-war consensus, built upon full employment and the welfare state, was a permanent feature of life in Britain and that trade unionism would be brought into a position where it helped to run it. That response has failed to command the support of our people because they have seen first, that it did not contain within it any element whatsoever of transformation, and secondly, that even by its own criteria it failed. That policy could not bring about growth, it could not extend freedom, it could not even maintain let alone develop welfare and it could not sustain full employment. The turning point came when, in 1976, the IMF simply dictated to a Labour government full of social democrats ordering them to abandon even social democracy. That was the background of failure but the potentiality of strength is still there. If I didn't believe that I would give up hope altogether, which I see no reason whatever to do.

EH You talked of residual and potential strength. Do you mean to

say that you are thinking of this in terms of mobilising forces which were once mobilised and can be mobilised again or of discovering newer and wider forces which can be mobilised?

TB Both. If you look back at 1945, which was the first election that I was active in, although I did distribute Labour literature 10 years earlier, the amazing thing was the extent to which we were able to mobilise young and old, left and right, men and women, Scots, English and Welsh, the trade union members and the Labour Party. We mobilised a huge body of opinion in favour of a clear policy of reform. I know these were modest reforms by modern standards, amounting to little more than the final fruition of the radical ideas of the 1906 government, amplified by a bit of Fabianism, a bit of Churchill in his various Liberal-Conservative roles, and a bit of Maemillan with his *Middle Way*. But we mobilised a powerful combination committed to change. Unfortunately that spirit escaped and evaporated during the period of successive Labour governments after 1951.

EH May I stop you for a moment. You have talked about the 1945 government. In your Guildhall lecture¹ you talked of Attlee's as a social and socialist revolution. Are you talking about the same thing?

TB Yes — because there are two ways of looking at the 1945 government. One is to look at it in the way in which I tried to answer your question: is it possible to mobilise a wide range of people who will clearly support major change? Secondly, did the 1945 government achieve a real social revolution? The answer to that is that at the time, and compared to the slump of earlier years in terms of what it was able to achieve, it was. But when you analyse it, with the benefit of hindsight, you can see that it was also in a sense the final fruition of a liberal and radical tradition: though that isn't to say it wasn't a very significant turning point for Britain in the mid century because it was. But it would not be adequate to go back to 1945 policies now and argue that they would suffice for the next time round, because the nature of the crisis we shall inherit, whenever we win the next election, will in many ways be much more fundamental than Attlee had to face in 1945. For our industry will have been destroyed, we will have a lot of long-term unemployed, and the economy will be in a much weaker state even than it was in 1945.

EH But surely we can't go back to 1945. I mean 1945 was, as it were, at an earlier phase of the development of the labour and democratic movement. One of the things that has often struck me, perhaps it has also struck you, is that the curve of Labour Party support starts off with 1900 and goes on, with a slight interruption in 1931, up to 1951 with the Labour Party becoming increasingly not merely the party of the working class, but also to some extent the inheritor of the wide popular coalition both of the other nationalities of this country, of intellectuals, the workers and others. This went on until the early 50s, and from then on it seems to me there has been a gradual erosion and the problem for us is how we can halt and reverse this erosion. There seemed to be a brief moment in the middle 60s when it looked as though the tendency was going to be reversed. It hasn't yet been. It has gone on being eroded. And to call for a return to 1945 seems hardly adequate.

TB I am not saying we should. I was trying to answer your question — is it possible to mobilise wide and residual forces and new forces — and I said it had been done in 1945 for a programme that was appropriate for that period. That task has been achieved once and can be achieved again. The policies to which we will have to attach support next time will be much more radical because events will

require them to be much more radical than they were in 1945. But don't romanticise the 30s. In 1935 there were 3 million unemployed, yet only 150 Labour MPs were elected to Parliament. To suppose that there was a steady rise in support during the 30s and that 1945 was inevitable in terms of the public response we received would be to romanticise it. As you know, in 1945 Herbert Morrison did not even want all that public ownership, and it was an amendment moved at the annual conference by Ian Mikardo which carried, that eventually led to the wide extension of public ownership. We must be very clear that even in 1945 there were people in the Labour Party, because I remember meeting some of them myself, who spoke about the continuation of the wartime coalition in response to Churchill's appeal. These things didn't happen inexorably, they happened because there was a form of socialist, democratic and activist leadership given at a critical moment.

Now the question is can we mobilise that again? The answer is we must. Because if we can't, then we are going to be locked into a permanent minority position while enormous damage is done to our



society and maybe we could witness the destruction of our world community. So we have to work for the recreation of that sort of wide alliance attached to relevant policies which must be much more radical in socialist terms, and have a much bigger democratic dimension, than they had in 1945.

EH Well, I'm happy to hear that you don't believe that this is inevitable, I don't either. But nevertheless this brings us to the next question I want to put to you. This is to what extent the weaknesses and failures of the labour movement have aided this erosion of support, this gradual decline of support, and indeed the failure, even after a year of the present government, for the movement, and I would say for the people as a whole, to recover the confidence in Labour that it should have. Now to what extent would you make the record of the various Labour governments between 1964 and 1979 responsible for this?

TB You know that I served in every Labour government from 1964 to 1979, and take my full share of responsibility for that. But it would be very foolish to deny that a very heavy responsibility for what occurred, occurred as a result of the upper direction of the Labour

Party over this whole period. That's why I mentioned the concept of surrender. Ideologically and tactically there have been over the last 30 years three waves of revisionism in the Labour Party.

The first was the Gaitskellite wave where he argued, in broad agreement with Macmillan, that you could rely upon full employment and it could sustain the welfare state without socialism. Every worker could have a mini in the garage, a television set in his living room and a package holiday in Majorca. Political trade unionism was no longer needed, and socialism was old hat. This revisionism was presented as Labour's response to Macmillan's 1959 victory. That was the first wave of revisionism and it took the form of a deliberate theological attack upon Clause 4 and was defeated, partly because the trade unions would have had to have had special conferences to change their own constitutions, many of which themselves included a version of Clause 4, which would have been a bit of a nuisance.

The second wave of revisionism occurred during the 1960s when Harold Wilson came to the conclusion that the trade unions were an embarrassment to the Labour government because the Labour

government was hoping to rise above its past as a product of trade unionism and present itself to the country as the natural party of government strong enough to govern the country even when opposed by the trade unions.

The third wave of revisionism, which is the one that is now being vigorously resisted, is a revisionism based upon a coalition at the very top of some of the parliamentary and trade union leadership to control the rank and file of the movement as reflected at Conference. This third wave of revisionism is the most comprehensive of all because it is a revisionism designed to consolidate, within the structures of the labour movement, an acceptance of the ideas of incorporation that were really defeated in May 1979. If that revisionism is accepted then we are finished. But it cannot, and will not, be accepted. That is why the argument is now focused primarily on the internal democracy within the Labour Party. If we lost that battle, then the whole history of the labour movement would have culminated in a mere Cape Canaveral rocket launching function whose sole job would be to fire the parliamentary leadership into orbit whenever there is a general election and, having discharged its function, the Labour Party like the first stage of the rocket would fall harmlessly into the Atlantic. That is not an acceptable role for the labour movement.

EH One might have other criticisms of Wilson than the one you make. Wilson was I think very nearly the worst thing that has happened to the Labour Party, including MacDonald, because he didn't even have the decency to leave it. I do think that there was more wrong with the Labour government in the 1960s than you suggest. One of the things is that they didn't do anything, they didn't propose to do anything. Reading the 1964 election manifesto, there was a great deal about the white heat of technology which a lot of people believed, you yourself were not immune to this belief, and, of course, in some sense it was perfectly real, but there wasn't anything else. And, in fact, all the sorts of things which you might have expected a Labour government to do, bringing up to date the reforms of 1945 to 1951, were not done.

TB That is a fair criticism. I don't think it was due to Wilson alone or Gaitskell alone or any single group of leaders. It was a collective development of revisionist thought which had become accepted in the Labour Party: the belief that full employment was permanent and that an expanding welfare state could always be financed by continuing full employment, and that the fine tuning of the mixed economy by a Labour government would always generate enough wealth and this could be redistributed in a rather more humane way so that Labour governments working on that basis could progressively



remove the inequalities and injustices of capitalism. There is no doubt that was the philosophy. If you read Harold Wilson's Conference speech on the white heat of technology it wasn't quite as naive as it's been made out. His argument about the white heat of the technological revolution was an expression of his belief that socialism had been made more relevant by science. He was also arguing that scientific change would have a serious effect upon people's lives who would then have to be protected. He was saying that the white heat of technology was something that burned people and therefore Britain would have to restructure and reorganise its industry and society in order to protect people from it.

But having said all that, it is also true that in 1966, when Labour won a majority of 100 in the Commons which consolidated its narrow election victory of October 1964, there was a complete reversal of engines and a return to absolutely traditional Treasury policies, followed later by an attack upon the power of the trade union movement, which could not otherwise be contained within that sort of a policy for administering capitalism. That policy, plus Labour government support for America's Vietnam war and various other decisions, did produce a collapse of support for the Party. Individual membership virtually halved, from 800,000 to 400,000 in those years.

EH The membership?

TB Yes, the membership, the individual membership of the Labour Party. That was a measure of the disenchantment. But I

wouldn't attach it to one man. Everyone of us who were involved must share responsibility for that.

EH Well, that brings me to another aspect of it which does involve you since you are part of the Labour left. Both the Labour left and also perhaps non-Labour left had their responsibilities for it, the Labour left particularly. What, in those years of Labour government, should the Labour left have done that they didn't do, what did they do that they shouldn't have done?

TB That is a very good question because it touches on the crucial power that a Labour government has when in office: namely the power to call upon the loyalty of the Party to support it on the grounds that a Tory government which would succeed it if it was defeated, would be much worse than what the Labour government was doing whatever it did. This appeal to loyalty, which was a perfectly understandable appeal, can however be carried to the point where the role of Labour MPs, and the role of the Party may be reduced to the recording of a succession of votes of confidence.

Let me express this dilemma in personal terms, because that was the way in which I experienced it: the question of whether someone should stay in a Cabinet with which he was in disagreement. I thought about this very carefully, particularly during the 1975-79 period. I put the choice to my local Party, and there were votes at the CMC on two occasions as to what I should do. I was very candid in presenting to them the fact that I was in a minority in the Cabinet and was likely to remain in a minority and asked them what I should do. In both cases they voted by a majority that I should stay in and argue. But if I had left the Cabinet, on the grounds that I disagreed with them — on the EEC, the IMF cuts, the Lib-Lab arrangement, or other matters — you are then faced with this problem. Imagine a Commons vote of confidence after you have left the Cabinet because you disagree with them, do you support that government in a vote of confidence? If you don't and there is a general election because the government is then defeated, do you stand again as a Labour candidate and try to get that government re-elected with the same leadership and the same policy in the election that you have precipitated? That is not a problem to be dismissed. It is a dilemma for many Labour people at many levels.

What was beginning to happen during the period of the last Labour government was that the left was increasingly seeing the importance of developing socialism within the Labour Party as a party, in parallel with support for the Labour government as a government. I can cite as evidence, confirming the wisdom of that strategy, that the National Executive, which had been widely ignored for years as a rather powerless fan club of the parliamentary leadership, came to be seen by the Tory press and by the establishment, from 1975 onwards, as a serious centre of socialist thought and criticism loyal to the government but critical of some of its policies. By contrast if you look back at the minutes of the Labour Cabinet for 1931, you'll find that when Ramsay MacDonald consulted the National Executive about the crisis the NEC said it had little advice to offer, and would be content to leave everything to the Cabinet to decide. Whereas at that time the TUC General Council was bitterly critical of what MacDonald was proposing.

Now if you compare that NEC response with the years of 1975-79 it is quite clear that the NEC and the Party was a real centre of alternative policy that was loyal to the government but was critical, was creative, and was more forward looking and socialist. The more I look back on that recent period the more I think that the role of the socialist critic of the Labour government when it is in power must be to work within the Party, within the constituencies, within the trade unions, at Conference and in the National Executive and its study groups. That is the way to develop countervailing power to the power

of a Labour government which will inevitably be under establishment pressure and will go wrong and will do the wrong thing from time to time. That is where the power of the left should be exercised, within the Labour Party rather than in futile gestures of pretending you are going to bring the government down, when, of course, everybody knows you are not. For the left to bring a Labour government down would be the one crime that no one would — quite properly — ever forgive. It seems to me that is the answer to those who ask where the left should work, has worked, is working and where it is likely to be successful. It is in the Party.

EH I think you have made the answer to this question a little too easy, partly because it seems to me that your own left, or the sort of left that you represent is, if I may say so, a better Labour left than there has been for a very long time. And partly because it isn't really a question of the personal behaviour of individual ministers. What I was trying to get at is your reaction to the proposition that the Labour left in the 60s, and quite a long time before, really had no alternative policy?

TB That is a different argument. I am not sure that what you say is entirely true. In terms of nuclear weapons policy, public ownership and so on the old left, if you like, of the 1960s was still existing and



working during the 70s. But the answer to your question about alternative policies arises from my earlier answer. It is because the left worked within the Party that it was able to develop the alternative policy. And the alternative strategy, which was accepted overwhelmingly at the recent Labour Party Conference at Wembley, was the one that came out of the Labour Party, and to which the parliamentary leadership contributed very little, and which it didn't really much believe in anyway. Moreover there is no doubt that in March 1974 a majority of the then Cabinet didn't really accept the manifesto on which they were elected. They had to accept that it was the manifesto because it had been developed within the Party and agreed with it but I don't know that they really accepted it. But the pressure to implement it was kept up by the Party. And it was a pressure for a consistent, logical, effective and relevant alternative policy. That was more useful than having a little parliamentary group always threatening to vote against a three-line whip but not able to reflect accurately the views of the Party in the country. So the left MPs did have a real alternative to advocate.

EH Of course one would accept that it's the right thing for the Labour left to operate within the Labour Party and, indeed, it's through the Labour Party and primarily through Labour governments that any social change that is likely to happen in this country is in the first instance going to be achieved. But that isn't quite the same thing as saying that the left within the Labour Party has an alternative policy and alternative solution. I think recently it has come

closer to having such a policy for a Labour government than it has previously. Now if I might make this a little bit more concrete. Where do you situate yourself and the sort of people who think like you, compared to the older Labour left traditions, for example, the Bevan type of Labour left, the Keep Left Labour left, the Michael Foot type of Labour left? How do you see yourself as differing from them, or not differing from them?

TB Well, I think one difference between the two is that they were in a minority and we are in a majority. I don't believe that the arguments that we are putting forward represent a minority position. We are in a majority. There is overwhelming support, the questions of policy having been argued out in great detail since the 1972 Conference. I don't say that Conference policy is perfect because it clearly isn't — but it offers a reasonably consistent and different view about how the country's industry and economy should be run, how its social services should be developed, about the Party's internal democracy and about the role of Parliament. That view now has a majority position. So I suppose the biggest difference between the position which I find myself to be in now, as compared to 1951 when Aneurin resigned, was that he was then in a minority and minorities — especially left minorities — can face great difficulty with the Party. At that time there was a clear majority in the TUC for traditional policies, in the National Executive for right wing or revisionist policies, and the Bevanite left never succeeded in getting a majority.

Now, of course, partly because the left couldn't get a majority, a lot of people who should now be in the Labour Party disappeared into community groups, into ultra left movements and so on. Now that the Labour Party has got a majority around alternative — and socialist — policies you are going to find that many of those people who left us in the 60s will be rejoining us. And that is going to consolidate the majority. So that that's the main difference. What the left were arguing at that time, looking back on it, seems to me to be very sensible.

EH I want to get back to this question of how to turn Labour back into a mass movement and a mass party in a minute. In the meantime, I would like to look at the question of this policy of yours. You say in *Arguments for Socialism*² and elsewhere that there are three or possibly four alternatives which are being put forward at the moment. There is monetarism, the Thatcher policy, there is something which you call corporatism, there is democratic socialism, and there is what you regard as a non-starter, namely social democracy. Now while I think it is easy enough to see what monetarism means, because we hear it being expounded very clearly, I am not quite so certain what you understand by corporatism, and I'm not very certain either that I understand what you mean by democratic socialism. The two things don't seem to me to be, as it were, of the same kind, fractions with the same denominator.

TB When I wrote that social democracy was a non-starter, what I meant was that the revisionism that was preached by Gaitskell and Crosland was killed, not by the left, but by the International Monetary Fund which simply said to the 1976 Labour Cabinet 'we are not allowing you to do that any more. Whatever you choose to do, we are not having this high level of public expenditure because we regard it as undesirable.' Tony Crosland died six months after his social democratic option had been killed for him by the IMF, and the IMF polished off revisionism fairly effectively. In 1976 I had hoped, when the IMF forced the choice between a socialist solution and a social democratic defeat, that a Cabinet majority might be created for the more radical response. But that was not what happened. Monetarism, as you quite rightly say, is now being tried.

What I mean by corporatism is this: the centralisation around the consensus politics that came out of Harold Macmillan, Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee, who, during the wartime coalition, used William Beveridge, the Liberal economist, to set down the framework for post-war policy in employment and national insurance. That policy did succeed in its time, in part because of the destruction of our wartime enemies, because of a lot of conditions that won't recur, thus making full employment and the welfare state available. Even the nationalisation of the basic industries was tolerated by the Right in part because those industries had all failed, and they weren't profitable any more, and so if the state did reconstruct such basic industries, this would constitute a subsidy for private industry. So the postwar consensus had a certain solidity about it. But more recently we have seen the slump and the collapse of that consensus as an option. This collapse made those who believed in consensus huddle together more closely and become much more authoritarian. For example both the George Brown pay policy and the Ted Heath pay policy did begin to develop some extremely authoritarian characteristics. So what I call the corporatist tendency, or however you want to describe it, is what happens when the consensus loses its grass roots support and the people at the top have to huddle together to force their policies on to society in a more authoritarian way. In short the top establishment has been driven to use incorporation as a method of governing the country. It occurs when the men at the top decide what has to be done and the trade union function is to deliver its membership in pursuit of any agreement reached by its leadership. That was what Heath tried to get the trade unions to do in 1973 and failed.

The particular characteristic of the British corporate state is that in this country our mediaeval feudalism has lasted so long that it has fused with our modern corporatism and created a most astonishing centralised bloc of political, financial and industrial power which has now virtually succeeded in defeating Parliament as an effective countervailing force, defeating Labour's rank and file, and commanding the general support of the civil service and the mass media. That is an authoritarian system. Mrs Thatcher very skilfully saw that she could do a re-run of the earlier attack on the feudal structure in the guise of recreating freedom for the entrepreneur. And she did it. She put on the laissez-faire armour of the early Adam Smith and Edmund Burke and cut through and won support. Corporatism now has no constituency except in the Golden Triangle of the City of London, Fleet Street and Whitehall. That's what I mean by corporatism.

Now you ask what democratic socialism is. It is an attempt first to find answers to the current problems of crisis by defending working people against the policies of the Government. Through struggle, it tries to generate a grass roots leadership and a perception capable of carrying forward a policy that will reconstruct, and in parallel transform, the power relationships in industry and in society, not just as between capital and labour but as between government and governed. It is both a democratic and a socialist campaign that we are engaged in launching. And in the process it offers the prospects of recreating that winning coalition in 1945 that we spoke about. The Labour Party must align itself with the women's movement, the black movement, the environmental movement, the peace movement, the rural radical movement, the religious movements that object to monetarism and militarism, and bring back into the mainstream of the Labour Party those socialists who have got isolated in sectarian loneliness. That is the way I would present it.

If you say what are the specific policies, well that's something we can argue about. But that is the broad conception of it. Capitalism is now log-jammed by an unresolved constitutional crisis between capital, government and labour. It is not open to us to make

government run everything, because that would be authoritarian. Nor can we allow capital to ride rough-shod over us through using monetarist policies. Labour now has to bring about the expansion of the public services and of our industry, by a socialist initiative that is only possible if there is a fully democratic Labour Party that will reflect Labour policies in the House of Commons. We need the recreation of the Labour Representation Committee, with a socialist dimension, at this period in our history. I think that's the way I would describe it.

EH I don't quite follow that, you see. I mean you are comparing different forms of breaking the log-jam, that is getting the British economy, and if you like, British society, moving again. Monetarism does so in Adam Smith's way or pretends to do so, by saying let's go back to the market. Corporatism does so by control from above, bureaucratic control, I add, plus presumably some kind of economic policy which in the past has been a kind of Keynesianism.

TB Plus wage control, that is a part of the corporatist strategy.

EH Plus wage control, if you like. But how does democratic socialism come in? What is that self discipline for democratic control of which you talk from time to time? I mean concretely. It's not that



one isn't in favour of these things, but I would like to see exactly how it solves these specific problems which monetarism and corporatism purport to solve?

TB Well, every society requires discipline in order to operate. The discipline of the market is very clear: if it isn't profitable, it stops. The discipline of the corporate state is by legislation to determine what people are allowed and not allowed to do, including what wage claims they can put in and secure. The concept of democratic socialism is that by diffusion of power there will be a change in the relationships between capital and labour under the self discipline of democratic control. Now that must involve, inevitably, a bigger role for the state, but not only by the state, nor by the state operating solely or principally at the national level.

For example, take the 1974 manifesto concept of the planning agreement that was seriously weakened in cabinet between the February election and the publication of the white paper. Planning agreements were to make the power of the major corporations subject to the assent of the people who worked within them, without putting workers on the board. The concept of the tripartite planning agreement was that major companies would have to clear their corporate strategies with those they employed and they would not get a release of public money by investment grants or regional employment premium or anything else, unless their plans had been agreed at the working level. That was a diffusion of power not a centralisation of power.

EH Why especially the people within them?

TB Because in the first instance the power of capital has to be made accountable to the people they employ. That is not the only discipline there will be by any means because the government will also be seeking to integrate — and this is a very early stage of a socialist transformation — the strategy of the major companies with the industrial policy of the government in the national interest. Take another example, which may offer a better answer to your question. The participation agreements that I compelled the oil companies to sign, were agreements under which the oil companies could only get their oil back from the government if they agreed to get their company strategy approved by the government. Now that was an accountability to the centre. But it was also my intention, and I began the process, to make those oil companies also accountable to the people they employed. That is a decentralisation of power. If you ask for concrete examples of what we shall do when we come to power, depending when it is, remember we shall have inherited such a broken economy that what will then need to be done will be to take direct measures to recover and recoup the cuts in the public services; to invest directly in industry; to control imports into this country via a planned trade mechanism; and to restore the power to determine our own industrial and economic policy from Brussels back to this country; we shall also have to restore the power of Parliament, especially by passing a Freedom of Information Act so that MPs and the public will be able to know what is happening.

I don't think it's difficult to think of concrete answers to concrete questions. What is difficult is to invest that policy with something that looks philosophically credible in answering an academic's question. I think I know what we would have to do. But what it would look like and how it would actually develop or what label you would feel, as an historian, you should attach to it, I'm not sure. But it would be democratic and not be corporatist. And it would not be monetarist. It would involve public initiatives, and it would involve a transfer of power from capital to labour and from government to Parliament and also to the localities and the regions. Now that you would have to define it when you saw it. What I have described is I believe a democratic socialist programme.

EH But that is exactly what my question is about, namely, what is concretely behind these phrases. These are not my labels, they are yours. What I want to know is in fact what concretely is the meaning of them in terms of what you think ought to be done if Labour gets back. You know, I think it's marvellous, democracy, the more democracy the better — particularly, as you quite rightly said earlier on, we have now got growing centralisation, growing bureaucracy — and a defence of this, including of all the British people, is necessary. Moreover I think this will be a very important way of regaining the political initiative and mass support. But at the same time, you see, democratic socialism as you put it is neither a policy nor a structure; it's a political style, democracy combined with an aspiration, socialism and social change. But what's in between?

TB I do not believe that democracy is just a matter of style. The most bitter battles that have occurred in history have been about who should exercise power. And therefore I do not regard democracy as a stylistic question at all but a basic question. I am interested, for example, that the parliamentary leadership, or the right wing of the Labour Party, have never been much bothered if policy resolutions they dislike have been passed at Conference. They knew they could be neglected. But now that we are debating the structure of power in the Labour Party they recognise the importance of what is happening. Real political battles are all about democracy because democracy, plus

an analysis and a proper sense of morality, are the main ingredients of socialism. Unless you believe that history offers you no democratic option as occurred in countries where there was no possibility of peaceful change, and there had to be a coup d'etat in the name of socialism, the battles must be for democracy. After a revolution what emerges is not what I would call socialism in this context. It would be a form of socialist corporatism, and socialist corporatism based on a 100% public ownership is no more acceptable to me in a post-revolutionary situation than is the very mild sanitised Stalinism, in defence of the mixed economy, of the kind that we have had in British corporatism.

So I don't accept that democracy is just a matter of style, it's a matter of who is accountable to who. And I think if you present it that way, people understand precisely what you mean. They do not want just to be a platform for launching somebody else operating in their name into a position of power. They want to be sure when he or she is there that they are accountable for what they do. And this is a very important dimension of what we are saying.

EH You are totally right. Nevertheless, the question of power has very often, in the history of socialism, been made the excuse for saying we don't actually have to bother about what we are really going to do. Everybody said, from Marx on, the really important thing is how we



are going to get there: what we are going to do after that is a hypothetical question which no doubt will be dealt with in concrete terms. The result is that when people got power, in one way or another, and I perfectly agree with you that in Britain it would have to be democratic, the question of what to do had to be started more or less from scratch. This is why I'm pushing you. It's clear, it seems to me, that what you are aiming at is, initially at any rate, a kind of mixed economy. You talk about renegotiation of terms between government and capital and labour. So in a sense it will go on initially being a mixed economy. How exactly is this going to be organised in such a way as to make a subsequent social transformation easier or more likely? What is the strategy of a social transformation — I don't say a transformation which would lead us to some hypothetical replay of the October Revolution because we would probably both agree that this is not really on. I'm not just trying to logic-chop.

TB I know you are not — and I am finding your questions very difficult. I would say this. Democracy is more than just a question of putting somebody there. If democracy was only how you got a government into power then I would agree with you, it would lose its significance.

EH And its accountability.

TB Yes — for remember the corruption of power is a very real thing, in all structures. And democracy must be about what happens

after you have won a majority and not just an agency for getting a majority. There is one other point to make about democratic socialist transformation. And this is the really difficult thing about being a Labour minister where you are really a son of worker on the board. Socialist ministers have got to strike the right balance between running society and changing society. If when you get there, you simply run the system as it is then you might just as well leave it to someone else who believes in the status quo to run it. If, on the other hand, you are always only talking about changing society, you may not meet the problems of workers as they face them and you lose your popular support. If people come to me with some urgent problem at a time when their employers are trying to close their works, if all I do is to read them a lecture on the need for socialist transformation they would say 'this minister is no use to us, he's trying to use our crisis to advance his philosophy'. So you have got to run it *and* change it. And that is what the labour movement has got to make Labour ministers accountable for doing.

Now, yes a mixed economy? But a different sort of mix. Big companies — that means that 2% by number, but about 75% by output — must be either publicly controlled or publicly owned. When Aneurin Bevan redefined Clause 4 in terms of 'the commanding heights of the economy', he was redefining the mixed economy in terms of size. I think that's very important. Every little newsagent seems to have been persuaded that a left Labour government is going to nationalise them. We are not. The press have, for example, succeeded in deceiving the small shopkeeper into believing that he is under threat from a Labour government, and for the same reason as the big monopolies. The press have also persuaded every little family struggling to pay their mortgage that they and the big landowners are much of a muchness, both are property owners in a society challenged by rabid revolutionaries.

It is very important to define the mixed economy. The Labour Party believes that the hundred major companies have got to have statutory planning agreements in the first instance to release the power of labour within those companies, to make their management accountable, and to secure accountability to the national economic strategy. Public ownership has also got to be extended, not just to pick up the collapses of capitalism, long accepted as an ambulance function, but also as a way of getting public money into key areas of economic growth and development. Now I don't say that that is a comprehensive transformation strategy, but at least it's got the twin goals of running it and changing it. The two roles have got to be kept in balance. Otherwise you are going to find you become either mere administrators of a declining capitalism, or just dreamers who are brushed aside because what you say is irrelevant to the daily needs of the man who is about to lose his job or the woman who is no longer able to get her child educated or can't get the facilities required for her family.

EH I think that you are quite right in stressing the importance of maintaining the support and gaining the support, rather than simply announcing what you or I and a number of other people in this room may regard as desirable, and this brings me to the last question. It's exactly this mass support and this mass dynamism which is at the moment lacking in the Labour Party. How can we all get it back again?

TB Well I mentioned one of the ways. We must be very clear that we are not interested in a narrow, sectarian, purist Party all taking one view. You may have noticed that now the left is beginning to get a majority on the National Executive, we are deliberately limiting the grounds for expulsion. I think that what the left is now saying is that we want a very broad church. The condition for the broad church,

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however, is groups within the Party don't put up candidates against Labour candidates.

EH When you say broad church, do you mean a broad church of different tendencies within the Labour Party?

TB Yes. I think we must be a broad church. We have got a lot of different groups in the Labour Party. For example, on the right we have got the 'exitists' who have gone, we've got the 'departurists' who are packing to go, we've got the 'ultimatists' who will go if certain things happen, we have got the 'confrontationists' who have stayed to fight it out. But all these are in a minority. The solid core of the Party is socialist. I think it's important to remain broad because all the groups have got something to contribute to our work. But more than that, I want to broaden the Party out much further. I want to extend affiliations. Why if we are trying to get the NUT to affiliate, shouldn't you try to get the Indian Workers' Association to affiliate? Why if you are trying to get NALGO to affiliate, shouldn't you seek to persuade the women's movement to affiliate? I would like to see affiliations now open on a very broad basis, including the peace movement, the ecological movement and so on. In that way we will broaden the Party.

We must however be careful to see that the Labour Party, at this stage in development, doesn't so excite middle class radicals that they come in and swamp our basic working class support. That is why it is so important to build up factory branches, to expand basic political education. The Labour Party Commission of Enquiry has done a very good job on organisation, finance and political education. We must also win the battle of Party democracy. If the trade union movement is to be induced to take a new and deeper interest in socialism, which is a precondition for mass support and social change, trade union members must be able to be sure that the policies that go through Party Conference will actually be in the manifesto and will be implemented by accountable parliamentary leaders.

If we get all those elements right: a broad Party; an effective organisation to allow the trade unions to play a more active part in the Party; and a capacity to translate policy into action by using a parliamentary leadership that remains accountable, then I think we have a chance of success. I can't put it higher than that. But at least the Party is now beginning to understand where it went wrong and what it must do to put it right. If we succeed we shall be able to answer the credibility question that we get when we go canvassing. You knock at the door and they say, 'well we agree with you about all this, but how do we know that you are going to do it next time?' Until we can answer that question confidently we won't get the third dimension of mass support from people, especially from the working class, who are neither active trade unionists nor active Labour Party people but who really want to know whether it's going to be exactly the same next time as it was last time. We must be able to answer that question credibly to get the electoral majority necessary to breath life into the policies that we have been talking about.

EH But are you not, with all respect and with all my support for what you have said, looking at this in a little too narrow an organisational sense? Isn't the problem also how to get back the 33% or so of the workers who voted for Thatcher? How to get support from those people who are no longer members of the old blue-collar industrial working class on which the Labour Party based itself? How can we all turn the Labour Party into a party which speaks for the nation in the way which once upon a time in, I think, 1940, the Tory people asked Arthur Greenwood to 'Speak for Britain'. Now you see the Labour Party is a class party of the workers. It's a party of the broad alliance of working people. But if the Labour Party is to become the party of the people once again it must once again be able to speak with credibility for the things that worry people, to speak for Britain. Can this be done simply by the democratisation of the internal constitution of the

Labour Party, however desirable that is, and by the correct toleration of the variety of things within it?

TB I don't think that democracy or the institutions of democracy, of themselves, *guarantee* a particular outcome. If they did one would be supporting whatever government had been elected. But I do think that one of the characteristics of the British establishment over the last few years has been their total defeatism about the future of Britain. The Vichy spirit has inhabited Whitehall over many many years since Arthur Greenwood was appealed to to speak for Britain. And the sense of total defeatism which characterises the British ruling class has often struck me. I think they have got a slight whiff of self-confidence now from Mrs Thatcher, but they are frightened that she is going to overdo it, and that they will be back in trouble again.

But if you consider the fact that Britain has handed over a great deal of control of its industrial policy to the multinationals, a lot of control of our economic policy to the IMF, the control of many of our laws to the Common Market, and the effective control of our power to make peace and war to the United States, or NATO, you realise what an astonishing collapse of national self-confidence there has been amongst the establishment and what an erosion of democratic control has occurred under a succession of British governments, all of which were elected by the people of the United Kingdom. I don't believe in nationalism or a nationalist policy. Labour is a party with a strong international working class tradition. But democratic self-government and liberation are as legitimate an aspiration for the British people as for the people of Zimbabwe or India or Guyana or anywhere else. Britain is now the last colony left in the British Empire. George Washington got out in 1776, Robert Mugabe got out in February 1980. Britain alone it seems is left with a colonial-type administration led by an establishment which is itself defeatist and is actually frightened of the potentiality and strength of the British labour movement working through parliamentary democracy. They have handed over the keys of power to others outside this country to govern us so that they can be protected from the British working class. An unconscious awareness, a sense that that has happened, is now embedded in the minds of an awful lot of British people.

Unless and until they feel that there is a government going to be returned to power that will put self-government and democracy into its programme and mean it, they may not even think that Labour would speak for Britain. That is a very important consideration. A strong democratic view of the future of Britain and the restoration of the powers of the British people to govern themselves, within an interdependent world society and with international responsibilities, is an integral part of the process of Labour becoming a mass party. We must appeal to those who have voted Liberal or Conservative and to other working people who have deserted the Labour Party in the past because they felt it wasn't doing a proper job of representing them.

EH Well just let me say in conclusion that I think we probably agree on what needs to be done. I think we agree on the urgency of it. I think we agree that it has not yet been done nor have we entirely found the ways of doing it. And I hope, finally, we do agree that everybody on the Left has a share in tackling this task and I hope we agree that all people on the Left, whatever their views, had better concentrate their fire on their adversaries rather than on each other as they are in the habit of doing. D

¹ The Granada Guildhall Lecture on Trade Unions given by Tony Benn on 15 May 1980. The full text will be published in a book by Granada.

² Tony Benn *Arguments for Socialism*, Jonathan Cape 1979. Now available in Penguin paperback.