

Thatcherism has been disastrous for Britain. But the Labour Party faces the need for fundamental renewal.

Interview with Neil Kinnock

by Sam Aaronovitch

What influences have shaped you in the way you think about socialism and the Labour Party?

The impetus for socialism in my case is liberty. The more you investigate the word, the more recognition dawns, then requires not just political expression but political action. And in order to make that political action effective it's got to mean economic action, with the purpose of economic emancipation. Those views initially struck me out of my own relatively comfortable experience in South Wales in the 1950s, knowing and noticing the enormous deficiencies, the basic insecurities and the poverty that still existed then. Perhaps I was more acutely aware of it because of the acquaintance I had with it through my mother as a district nurse and that evoked enquiries of various kinds of my father and my grandfathers, about the position before the war, and an understanding that just a decade or so previously the whole condition of the people and my family had been unimaginably different.

But there are a number of different intellectual thoughts in which you could have come to that sort of notion, so what were the ones that struck you? Where were you looking for the answer?

I didn't come to it intellectually, I came to it pragmatically. What intellectual appeal there was came initially entirely from Sevan mainly because of the way in which Bevan, in speech and writing, articulated exactly what I was feeling. I experienced the thrill that people do when they've heard what they believe to be their secret and innermost feelings endorsed by people of, what they consider, to be great sophistication. Then in my teens, Jack London, Upton Sinclair and others influenced me. It was this continual process of endorsement of what appeared to me to be an instinctive belief. Subsequently, at university, my one real intellectual inspiration was reading R H Tawney. I came up against other people, also for example Eric Hobsbawm.

What meaning did socialism have for you?

The other interpretations of liberty were always limited, always conditional, always related to how much money you had in your pocket. And socialism was the only political view that proposed that economic freedom for working people was a necessary companion of any meaningful political freedom. Socialism drew together the need to satisfy the materialistic requirements of a decent standard of living with the requirement of the soul for individual liberty.

By the time you were developing your ideas, was the Marxist tradition in Wales dead? Did it make no impact?

It certainly wasn't dead and I didn't reject the Marxist idea. I didn't really encounter it until I was 16. I didn't reject that. I made

a conscious decision to join the Labour Party rather than the Communist Party and the conscious decision was very directly influenced by my mother, who was a very radical socialist with a Christian tradition who didn't like the elements of the Communist Party that she encountered. And to that extent, in personal terms, as you can understand in a valley community, that rubbed off on me. When I started to encounter Marxism at 16, the elementary truths of the surplus value theory and more than anything else, the logical argument that he produced that labour was the source of all wealth, gave me a political and intellectual justification for what I believed in a way that nothing else did.

Where do you place yourself, having come through this process, within the spectrum of the Labour Party? How do you define your own position?

I think labelling is unavoidable but I think it is a replacement for an accurate understanding of people's political positions. I know I am on the Left because I see other people on the Right. I know that the view that I hold is becoming predominant in the Labour Party although 6 or 7 years ago it was a heresy. That thrills me.

Could you explain that?

By a series of policy ideas. Unilateral disarmament is one of them. Another is the understanding that it is inconceivable that we could transform this society without a major extension of public ownership and control. The need to revise our attitude to the welfare state and gear it much more to the permanent eradication of poverty instead of the relief of poverty, which is going to mean a great deal more allocation of priority between middle class users of the welfare state and its poor users is a third. Those views, which had minority support 6 or 7 years ago, now enjoy a much wider understanding and much greater backing.

The British labour movement grew up in a specific historical period and is very much rooted in the structure of British society as it was then. But that society seems to be profoundly changing, for example the structure of the working class itself. A lot of disruption is taking place. Traditions have altered, cultural changes occurred. This means that the labour movement, and the Labour Party in particular, has somehow to become a different sort of thing because the communities in which it arose have also changed.

The Labour Party needs to modernise a lot of its attitudes because some of them are nothing more than sentimentality, and mythology. The need for modernisation in a lot of the attitudes in the Labour Party has been there for a long time because the environment has been changing around us. This was brought home to me, particularly in the last election. I was talking to a chap at the station who said he wasn't going to vote Labour. He

demonstrate to all people who have no means of maintaining an acceptable living standard without the sale of their labour that they are the working class and that we have in common certain interests of universally provided and paid for support, of the need for collective organisation for the advance and defence of living standards. That has long been the mission. But it is more of a mission now because of this volatility of which you speak and because of the way in which the Labour Party sought to obtain its mandates in the 1970s and 1980s on the basis of half memories of the 1920s and 1930s. Now as for the peace movement, women's movement, black peoples' organisations, the poverty groups, we have to demonstrate to them in a practical fashion that their requirements are not just on our agenda, but are tangible parts of our policy. That is the only reassurance that would be worthwhile to those groups. After all, to some extent these groups have developed as a consequence of the failure of the Labour Party to keep pace with the times.

Socialists should be able to anticipate more intelligently than just about any other political creed, what the next step is, to identify movements in society and be able to sort out the serious ones from the frivolous ones, and they haven't. That's because our vigilance has been dimmed by being able to depend upon what we thought of as a solid body of support that would never be eroded. Now it's not there.

In 1979, a dramatic shift to the right took place affecting large sections of working people. Since then, the terms of the political debate have shifted markedly. How do you analyse the phenomenon of Thatcherism, its rise, what caused it, what is it expressing?

You are right. In the last four years we have lived in a more reactionary country than I remember in my life and I was born in 1942. That's one thing I think Thatcher understood.

You mean she understood it was a more reactionary country?

Yes.

But that must mean more reactionary before 1979?

Sure. In Thatcher's case it certainly goes back to 1975, possibly before, when she and the Thatcherites realised that they had a message to give. It is much more profound than monetarism, it's a social ideology, it's about deference, fear, reduction of confidence. It's about recapturing reverence for certain institutions and levels in society. It's the restoration of an old and brutal definition of patriotism. Thatcher and the Thatcherites recognised that there was a big constituency for that in Britain. Now anybody who has been a socialist, and knocked on doors has-always known that's the case, but we chose to ignore it. We thought that by ignoring it and working in a different direction, we could wear it down and eradicate it instead of taking it head on and arguing with it.

She owes her success specifically to two factors. First, the exhuming of some beliefs that held sway a long time ago and we thought had been buried by history and practical necessity. She was able to present this as a new direction, a new firmness in government, which in a class conscious society, in a society which has never entirely shaken off its feudalism, has a real appeal. The other thing is that the ground had been prepared for this move by 30 years of newspaper reporting, through the full employment and welfare state years, that 'although you, the workers, have got it, you don't really deserve it'.

Another explanation for Thatcher's rise is her radicalism in the context of a situation where there was a growing feeling amongst large numbers of people that previous attempts to deal with the relative decline of the British economy had not been successful, and there was a need for a much harder, tougher, more realistic appraisal in which the previous consensus was no longer useful.

I think that feeling existed. I think it should have been possible then, and it wasn't done effectively, to show that you don't strengthen an economy by breaking its legs and that is what Thatcherism proposed quite openly. But even where people perceived that, they were still, as you suggest, willing to take a gamble on it.

That suggests there was also something in people's experience that made Thatcher's arguments credible and plausible. Has the Labour Party taken the Thatcherite argument seriously enough?

From day one when Thatcher was elected up until very recently, the Labour Party as a whole, has cursed and spat at Thatcher. Before that all it did was giggle which was a fantastic error: it was evidence of its sexism, apart from anything else, not to take Thatcher seriously. Those attitudes to Thatcher were also produced by ignoring or evading, I'm not sure which, what people at the grass roots of the labour movement knew to be true about some regressive attitudes and instincts in the electorate, in the working class.

The other thing is that the last Labour government was a minority government and so the impression of hanging on, of going with the wind, was even stronger as a consequence. Unfortunately the efforts pragmatically to adjust the economy were also seen as softness, instead of being seen as a sensitive response to what that government perceived to be the way in which they were going. I think a lot of their perceptions in that Labour government were wrong. That's why I quarrelled with them. But they could be represented as listlessness, complacency, prevarication, lack of direction, all those things. And then along comes 'superwoman', and the more insecure a society is, the more that vicarious strength is bound to appeal.

Those are the things that gave Thatcher support, but there are also things the labour movement has not done. Firstly, we have not explained that the welfare state and full employment didn't drop out of the sky. There has never been a systematic effort by the labour movement to show that our effort to conduct and manage society had to be fought for. Secondly, people's day to day encounter with the edifices of social benefit that we can claim credit for, do not generate affection for the welfare state. Many who use the welfare state, don't even recognise they are users, and therefore resent the payments. And for those who are users, they are taught by the welfare state that it's a direct inheritance from the poor law system, they are supplicants, not citizens exercising their right to claim. So that in both respects, all they see is officialdom, unfairness, the misallocation of resources. And so the necessary body of understanding for the welfare state, our main edifice, is not there.

This brings me to the more general state of the Labour Party. By most indices, the Labour Party has experienced a serious long term decline. What explanation do you offer for this?

The explanation is bound up with wider developments over the last century. An impetus was given to radical change by mass action at the end of the last century for the vote and trade union and civil rights. It was carried through into this century by the experience of



war, the struggle for women's franchise and the depression. And it was argued and felt that these great problems could be assuaged if not resolved by political action. We came to 1945 and it seemed that this proposition was true, that problems could be enormously mitigated by such action and therefore it was worth being politically committed and involved. Then came the 1950s and there was a conjunction of developments, the first real taste of affluence, full employment, the hospital service, acceptable if not satisfactory old age pensions, free schooling. Those rudiments of civilisation had been achieved and the impetus of struggle seemed to become largely unnecessary. There were amendments and adjustments to be made but it was largely shifting the furniture.

Now in conjunction with this, and partly as a reflection of it, the Labour Party suddenly got old. The people who had led it at local level, especially in the 20s and 30s and through the war, had achieved triumphs and positions of very considerable importance in all localities in the 1940s, now became aldermanic. And given that there was no impetus among the young to drive them to politics and no instinct amongst those who had aged in their struggle to go out and refresh the Labour Party, the Labour Party became stale in the 1950s. On top of that, it was dominated by a political attitude amongst its leaders, that would have taken rationalisation a stage further and actually turned furniture rearrangements into a political philosophy. People like Gaitskell and Crosland I think were honest about their view that those basic wrongs had been righted and now it was a question of sophistication rather than of radical change. That further staled the Labour Party. Then when Wilson came along, he didn't just hold it as a political philosophy, he made it the metier of government. And so the Party itself was shrunken and lost its dynamism in that process, and it was happening simultaneously with a similar drift in the population at large. The conjunction of those things explains the lack of belief in, participation in, commitment to the Labour Party. It also largely explains the Labour Party's over dependence through those years on recounting memories rather than addressing itself to the current crises as people who live in it see it.

Obviously one of the crucial things in the position of the Labour Party is its relationship with the trade unions, on which the Labour Party after all is founded. This kind of decline, this erosion of its support may also

mean that a number of unions may no longer believe that the Labour Party is an effective vehicle for the interests which they pursue as unions.

I take the general view that, by their very nature, trade unions have been responders to events rather than makers of events, and one of the responses they made, reluctantly but nevertheless eventually with great force, was to understand the connection between working class living standards and political action — hence in this country the Labour Party. But if affluence appears to be coming from the exercise of strength at the point of production and not from political action or implementation of political programmes, then the relationship between material living standards and political action decays. It's not seen to be as strong as it should, and despite the good political motivations of a lot of people at all levels in the trade union movement, there hasn't been an understanding among the mass of the relationship between their living standards and political action. A major part of that is a phenomenon of the times. The part for which we can bear blame is in not engaging in a process of continual education whether in regard to where the welfare state and full employment came from, or in regard to the necessity of political action to ensure permanent industrial advances.

So how is the Labour Party actually to renew itself? We've looked at the decline, how is it to recover?

Let's start with how we don't do it. First, we don't do it by finding a cause and picking it up, simply in order to court popularity. Secondly, we don't do it by pretending that there can be mechanical, constitutional adjustments within the Labour Party that will automatically make us more socialist and more appealing.

The way we do it, in a word, is by education, in two respects. One is by argumentative education, explanation. The systematic and sometimes very trying business of contacting as many people as possible through as many media as possible to explain our fundamental objectives. I think we've got to do that. The second thing is education by illustration. Of showing that the Labour Party's sufficiently responsive to the condition of our society to want to take the lead in representing grievances and having the answers to the problems that people feel.

/ think this may be part of the problem, Neil, because there's an assumption here that one knows what the Labour Party is and one knows what your objectives in the Labour Party are. But the Labour Party is, to use a commonplace phrase, a pretty broad church and the question of its direction may not be so clearly defined.

Well I think it is quite clearly defined. I happen to think we do have an ideology. It is in Clause 4, and not just Clause 4 Part 4, which is the one that everybody recites. Let me go through Clause 4. Part 1 is to have a Labour Party in Parliament and in the country. That recognises that access to power is by parliamentary means. The second thing is to have this relationship of independence and interdependence with the trade unions based on a recognition of the relationship between industrial and political advance. Thirdly, the conference should guide the policies of the Party but it shouldn't dictate the individual's view or the view of organisations within the Party or affiliated to the Party. That was a very definite rejection of the idea that year on year a *line* was set down by a congress of the Party. Now Clause 4 Part 4 itself is a lot more profound than people understand, mainly because again it is only half-remembered and less than half of it is understood. The phrase 'by the best obtainable means of control and administration' has got at least as much importance in terms of ideology as the proposition that wealth originates with labour and that it must be returned to labour by the public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange. Then the purpose of Section 5 is the emancipation of the people, but most particularly those who labour by hand and by brain. The objective is emancipation, is freedom.

You've put the weight very much on what you might call the doctrine in the Party's constitution. But if people think of the Labour Party they don't necessarily think of a statement of objectives of that sort. They think of the party that is there — of the way it functions, different trends, its leaders. That may be a very different animal from what is stated in the constitution.

I think it would help the party if it was to study that part of the constitution. For instance, we would stop writing our history as a series of leaders — we're obsessed by leaders in the Labour Party. Both as demons and as angels, depending on which side you're on at any given time, which is a fundamental mistake for a socialist movement. If people were conscious of the ideology of the Labour Party, broadly stated, it would be a good insurance against the vagaries of shifts in the Labour Party that is a consequence of our over-dependence on the nature of leaders.

But you do have very different tendencies and directions within the Labour Party, irrespective of what the constitution says. What I'm trying to probe you about is how the Labour Party needs to change bearing in mind it comprises such a wide range of forces.

In order to renovate itself, the medium should not simply be that of distrust. The medium should be of confidence in the ideology of the Labour Party, confidence that everybody in that Party is at least coherent, if not unanimous, that our objective is to secure the socialist transformation of society by the agreed and stated means.

Do you want to shift that alliance towards the left in accordance with the constitution of the Labour Party with its socialist objectives?

Yes, that's right.

In that very sharp debate within the Labour Party over the deputy leadership, what was the strategy which lay behind your thinking at the time."

There was only one strategy. I thought that the decision to contest the deputy leadership at that stage was very harmful to our electoral chances and the harm that it did vastly outweighed any conceivable advantage that could have been secured by the election of Tony Benn. That's all.

How do you evaluate the actual campaign that was waged around the deputy leadership election and for democratic reform within the Labour Party?

I don't think the argument for democratic reform really had a lot to do with the decision to contest the deputy leadership. That was a battle which we had won and the obligation then was to move on to the next battle, for the advancement and installation of policy.

Could we now turn to the general election and possible outcome? If the Labour Party wins the election, how would you characterise the government that would emerge?

It will be a more left wing government for two reasons; it's got a more left wing leadership and there will be people in that government who I believe have learned from the errors of two recent periods of government about the way we must react. As a consequence, I think it will more resolutely implement the policies of the Labour Party. The other reason is the times in which we live. Deep and obvious crisis has produced a much greater consensus in the party about direct and radical action against unemployment, for production; and about investment, rewards and planning.'

We've got the French experience to show that there can be very fierce opposition to a left wing government and it's not clear, is it, that the most radical elements in Labour's policy are the ones that command the greatest popular appeal. So if Labour succeeds, the problem will be to win enough popular support for the kind of policies it wants to press forward. Then there is also the question of how it would deal with the kind of sabotage and attack that is bound to be mounted on it from vested interests?

As far as popular support is concerned, that is something a government has to earn, and the only way for a government to earn it is to implement policies that people perceive will improve their lot by comparison with their recent experience. In view of the last four years, that should be easier than in the 70s. We can, I think, in a two year period, accomplish changes in industrial production, industrial investment, employment, the provision of the welfare state, the extension of the education system, that offer the conviction that this is a government of change. Now as far as sabotage is concerned, that will certainly be attempted. There's no doubt about that. There's only one way to regard it and that is as sabotage and not to accommodate it. We are committed, for instance, to import controls and controls on the export of capital, and we have got to stick 100% to that obligation. It is a matter of total necessity, especially the latter.

Would you argue that a Labour government must start from the efforts that must be made in this country and not be dependent, so to speak, on international co-operation? The Mitterrand government has faced very big problems because other countries have not reflated and

therefore the expansion in international trade necessary for increasing French exports has not taken place. We're not going to be immune to that problem either.

Well, we must begin from the assumption that there will be no co-incidental upturn in the world economy. Secondly, we begin from the proposition of borrowing, so we don't collapse into being a borrowing country in the midst of panic. We must decide beforehand that this is a necessary part of any strategy to inaugurate economic growth. A critical mistake of the last Labour government was not to begin on that basis. But we should not rule out the possibility that the international climate will not change and force some limited reflation. That would obviously help.

The economy has been severely weakened over the recent period. Whatever happens, a new Labour government is therefore going to face severe problems. It can't just present some kind of rosey prospect.

We've got to be realistic, but we mustn't let it slip into torpor or paralysis which has been a danger previously. People have used the word realism and realistic to explain away inactivity.

I see that, but then a Labour government is bound to face a whole lot of people who are demanding things, which can't all be simultaneously met, and the government has therefore to go to find its way through that.

I think that's where the National Economic Assessment is the beginnings of an effective policy because in that programme we say that the assessment is going to be of dividends, rents, costs,


taxation, benefits, all of the elements of reward, however gained, earned or unearned, paid out in benefit or earned as income. Now if we have a procedure for an assessment, then I think we have got a real hope of running a tax policy that is progressive, running a rents policy that actually directly subsidises living standards; and so on. It *does* mean an argument about what the rational allocation of resources is. If we don't do it in respect to rents, dividends and money leaving the country, I don't expect anybody to recognise the authority of that assessment when it comes to negotiating their wages and working conditions.

You put it all very much in the form of what the government does. How far do you also see it in terms of what kind of popular movement grows up down below? A government by itself does not necessarily evoke the kind of support you're talking about.

No, I don't expect people to dance round the maypole celebrating the National Economic Assessment. But I believe if a government wants popular understanding and support it has to show that it's trying. People will give it credit for trying. They don't expect perfection or miracles — they do expect governments to try. If they think that, they will feel we are therefore worth supporting.

That's the optimistic position then, the election is won and the Labour Party has a majority. Now let's suppose there's a clear-cut Tory victory, and Thatcher is returned for a second term. What will that mean, not just in terms of misery and despair, but how will it change society? And how will those changes affect the fight against Thatcherism?

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The fight itself might be disabled by the reduction of civil liberties that would be the consequence of a refurbished Thatcherism, there's no doubt about that. It's got to be that continuing process of education. Now, it sounds like a weak word but it isn't. First of all, because it does mean a thorough approach to explaining why we exist, what we're trying to achieve and that Thatcherism is contradictory to the basic interests of the people. It's difficult to express this but we would clearly have to do it with a consistency, with a thoroughness that just hasn't been done before.

What does that mean though? Can I make a point here? If you take, for example, the way in which different groups of people are affected like council tenants or those who have got into the private sector of the health service, then we are dealing with new vested interests created by privatisation and so on. Won't the Labour Party and the labour movement have to not only educate but also analyse exactly what these groupings are, what their interests are, how one responds to those particular concerns?

Of course. Now look, if we have continuing mass unemployment, which we will, then the view that already exists in sections of British society, of self-righteous satisfaction with surviving the slump, is going to become more prominent. People are going to think, 'well we survived the slump because we took cuts in our wages, because we were moderate in our attitudes, because we obeyed orders. If we could survive the slump by that means, well everybody else could have done that and therefore unemployment is a self-inflicted penalty of the unemployed.' So you will get that division in society. What we have to do in those circumstances, should be doing in any case, is to show that unemployment on this scale is by very definition epidemic, and that nobody can vaccinate themselves against it by taking a wage cut or by working in conditions that are unacceptable.

What you're describing is a situation where one section of people is coping and the other section is driven into enormous difficulty. The section that is driven into enormous difficulties doesn't automatically become radical and the section that is surviving doesn't feel the need to be radical because it's getting by maybe improving its position.

Yes, but I don't think we find the answer in counterposing radicalism and anti-radicalism, we do it by pursuing the central theme of the best material and social interests of the people, whether they are apparently beneficiaries or whether they are among the victims.

Right, then the emphasis you are beginning to develop is not simply education in a general sense but really some kind of alternative vision of where British society should be going and our ability to win support for that vision.

And it's the vision of interdependence. The basic maxim of socialism.

But that sort of socialist vision needs to be tackled on two levels. First there's the renewal and revival of the Labour Party itself, especially if Thatcherism is successful because you'll have the big shock waves that will come from it. And secondly you've got to find how to reach into the heartlands of Tory support. . .

Because if we can't get them, we can't get a Labour government.

Right. So don't you have to think out a strategy which involves a vision combined with a series of movements like, for example, Greenham and the Peoples March for Jobs. Because there's an absence so far in your presentation of the way in which actual movement is encouraged and developed. It's as if you or us are going out and explaining to people just what the situation is.

There is no strategy as dependable or likely to be as effective as this constant strategy of explanation and advocacy. You see I think that the movement is in that. It isn't just postulating a nice set of ideas and hoping that they will be magnetic to people, I don't think that will occur. But of knowing what you believe, repetitively asserting it and explaining it in terms of the advantage to people in all conditions. In that context, I am for demonstrations and such activities. If it is a lecture, it should be a lecture very frequently illustrated by demonstration.

Let me come finally to another kind of possibility, namely that the general election does not produce a clear-cut result. What should Labour do if it was invited to form a minority government.

I think there's only one way. If we form the government then we get on with the programme.

And if you don't get the support you go to the country?

That's right. That's the only way to do it.

Would that be on a kind of all or nothing basis? For example, there's an argument that the SDP alliance might come forward with support if you are prepared to adopt proportional representation.

No government of which I was a member would accept that kind of relationship. At least it wouldn't have me as a member of it if it did. PR, I think, is fundamentally counter-democratic in any case. There can be no deals with a third party. They can take it or leave it and if they want to precipitate an election then that's what they must do. The Labour Party is about 80 years old and has been a governmental force for 60 years. Three times in that time we've had minority governments, three times we have depended to a greater or lesser extent upon the support of those who are our natural enemies. On two of those occasions it ended in absolute disaster because we became hostages and the other time it led to 1979. So that kind of coalition, formal or informal, has got nothing to offer the Labour Party.

But aren't you assuming Neil, to some degree, that British politics remains essentially the same as it has been in the past? In other words that the rise of the SDP or the development of the SDP-Liberal alliance is something that's a purely temporary thing and likely to be somehow obliterated or shoved into the background anyway? And therefore the Labour Party can think of the future in the same way as it's acted in the past?

That third party phenomenon will only be temporary if we succeed. If we don't succeed it will be more or less permanent because of the three broad opinions in politics of conservatism, radicalism and people who can't make up their bloody minds, they are always the third force in politics. If our appeal is unsuccessful then the third party will be picking up that part of the electorate to whom we should be making a direct appeal. It's up to us to stop that.