
The road ahead for British socialism

Neil Kinnock

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NEIL KINNOCK, one of three candidates for the Labour leadership, outlined his approach to democratic socialism last night in the annual John P. Mackintosh memorial lecture. This major statement laid out his vision of Labour's future in the aftermath of a disastrous *General Election* for the party. Here we publish an edited extract from the lecture.

In his last published article John Mackintosh remarked that, "It has often been said that the Labour Party in recent years has lacked books, theories, ideas of what it should be seeking in politics."

It is therefore fitting that in the wake of the most important and, for Labour, the most cataclysmic election since the war, we should take heed of this remark and take stock of our future in the light of our recent and not-so-recent history.

It is a fact, and a measure of our difficulty, that the Labour Party has been losing the support of even those groups which we traditionally have claimed most and have tried hardest to represent.

We have now had the awful lesson of June 9, 1983. Then two out of ten of the total electorate voted Labour. It is too early for an exhaustive analysis of the class composition of Labour's vote to have been compiled. But what evidence exists simply confirms our sense of smell that the majority of those voters who earned their living from manual work did not support Labour. Indeed, when we know that in 1979 only 46 per cent of skilled and unskilled workers who voted, actually turned out to support Labour at the polls, and the Tory working class vote was as strong as at any time since the 1950s, the probability is that in the 1983 *General Election*, Labour obtained the votes of less than one-third of skilled workers and less than half of the unskilled workers. Trends such as these have prompted some commentators to suggest that the growing volatility of electors means that we now have the "independent voter": the elector who offers no loyalty to any of the parties and who hovers between parties at each election.

I have never believed that this process is inevitable. Loyalty has to be earned and retained from generation to generation. Even if the pundits are correct that the "floating voter" is now more numerous than before, it does not follow that this is an irreversible process. Nor does it follow that it is exclusively damaging to Labour or that it is related exclusively or even mainly to the real or imagined failures of past Labour Governments. Indeed, in a paradoxical fashion, the very opposite may be true.

From 1945 and up until relatively recently, British society has been increasingly composed of those for whom the Welfare State and an annual increment in their standard of living has been taken more or less for granted. Their personal experience has precluded the necessity of tooth and claw struggle for a decent wage, working conditions, basic human rights and access to education. In a sense, therefore, Labour suffers in some ways from the success of a mere century of organised Labour and from the necessary adjustments which have been forced on the "free enterprise" system — often involving State intervention — in order to ensure its survival.

The success of mitigation, it appears, has slaked the thirst for transformation. For socialists, the task of scaling the commanding heights is somehow made more difficult by the conquest of the foothills, especially when British socialists have, with deplorable modesty and complacency, rarely sought to effectively teach the truths that the civilising of capitalism was an arduous victory *over* it, not a voluntary concession *by* it.

Labour now stands at the crossroads. Disenchantment, whether by misconception or by direct antipathy, with central planks of Labour's perceived programme, an apparent difficulty in establishing legitimacy of intentions and purposes in the public mind, and the superficial abatement of social conditions, have up until recently undermined the capacity of the Party to maintain an onward surge.

Wilful treachery

I do not personally believe that this is merely a matter of choosing between the "Left" or the "Right" — and certainly not as these classifications have been used over the past few years by media shorthand thinkers and self-appointed spokesmen of the factions working in unholy alliance. That is a parasitic inter-dependence in which the editors require devils of extremism, the factionalists need demons of a persecuting Press and the deserting Right grossly inflates the significance of sectarianism in order to alibi their act of wilful treachery in forming the SDP.

The first step in creatively developing an ideology and strategy of democratic socialism is the recognition that every socialist movement exhibits not only flaws of caution and complacency and conservatism in the analysis on the Right, but seductive, superficially radical, but ultimately destructive and reactionary tactics and strategy on the *Ultra-Left*.

Modern social democracy has been proved wrong not only in its *economic* premise, but also in the political assumptions based on it.

In the atmosphere of the so-called consensus politics — the "Butskellism" of the 1950s, and sixties — social democrats rejected the possibility of the revival of a reactionary, class-orientated Tory Party and the destruction of the Welfare State.

Anthony Crosland's version was that capitalism was historically associated with an "Explicit, assertive. . . ideology. That its essential features were, first, the veneration of individualism and competition; secondly an insistence on the absolute and unconditional rights of private property; thirdly, an intellectual belief that the unfettered exercise of private rights must, by 'the invisible hand' of economic competition, maximise the welfare of the community." And that in his new view "None of these beliefs could be said to form part of the ruling ideology in Britain today."

As late as 1964 he wrote of the Conservative Party that it was never likely that it would destroy, or attempt to destroy the hard core of the social and welfare achievements incorporated within modern Britain. "It is not, for one thing," he wrote, "in the nature of the British Conservative Party, which for all its clamorous fringe of backwoodsmen, usually entrusts its leadership to cautious, realistic Peelites." "Indeed," he continued, "it lacks the essential attribute of a counter-revolutionary party — a faith; a dogma, even a theory. A passionate desire to restore the past must rest on a deep attachment — moral, ideological or theoretical — to the virtues of that past."

How ironic, almost bizarre, those words seem today and, were it not for David Owen's declaration that he would work with Mrs Thatcher, we could assume that no-one believed them any longer. Crosland's description of the Toryism which, could not, and would not recur, is perhaps the most concise and apt definition of the present Government in its leadership, its monetarism, its selective and smug homilies on "Victorian values", its aim to destroy the Welfare State and its use of the hidden boot of unemployment as well as the hidden hand of *sozialmarkt wirtschaft*.

If and when the Tory Party is ever rescued from its present bigotry I hope that no-one, even in the most unguarded moment, will ever forget that it is only when the Tory Party is in the hands of the people who do not worry too much about money because they have always had it, that it takes on the image of a Party of kindly complacency, a Party that hasn't the energy to put its beliefs into practice. When that Party is in the hands of people who worry about nothing much except money, it is a political python with a cobra's instincts.

Social democracy has failed in its economic and its political assumptions as changes which it did not anticipate swirled around it.

The result is that Britain is in many ways as unequal a society today as it was 20 years ago. The top social groups are only half as likely to be in ill health as unskilled or semi-skilled workers. They are four times as likely to have sons who gain white-collar jobs. And they earn twice as much on average in wages. It is not a result of their malevolence or of the corruption of welfare. It arises partly because of the lack of quantity and quality in provisions and partly because — when that relative scarcity exists — benefits go disproportionately to those with the confidence and

judgment to represent their own interests and needs both as individuals and as pressure groups.

The rejection of social democratic ideology and policies — a development well advanced within the Labour movement — is not the only task of democratic socialists: in the process of the battle of ideas against social democracy inside the movement, some on the Left have adopted tactics, attitudes and strategy, consciously or unconsciously, which are just as contrary to democratic socialism as is the ideology of the Right. I emphasise that I am talking here not so much about *Policies* generally associated with "the Left" but about the approach of *some* of the parts of the Left — whether they are components of the Labour Party or uninvited appendages at the fringe.

Socialist purity

If the Labour Party goes down the wrong path it courts disaster. For no political institution has a divine right to exist, and as Isiah Berlin pointed out "those which have ceased to perform any useful historical functions soon fade into insignificance."

In the Labour Party we are neither impossibilists nor adventurists. We do not gamble on a sudden crisis which will, somehow, as if by magic, precipitate a socialist Utopia. Nor do we put forward a programme to be achieved by violence and bloodshed. Nor do we offer a programme whose justification lies in its pristine, socialist purity. Some of his avowed followers ought to recall that it was Trotsky himself who pointed out that "It is not enough to create a programme, it is necessary that the working class accept it. But the sectarian, in the nature of things, comes to a full stop upon half the task."

Any strategy which does not pay sufficient attention to the institutions, customs and traditions of a country is like the proverbial seed thrown on stony ground.

Unless the roots of a movement are, and are seen to be, deeply embedded in its local soil it will inevitably starve and wither. In Britain's case it is crucial that we extend rather than discredit parliamentary democracy. This is precisely why in our support for extra-parliamentary action we draw a distinction between that as essential and honourable in British democracy and our rejection of *anti*-parliamentary activity and philosophy whether it emanates from the ultra-Left activist or from the board rooms of multi-national corporations.

Vanguard party

The task of the Labour Party is — as ever — to win understanding of the elementary view that democratic socialism is directly relevant to those contemporary realities, to gain support for the answers which we offer to the needs of the present and the foreseen future and to breed justifiable confidence that we will put the answers into effect whenever we obtain the necessary power.

We can make that task much more arduous if we become incapable of appreciating that a yawning gap can open between the best intentioned party and those that it most wants to help. It can lead to rejection by the intended beneficiaries and, amongst the party adherents, to the worst form of elitism — a belief that waning public support, even from “traditional” industrial working class voters, must indicate *their* political immaturity rather than *our* political inability.

The inherent danger of that approach is that it threatens the very nature of the Labour Party and any coherent strategy for achieving a socialist advance in the conditions of Britain today. If followed through, it will lead us to adopt a position of purely a “vanguard” party rather than a mass party — at a time when even Communist parties throughout Europe are themselves rejecting that constraining role. It would lead us into a situation we could claim only to be “for” rather than “of” the working class, a party based on activist cadres, rather than a mass membership.

For some, it appears, this would be no tragedy. What they fail to understand or choose to ignore, is the uniqueness of the British Labour Party. We are not, and never have been, united by a strict ideology. We are united by our structurally, financial, representative and historical links with a trade union movement that functioned long before it fashioned a political party. We are not *merely* the political wing of the organisers working class but that is *central* to our existence and to our ideology.

We are in the business of putting forward policies and a strategy capable of transforming society through the democratic process, backed by a mass of ordinary people who are prepared to elect and defend a democratic socialist government.

The socialism we seek aims to give people the maximum possible freedom to control conditions under which they live and work. It aims to provide a freedom that people will no longer need to be “given” anything. People will stand free of “handouts”, paternalistic interference and bureaucratic indifference. Socialism stands, in short, for the freedom of everyone, in contrast to the Conservative freedom for the lucky few who climb a ladder and then kick it away in order to guarantee the superiority of their liberty.

In the disputes that various vanguards create and in the way that they conduct them they become the new philanthropists, weakening the Labour movement by dividing it ideologically, wasting its energies with unnecessary internal conflict, making idealism look like naivete or even madness; making realism look like evasion.

Let everyone heed what most know already — that socialists have enough of a task on their hands in winning people away from deference to capitalism without having to fight on the other front of reassuring them that socialism is neither malevolent extremism nor tepid Toryism. That task is difficult enough when capitalism slanders socialism as a conspiracy against democracy, Christianity and the family. But when

some socialists give the impression that all of the aims are destructive and aggressive, or others appear to be indistinguishable from the enemy, the problems of socialist persuasion become even greater.

We owe ourselves and those who gave us democratic socialism, better than that. We owe the people of today better than that. And by reason and radicalism, through the very commonsense of socialism, we can work *with* them and *for* them to rescue and revive our country and fulfill obligations to the wanting of the world. Social democracy cannot do that, ancient and modern Conservatism does not want to do that. That can only be done by democratic socialism — Aneurin Bevan's* "child of modern society" that "seeks the truth in any given situation, knowing all the time that if this be pushed too far it falls into error. . ." that "struggles against the evils that flow from private property, yet realises that all forms of private property are not necessarily evil", that knows "how to enjoy the struggle, whilst recognising that progress is not the elimination of struggle but rather a change in its terms."

We shall enjoy the struggle. And we shall win.

Because of a throat infection Mr Kinnock was unable to deliver his address last night. The speech was read in his presence by Robin Cook MP.

* 'Democratic socialism is a child of modern society and so of relativist philosophy. It seeks the truth in any given situation, knowing all the time that if this be pushed too far it falls into error. It struggles against the evils that flow from private property, yet realises that all forms of private property are not necessarily evil. Its chief enemy is vacillation, for it must achieve passion in action in the pursuit of qualified judgments. It must know how to enjoy the struggle, whilst recognising that progress is not the elimination of struggle but rather a change in its terms.'

* From: 'In Place of Fear' by Aneurin Bevan, William Heinemann Ltd, London, 1952. Chapter 10 'Democratic Socialism' page 170.

Kinnock begins his drive for leadership

From: *The East Lothian Courier* July 1, 1983

More than 500 people packed Prestonpans Community Centre on Friday evening for the fourth annual John P. Mackintosh Memorial Lecture, in which Neil Kinnock, MP, made his bid for the Labour leadership with a blistering attack on both the right and ultra-left wing factions of the party.

In his lecture, entitled "Democratic Socialism and Social Democracy", Mr Kinnock accused the right and ultra-left of "wasting Labour energies by unnecessary internal conflict." He also attacked the Tory Party for "worrying about nothing much except money — a political python with a cobra's instincts."

Unfortunately, Mr Kinnock, who is suffering from a throat infection had been told to rest his voice by "good National Health Service doctors", his audience was assured, and his lecture was delivered by Robin Cook, now MP for Livingston.

Chairman of the John P. Mackintosh Memorial Fund Committee, Mr Arthur Greenan, welcomed everyone to the lecture, which, he said, was in memory of a man who was "an inspiration to us all." He added that they would remember John Mackintosh "at the zenith of his political prowess" and in particular, his love of life, distrust of bureaucracy, brilliant oratory, selfless dedication to his constituents and his deep personal sensitivities.

Dr Henry Drucker, head of the department of politics at Edinburgh University, who jointly organised the lecture, said that one of John Mackintosh's final essays was dedicated to re-fashioning social democracy, and there was now a need for answers to his questions, including a re-assessment of socialist values and a reconstruction of the programme around those values.

Neil Kinnock apologised for being unable to deliver the lecture himself, adding that the last time he visited Prestonpans he also had a hoarse voice, from cheering the Welsh rugby team at Murrayfield.

He told the audience that he was grateful for the opportunity to "mark the memory of a man I had much respect and the highest affection for", and realised that a considerable honour had been bestowed upon him in being invited to set forth this year's lecture. "Above all, John Mackintosh was someone of conscience and clarity. I am honoured to mark his memory," he said.

In his lecture, Mr Kinnock referred to John Mackintosh's last published article in which he remarked that: "It has often been said that the Labour Party in recent years has lacked books, theories, ideas of what it should be seeking in politics."

He continued: "It is therefore fitting that, in the wake of the most important, and for Labour, the most cataclysmic election since the war, we should take heed of this remark and take stock of our future in the light of our most recent and not so recent history." He added that it had once been said that, "there has never been a time in the history of the Labour Party when it would not be appropriate to write an article on 'the current crisis'. Sadly, that remark is still pointedly appropriate.

"We have just had the awful lesson of June 9, 1983. It is too early for an exhaustive analysis of the class composition of Labour's vote, but we do know that two out of ten of the total electorate voted Labour. But what evidence exists simply confirms our sense of smell that the majority of those voters who earned their living from manual work did not support Labour".

Mr Kinnock then referred to the so-called "independent voter", who offered no loyalty to any party and hovered between parties at each election. "I have never believed that this process is inevitable. Loyalty has to be earned and retained from generation to generation," he said.

"Labour now stands at a crossroads. Disenchantment — whether by misconception or by direct antipathy — with central planks of Labour's perceived programme, an apparent difficulty in establishing legitimacy of intentions and purposes in the public mind and the superficial abatement of social conditions, have up until recently undermined the capacity of the party to maintain an onward surge.

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He then went on to attack the Tory Party. "If and when the Tory Party is ever rescued from its present bigotry I hope that no-one, even in the most unguarded moment, will ever forget that it is only when the Tory Party is in the hands of people who do not worry too much about money because they have always had it, that it takes on the image of a party of kindly complacency, a party that hasn't the energy to put its beliefs into practice.

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"We can make that task much more arduous if we become incapable of appreciating that a yawning gap can open between the best intentioned party and those that it most wants to help. It can lead to rejection by the intended beneficiaries and amongst the party adherents, to the worst form of elitism, a belief that waning of public support, even from traditional industrial working class voters, must indicate their political immaturity rather than our political inability.

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"Social democracy cannot do that, ancient and modern Conservatism does not want to do that. That can only be done by democratic socialism — Nye Bevan's 'child of modern society' that 'seeks the truth in any given situation knowing all the time that if this be pushed too far it falls into error', that 'struggles against the evils that flow from private property, yet realises that all forms of private property are not necessarily evil', that 'knows how to enjoy the struggle while recognising that progress is not the elimination of the struggle but rather a change in its terms.'

"We shall enjoy the struggle, and we shall win." Mr Kinnock was given a standing ovation when his speech ended, amid much applause and cheering from the crowds.