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Ralph Miliband and the Labour Party: from *Parliamentary Socialism* to 'Bennism'

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Ralph Miliband completed *Parliamentary Socialism* at the end of 1960 and it was published in October 1961. This proved to be probably the most influential book on the Labour Party written during the post-war era – possibly the most significant of any period. As chapter 5 will confirm, the book helped shape a whole school of left-wing interpretations of the party (Coates 2002; Panitch and Leys 1997) and established an analytical framework that challenged more conventional viewpoints.

Ironically, the argument advanced in *Parliamentary Socialism* was, in the first instance, not entirely obvious, and its impact on many readers was not quite what the author intended. Thus in 1994 Paul Foot of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers' Party (SWP) wrote that no book had 'made more impact on my life'. In 1961 Foot was contemplating a life as a Labour MP: *Parliamentary Socialism*, however, 'put me off that plan for ever, by exposing the awful gap between the aspirations and achievements of parliamentary socialists' (*Guardian*, 6 June 1994). Foot was not alone in deriving this message from the book. Yet, Miliband actually saw his work as an eleventh-hour call for the party to be transformed into an agency for the establishment of socialism, rather than a plea to abandon the party. However, it is hardly surprising that so many could derive the latter message from *Parliamentary Socialism*, as Miliband's attitude to the party in 1960 had been deeply ambivalent. Moreover, by the time the second edition was published, in 1972, his views had changed so much as to require a postscript which maintained that Labour 'will not be transformed into a party seriously concerned with socialist change'. Thus, while the task remained that of preparing the ground for a socialist alternative to capitalism, 'one of the indispensable elements of that process' had now become 'the dissipation of paralysing illusions about the true purpose and role of the Labour Party' (Miliband 1972: 376–7).

In order to help further our understanding of *Parliamentary Socialism*, and situate it firmly in its intended context, this chapter explains the evolution of Miliband's thinking about the Labour Party. It does so by analysing his wider assumptions about political change and the role of parties, and suggests that these were based on an attempt to understand both objective socio-political

circumstances and subjective intentions and convictions. In addition, the chapter explains both the continuities and the changes in Miliband's view of the Labour Party between the 1950s and the 1990s.

The argument of Parliamentary Socialism

The opening sentences of *Parliamentary Socialism* effectively summarise Miliband's general outlook. Thus, of those parties 'claiming socialism to be their aim', Labour is characterised as being 'one of the most dogmatic' – not about socialism, but about the parliamentary system. 'Empirical and flexible about all else', Miliband (1972: 13) asserted, 'its leaders have always made devotion to that system their fixed point of reference and the conditioning factor of their political behaviour'. The rest of the book develops this point, providing an interpretation of the party's history and demonstrating that its insistence on parliamentary methods had wasted the potential of those who came to identify with it, and so had thwarted the advance towards socialism.

A significant feature of the book – and of Miliband's overall approach – is the extent to which it differed from both Communist Party (CP) and conventional Labour Left critiques. When CP members wrote about Labour, their argument – implicitly or explicitly – was that only the CP was a truly reliable opponent of capitalism because of its pristine working-class character and acceptance of 'scientific socialism'. Even when advocating unity among all parties on the Left, their underlying proposition was that socialist advance depended on increasing the size of the CP and securing acceptance of its theses. *Parliamentary Socialism* rejected any such notion: its comparatively few comments on CP policies were all negative. According to Miliband, therefore, socialism would not come from a more influential CP.

The *leitmotif* of the Labour Left analysis was, in contrast, the theme of leadership 'betrayal'. The assumption here was that, while Labour as a whole was socialist, its leaders periodically 'sold out' and diluted agreed policies. Miliband certainly shared the Left's insistence on the importance of the party's annual conference in determining policies, arguing it was an obstacle to the 'degradation of the business of politics' (Miliband 1958a: 174). He believed that the Left had two basic purposes, both of which he endorsed: to push the leadership into accepting more radical policies; and to press for more militant attitudes towards Labour's opponents. Moreover, while the leadership 'eagerly' accepted the parliamentary system, the Left adhered to its inhibitions and constrictions 'with a certain degree of unease and at times with acute misgivings' (Miliband 1972: 14–15). Yet, the Left still accepted parliamentarism, something which explained its ultimate failure – from the ILP until it exited the party in 1932, the Socialist League of the 1930s, the Bevanites and Victory for Socialism during the 1950s – to mount a successful challenge to the leadership. Thus, to Miliband, the party as a whole – the leadership as much as the Left – subordinated socialism to the dictates of the parliamentary road.

Miliband's primary argument was that, as a result of this subordination, in practice Labour stood merely for social reform rather than socialism. For whenever

there was a possibility of more extensive change through extra-parliamentary action, the party had deliberately dampened it down. The only exceptions to this general rule occurred when such action was thought to be in the 'national interest' rather than for class purposes. Thus when, in 1920, it seemed the Lloyd George Government was about to become involved in war against the Soviet Union, Labour and many trade union leaders were prepared to take direct action to prevent such an outcome. In contrast, when the class element was dominant, the leadership was paralysed. Accordingly, 'it was the class character of the General Strike which made them behave as if they half believed they were guilty men, and which made them seek, with desperate anxiety, to purge themselves of their guilt' (Miliband 1972: 82, 144–5).

Miliband's secondary claim was that, despite Labour never having been socialist in practice, it had always contained socialists within its ranks. Indeed, the 1918 constitution, especially the Clause 4 commitment to extend public ownership, had 'created a basis of agreement between socialists and social reformers.' At the time, however, that which undoubtedly divided these 'two fundamentally different views' of Labour's purpose was 'sufficiently blurred' by the party's 1918 manifesto, *Labour and the New Social Order*, as 'to suggest a common purpose, at least in programmatic terms' (Miliband 1972: 62). In such an arrangement, Miliband argued, the social reformers in the leadership enjoyed hegemony. At the time of writing *Parliamentary Socialism* he nonetheless hoped that 'labourism' – which he defined as the historic coalition of socialists and social reformers – was about to disintegrate. This was because the party's then-leader, Hugh Gaitskell, who apparently wanted Labour to abandon even its notional commitment to socialism, had pitched himself fully against those who sought to fundamentally transform capitalism (Thorpe 2001: 125–44). Miliband appreciated that there would be attempts to sustain labourism and that, in an electoral system which discouraged fission, this would appear a wise course to many socialists. Even so, he considered 'genuine compromise' between Gaitskell and Labour's socialists to be impossible, as any compact that obscured the party's full commitment to socialism would merely allow the leadership to maintain its historic course (Miliband 1972: 345). His conclusion was that Labour should now transcend the orthodoxies of labourism and become a genuinely socialist party. Anything else would mean 'the kind of slow but sure decline which – deservedly – affects parties that have ceased to serve any distinctive political purpose' (Miliband 1972: 345).

Parliamentary Socialism therefore was sustained by a powerful critique of 'labourism', and contemporary reactions, from those whose opinions Miliband most respected, were generally enthusiastic. Yet even they were troubled by the politics of the work (Foot 1961; Hobsbawm 1961; Thompson 1961). This was partly because Miliband concentrated on the negative case against Labour and spent little time exploring alternatives. This unevenness led to the paradox, observed above, that while the author saw his book as a last-minute exhortation for the party's transformation, others viewed it as a call for socialists to abandon Labour. Miliband was undoubtedly guilty of not clarifying his underlying assumptions. The next section explores his obscured purpose in writing the book.

The politics of Parliamentary Socialism

Miliband had been a Marxist since the age at least of 16, when he first arrived in Britain, in May 1940, as a Jewish refugee from Belgium. An understanding of Miliband's Marxism, and especially his distinctive understanding of Marxism's implications, even though not an explicit feature of his analysis, is crucial to any full appreciation of *Parliamentary Socialism*.

As an adolescent, Miliband joined the left-wing Zionist organisation Hashomer Hazair, and it was in that environment where he probably first encountered Marxist thought. Once safely in Britain, he embarked on an analysis of society and politics from an essentially Marxist perspective, but for the first year or so established no formal connection with a political party. Having gained a place at the London School of Economics, which during the war was located in Cambridge, he associated with members of the CP. In June 1943, however, this contact effectively ceased as he entered the Belgian section of the Royal Navy, in which he remained until January 1946. During this period Miliband resumed his largely solitary attempt to make sense of contemporary developments, aided by one of the few copies of *Das Kapital* to find itself on a Royal Navy vessel. Despite this interest in Marxist theory, with the Second World War over he became increasingly critical of Stalin's Soviet Union and the CP over a range of issues – especially Moscow's attempt to bring down the independent communist regime in Yugoslavia and the growing anti-Semitism evident in numerous East European communist parties. As a result, Miliband continued to stay outside the orbit of established communist politics.

Miliband's relatively solitary position on the Left was an important influence on *Parliamentary Socialism* and the key reason for some of its apparent ambiguity. For, it was not the product of a long-time Labour left-winger whose interpretation was forged through the experience of leadership 'betrayal'; nor was it the result of Moscow-imposed orthodoxy. Moreover, Miliband's analysis was set within a broader understanding of the development of socialist politics after 1945 than usually attempted at the time.

One fundamental element in Miliband's wider framework was his vehement condemnation of American international policy. While critical of the Soviet Union, he did not doubt that the USA carried primary responsibility for the Cold War, and that this could be attributed to counter-revolutionary and anti-socialist motives. Furthermore, he was adamant that the USA played a crucial role in upholding West European capitalism. In fact, he argued that the USA had effectively replaced fascism as the established order's guarantor against any threat from the Left – and viewed the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in this light. As a result, like many on the party's Left, Miliband saw Labour ending its close association with Washington as a pre-requisite for building socialism in Britain.

A second feature of Miliband's broader analysis was his rejection of Gaitskell's 'revisionist' argument – most openly articulated by Anthony Crosland in *The Future of Socialism* (1956) – that post-war capitalism had been transmuted into a less exploitative and more stable 'mixed economy'. In some short, but powerfully argued, pieces written during the late 1950s, Miliband subjected this claim to

critical analysis, which foreshadowed his more extensive treatment in *The State in Capitalist Society* (1969). He did not deny that capitalism had changed, but argued that this did not affect its fundamental character. For, in all advanced industrial societies what he termed 'marginal collectivism', based on limited state intervention and welfare provision, had become 'the price which capitalism has learnt it must pay as a condition of its survival as a more or less going economic concern'. In fact, he asserted, no leading capitalist economy could be run efficiently without the kind of welfare state and extensions to public ownership associated with the 1945 Labour Government led by Clement Attlee (Miliband 1958b: 92). Thus, while Miliband thought that some of the reforms associated with marginal collectivism were worthwhile, unlike many in the Labour Party he did not think they marked a step towards socialism.

A third aspect of Miliband's overall argument concerned the role of the major parties of the Left. He believed liberal democracy had re-established itself after 1945 without relying on fascism – as many business leaders had done during the 1920s and 1930s – simply because the Left presented no serious threat. Instead of trying to transform capitalism, they limited their ambition to reconstructing and reforming the existing economic system. This criticism applied as much to communists in France and Italy as to Labour in Britain. Indeed, albeit for different reasons, he doubted that communists or Centre-Left social democratic parties such as Labour would bring about radical change. In the first instance, he believed that 'in every West European society a majority of people . . . would simply not support a Communist-led social revolution, whatever the Communists might say or do' (Miliband 1958c: 43). In contrast, social democrat leaders were everywhere 'primarily engaged in political brokerage' between the trade unions and capitalism – they were not trying to overthrow the latter with the help of the former (Miliband 1958c: 46). Against the Labour Left view that all that was needed was a new leadership, Miliband believed that the integration of parties of the Left into capitalism could not be explained in individualist terms but was the result of deeper structural forces (Miliband 1958c: 43).

The above were central points in the analytical framework behind *Parliamentary Socialism*: on their own they suggest the approach of a detached Marxist. However, like all good Marxists, Miliband wanted not only to interpret the world but to play a part in changing it. This meant he had to become engaged in some form of political activity – albeit of a rather tentative kind.

Miliband never doubted that a political party would be required to achieve socialism, and he was gradually drawn towards Labour, if only because it was supported by most working-class voters, while he was increasingly negative about the CP. The resignation of Aneurin Bevan from Attlee's Cabinet in 1951, after the introduction of prescription charges in the National Health Service, and the subsequent development of the 'Bevanite' movement on the Labour Left, probably finally encouraged him to join. Thus, from 1952 until 1957, the Labour Left was thus the main focus of his political activity. Miliband even participated in the Bevanite 'second eleven', which tried to build up support in the constituencies (Jenkins 1979). In 1955 he also attended the party's annual conference as a

delegate for the Hampstead CLP. There he delivered an impassioned, if a fairly conventional leftist, speech on nationalisation and the need for conference to exert its authority over the leadership. He ended by calling for a 'clear and detailed programme to say specifically and clearly that we stand for socialism, that we are a socialist party, and that we shall go on being a socialist party until we have built the socialist commonwealth' (Labour Party 1955: 113).

Even while a Labour activist, however, Miliband never believed he belonged to a truly socialist party; it was, however, the best means of articulating socialism at that time. This position altered slightly with the emergence of the New Left during the late 1950s. The New Left promoted a variety of *avant-garde* endeavours, including cultural politics and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, an intellectual eclecticism encapsulated in the journal *Universities and Left Review*. Miliband found such initiatives encouraging – betokening an ending of the constraining atmosphere of the Cold War – and supported the new movement. However, he attributed greater political importance to the other aspect of the New Left: the exit of many communists following Krushchev's 1956 secret speech, which revealed the true nature of Stalinism, and the Soviet repression of Hungary during the same year. In particular, the resignation of intellectuals, above all, the historians E. P. Thompson and John Saville, was of crucial importance to him. For, it meant that there were finally now Marxists outside the CP with whom he could join. When invited to write for their journal *New Reasoner*, he did so with enthusiasm, and, at the end of 1958, Miliband became the first person never to have been of a member of the CP to join its editorial board.

Despite the rise of the New Left, Miliband remained convinced that socialism needed a political party with strong links to the working class and, in that regard at least, Labour remained crucial. Thus, he continued to be active in the party, during 1958 becoming an executive council member and secretary of the home policy committee of the leftist Victory for Socialism (VFS). Miliband in fact hoped to draw the *New Reasoner* group into an alliance with the Labour Left in the hope that together they would transform Labour into a fully formed socialist organisation. Few others saw merit in his proposal, and, instead, the likes of Thompson joined up with the *Universities and Left Review* to establish the *New Left Review*, a journal which, for all its intellectual merits, never exerted much influence on Labour politics.

Miliband still remained optimistic that Labour would take a decisive turn to the Left as he wrote *Parliamentary Socialism*. It was in 1960 that Gaitskell's attempt to reduce the doctrinal significance of the party's commitment to public ownership suffered a decisive set-back. That year also saw him defeated at conference over unilateral nuclear disarmament. While Gaitskell eventually managed to reassert his position, Miliband's belief in Labour's centrality to any socialist strategy did not alter. He stayed on the VFS executive until the organisation disintegrated in the early 1960s, hoping – probably with diminishing faith – that through a combination of pressure and socialist education, both inside and outside the party, Labour might yet be turned into an body committed to transform capitalism.

There is one final aspect to Miliband's thinking at this time that needs to be highlighted. One of the unanswered questions in *Parliamentary Socialism*

concerned the process of transition itself. For it was unclear whether Miliband rejected the possibility of a peaceful road to socialism. In truth, he did not know if violence would be necessary, for that would depend on the balance of forces present at the time of transition. He certainly believed a peaceful transition was the more probable if there was a large majority pressing for socialism, but he was also convinced that the commitment of the political leaders would be crucial. In other words, a party could bring about the transition to socialism only if it was sincere and resolute about its intentions. Thus questions of intention, will, consciousness and conviction were crucial in his attitude to political parties. In 1960 he was sure Labour lacked those qualities, but still held it conceivable that they might be developed through sustained pressure. Given the extent to which *Parliamentary Socialism* reflected Miliband's conditional, tentative and ambiguous support for the party, it is perhaps understandable that so many misunderstood his message.

The search for a socialist party

Unlike many on the New Left, Miliband did not view Harold Wilson's succession to the Labour leadership in 1963 as cause for celebration. Like many he certainly mistrusted Wilson personally. More importantly, however, he was largely alone in preferring that Labour's divisions be further accentuated while the new leader was initially adept at smoothing them over. In contrast to most, Miliband was, moreover, under no illusion about how far the Wilson Government elected in October 1964 was dominated by social reformers. Though it might introduce some valuable changes, there was no prospect of socialism from such a quarter. Nevertheless, during the Government's early days, he was enthusiastic about the possibility of organising seminars for Labour MPs, hoping these might encourage them to press for a more socialist strategy.

As did many others on the Labour Left, Miliband found Wilson's period in office between 1964 and 1970 to be a desperate disappointment. Indeed, it provided the postscript to the second edition of *Parliamentary Socialism* with much material to justify the author's rejection of the party as a vehicle for socialism. Yet Miliband's position had been transformed far earlier than that of most others on the Labour Left who took a similar route. While many activists were frustrated from the start of Wilson's tenure, most gave his government the benefit of the doubt until 1966 – when its wafer-thin Commons majority was, courtesy of the general election of that year, turned into something more substantial. In contrast, Miliband abandoned Labour in May 1965 on the grounds that it would never become a socialist party.

The catalyst for this change of attitude was Wilson's support for the American war in Vietnam. For Miliband, there was no question of compromise here: the Americans were external aggressors upholding a corrupt puppet government in South Vietnam that resisted a popular social revolution and national liberation. Thus, everybody on the Left had to oppose this policy. While many on the Labour Left – especially those associated with the weekly *Tribune* – looked on Vietnam in similar terms, most believed the Wilson Government should be supported given

its possible role in reducing inequality and advancing state ownership. For Miliband, however, Vietnam was the decisive issue of the era – the real fault line that divided not only Left from Right, but morality from immorality. Labour under Wilson failed this fundamental test. In some ways Vietnam was merely the straw that broke the camel's back, thus Miliband's final decision might be thought to have been not an especially dramatic one. Even so, given his belief that parties were crucial agencies in the transformation to socialism, it had enormous implications for Miliband who still had no faith in any of the alternatives to Labour. So began his search for an effective substitute, one that would continue for the rest of his life.

As is often the case with converts, Miliband proclaimed his new conviction with an impressive zeal. Indeed, he was so keen to demonstrate that Labour was now an obstacle to socialism that he became wary of any form of association with his old party. Thus, when prominent figures on the Left held a series of meetings leading to the 1967 *May Day Manifesto*, which outlined a strategy to transform Britain into a socialist society, Miliband refused to participate, fearing the project was too pre-occupied with his old party. Nor did the events of 1968 help much, although he was naturally heartened by growing opposition to the war in Vietnam and by the mobilisation of students across the West in solidarity with the Vietcong. However, because he was convinced that socialism needed a working class marching in step with an organised socialist party, he never saw the often-anarchic student protest as truly revolutionary. Nor did he have any faith in those Trotskyist and Maoist groups that proliferated in the late 1960s – while the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 merely confirmed his enmity for communism.

Miliband constantly stressed that democracy and pluralism were integral to socialism, something that should be reflected in all aspects of its theory and practice. If the freedoms associated with capitalist democracy were inadequate, they should never be dismissed as 'bourgeois': socialists should instead aim to increase their scope beyond that allowed by capitalism. Socialist parties, he believed, must have open internal debates with dissenting minorities putting forward their own policies. Furthermore, Miliband argued against the notion of a single party to represent the working class either in capitalist or socialist society (Miliband 1977).

The implication of all this was that a new socialist party had to be established as soon as possible, one that would adhere to both Marxism and pluralism, qualities neither Labour nor its rivals on the Left enjoyed. Miliband had toyed with this idea ever since his break with Labour, but made a more determined attempt to bring it about in the mid-1970s, when professor of politics at the University of Leeds. However, despite various attempts to promote support for an inclusive, democratic, Marxist-oriented party, Miliband was no nearer to establishing such an organisation at the end of the 1970s than he had been at the start. Even so, he played a leading role in a more modest initiative – the Centres of Marxist Education – designed to promote the spread of Marxist ideas in the labour movement. Nonetheless, his aspirations for a party that would propagate socialism to the masses had yet to be fulfilled.

The impact of 'Bennism'

Labour lost the 1979 general election, following what socialists viewed as yet another depressing period in office. Miliband's initial reaction was to criticise socialists who still thought their main goal should be to push the party leftwards. So far as Labour was concerned, Miliband believed the only contribution it could make to socialism was if it split so that its left wing might form the nucleus for a genuinely socialist organisation. Even that he believed to be unlikely. Thus, Miliband was highly sceptical about the merits of the campaign to change the party's constitution, promoted by the likes of the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy to give activists greater control of the leadership. Having participated in the Bevanite campaign of the 1950s, Miliband believed such efforts were misconceived, as he was convinced that the social reformers in the leadership would always control policies in practice. Thus, while well intentioned, the attempt to make this hegemony more difficult in constitutional theory seemed to Miliband to be a waste of socialist energy.

During the 1980s Miliband slowly revised his position, due largely to a more positive evaluation of those who sought to take the party in a more socialist direction and especially to his high regard for Tony Benn, their standard-bearer. Miliband was impressed by Benn's refusal to stand for the discredited Shadow Cabinet after the 1979 defeat, but only got to know him personally in April 1980 after being invited to speak at a day-school in Benn's Bristol constituency. Although Miliband inevitably gave a lecture on why Labour could never become the agency for a socialist transformation of Britain, there were signs of an immediate rapport with Benn, which would develop into a close political and personal relationship. Thus, when Benn, backed by an array of left-wing groups, challenged the incumbent Denis Healey for Labour's deputy leadership in 1981, Miliband acknowledged the Left's progress within the party. Furthermore, given its acceptance of the need for forms of extra-parliamentary action, this also appeared to be a new kind of 'Left'. He also appreciated the wider political significance of the Left's control of the Greater London Council under Ken Livingstone. Indeed, during the early 1980s the Labour Left appeared to have command of the party for the first time in its history. Not only were many local authorities under its influence but also Labour's basic economic policies now reflected the Left's outlook. Constitutional change had, moreover, reduced the influence of MPs and gave activists a say in the election of both leader and deputy leader. The old left-winger Michael Foot, elected in 1980, was seen as merely a stopgap before Benn could assume the mantle. His campaign to replace Healey as deputy was regarded as a dry run for the leadership itself, and, while bitterly fought, Benn came within less than 1 per cent of winning the post (Seyd 1987).

It was in this context that Miliband became involved in establishing the Socialist Society, the founding conference of which was held in January 1982. In attendance were 1,200 individuals who ranged from members of the Labour Left to those belonging to the SWP and the International Marxist Group. Miliband played an important role in drafting the invitation, which significantly proclaimed that

the society aimed to encourage socialist renewal inside the broader labour movement and help those fighting for socialist ideas in the party itself. This did not mean, however, that he was now reconciled to Labour. In fact, he remained worried that the society would become too preoccupied with the party's internal developments and wanted it to keep a critical distance. Nevertheless, this certainly marked a change from his position at the time of the May Day Manifesto, for he was now prepared to work closely with people who were still active in Labour's ranks.

During the early 1980s Miliband's respect for Benn steadily mounted. He viewed Benn as someone who – as a cabinet minister in the Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s – had seen at first hand how often the party's principles were subordinated to the 'political game', and he learned from the experience. He was also attracted by Benn's energy, constant refusal to accept defeat and conviction that socialism would eventually triumph. Benn was not a theorist, still less a Marxist, but there was a similarity between them in their optimism. It was also relevant that they were almost the same age and so had many of the same formative influences and reference points.

By 1985, however, Benn's star no longer shone as brightly as it had done. He had lost his seat in the 1983 general election – a disastrous defeat for the party nationally for which many blamed the Left's policies. Although returned to the Commons as a result of the Chesterfield by-election a year later, Benn found that the atmosphere inside the party had changed considerably. He had also lost his chance to replace Foot, who had resigned immediately after the end of the 1983 campaign. The main strategy of the new leader, Neil Kinnock, was to push Labour back to the mainstream so as to squeeze out the SDP, formed in 1981 by ex-Labour social reformers who believed the Left had gained permanent control of the party. The SDP almost forced Labour into third place behind the Conservatives in the 1983 election and Kinnock thought Labour's only hope was to abandon most of the positions it had assumed while Bennism was at its peak. In addition, the 1984–85 Miners' Strike which ended in disastrous defeat, and the Thatcher Government's rate-capping of left-wing local authorities further demoralised and divided Labour activists. As a result, many of Benn's sometime supporters re-packaged themselves as the 'soft left' and sought an accommodation with Kinnock.

It was in this inauspicious climate that Miliband made a proposal to Benn when they met in February 1985. Benn's (unpublished) diary records the conversation as follows:

He [Miliband] said, 'You are a great resource for the movement. Looking back from Keir Hardie, Ramsay MacDonald, George Lansbury, Stafford Cripps, Nye Bevan right through there has never been somebody with your experience of Government who has taken such a radical position on institutional questions – quite exceptional experience and you must use it properly. I would suggest that you keep absolutely away from infighting in the Party which does nothing whatever to assist. . . . I don't know if you've read [the] *Life of De Gaulle* but you are in the position he was at *Colombey les Deux Eglises*, waiting, available, a senior statesman of the left and you should look ahead and address people when you think it right to do so but that is really your function.'

‘Have you got a think tank – would you like me to help you to get together a few academics who would be prepared to assist?’

I was very flattered. He said, ‘You underestimate your role as a leader, we need leaders . . . and I think you should take that role . . .’

Miliband was not complimenting Benn for the sake of it. After unsuccessfully attempting to convince people that a new party was needed, and finding it so difficult to make progress, he saw Benn as a potential leader, one receptive to socialist ideas. Miliband’s recent experience in the Socialist Society had perhaps also persuaded him that such initiatives would always be condemned to marginality unless harnessed to a figure with a national reputation. He therefore thought it important to bolster Benn, to keep alive the kind of socialist commitment he represented, by providing him with an intellectual forum. At the same time Benn’s involvement with people from outside the Labour Party might eventually galvanise a wider socialist movement that could lead to the new formation Miliband sought. Moreover, while Miliband realised Benn’s importance, this feeling was more than reciprocated and the enduring pattern of their relationship was established.

If Miliband really told Benn he could ‘get together a few academics’, they were of a very particular kind, for he invited Hilary Wainwright and John Palmer from the Socialist Society, and Perry Anderson, Robin Blackburn and Tariq Ali from the editorial board of *New Left Review*. The group called themselves the Independent Left Corresponding Society (ILCS); and, with a fluctuating membership, the ILCS held monthly meetings for the next few years. Benn and Miliband each derived something from the initiative, but both were aware that they were not entirely united in their aims. While Miliband was trying to draw Benn out from internal Labour politics and make him the rallying point for a new socialist movement, Benn was keen to harness the ILCS to the Labour Left to help it combat the Kinnock leadership.

As time went on, Benn’s increasingly marginal role in the Labour Party became ever more evident, as was the position of the Left generally within Margaret Thatcher’s Britain. After Labour lost a third successive general election. in June 1987, Miliband persuaded Benn to hold a socialist conference in Chesterfield. Organised by the Socialist Society along with the Bennite Campaign Group of Labour MPs, this was held in October 1987 and drew an attendance of 2,000 people. Miliband was disappointed by the predominance of SWP members and the general focus on Labour politics. Although he remained a member of the organising committee for the second Chesterfield conference, which was held in the following June, and continued to be a friend and supporter of Benn, Miliband probably no longer believed that the socialist breakthrough would occur in the short-term. Indeed, in January 1988, he tried to dissuade Benn from standing for the Labour leadership – this presumably was something De Gaulle would not have attempted. Benn, however, did not take his advice – something he later regretted, for he secured only 11 per cent of the votes in an election that gave Kinnock a much-needed boost. Miliband shared the general view that the second Chesterfield conference was more successful than the first, but he no longer exuded confidence that the Socialist Movement, which emerged from it, was the embryo of a new

party. He was well aware that, for the time being at least, the Left was in decline in Britain and that non-aligned socialists of his ilk were highly marginal figures.

If Miliband's role in relation to 'Bennism' is considered in comparison to his earlier attitudes, some striking points emerge about the interaction between the analytical and subjective aspects in his interpretive framework. In 1979, his initial position was to adhere to an analysis based entirely on an understanding of structural factors. From this perspective it seemed clear that Labour would never present a real challenge to the Thatcher Government, and that the Left under Benn could not gain control of it. However, he shifted his position because of an appreciation of the subjective intentions of the Bennites and the character of Benn himself. In the mid-1960s he had written off Labour because the Wilson Government's attitude to the American presence in Vietnam demonstrated its passivity and fundamental lack of morality. In the mid-1980s Miliband was prepared to devote considerable time to Benn for the opposite reason: he believed him capable of providing the right kind of socialist leadership. In other words, Miliband wanted to help Benn because of the latter's convictions and determination. This did not mean his appreciation of the Labour left-winger's personal qualities negated his analytical framework. He was always aware that Benn was unlikely to succeed within the Labour Party and that the tide was turning against the Left in general. Nonetheless, Miliband's allegiances were determined both by his assessment of people's subjective qualities – consciousness, will and ideology – and by his analytical framework. He did not believe, however, that subjective intentions could transcend objective circumstances – as was indicated by another shift in his view of the Labour Party.

After communism

It was argued earlier that Miliband saw developments in the Labour Party from an international perspective: *Parliamentary Socialism* owed much to his understanding of the role of West European social democracy and of an international system dominated by the USA. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that what would be his final position was also based on an analysis of the key changes in the wider world – particularly the collapse of communism.

After 1968 Miliband had regarded the Soviet-backed regimes of Eastern Europe as 'bureaucratic collectivist' systems that had no relation to socialism. However, during the 1980s, when the leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhael Gorbachev, attempted to reform the Soviet regime from within, Miliband became an enthusiast for what was referred to as *perestroika*. With the prospects for the Left generally bleak in the West, he hoped that a successful transformation of the East European system into a form of democratic socialism might revive the prospects for socialism across Europe. If Gorbachev succeeded, the association between the Left and totalitarianism – so powerful a weapon in the armoury of the Right – could finally be broken. Unfortunately, Gorbachev failed and the Soviet Union eventually embraced capitalism rather than pluralist socialism.

Miliband tried to suggest that the downfall of communism was, nonetheless, also advantageous for the Left, given the extent to which the Soviet regimes had

long embarrassed Western socialists such as himself. However, he was not entirely convinced by his own argument, and in August 1989, as the East European regimes crumbled, he wrote that, for years to come, 'socialists will be something like a pressure group to the left of orthodox social democracy'. It was social democratic parties such as Labour that 'will for a long time constitute the alternative – such as it is – to conservative governments' (Miliband 1989a: 36). A few weeks later he suggested that the end of communism meant 'socialism has to be reinvented'. 'All anti-socialists', he went on, 'rejoice in what they take to be the death of socialism', and while socialists needed 'to prove them wrong', that 'will require a lot of work' (Miliband 1989b). This was slightly misleading, for he still believed that a Marxist-inspired version of socialism was both valid and possible. Much of the 'reinvention' was therefore also 'reaffirmation', as Miliband was to show in his final (and posthumously published) book *Socialism For a Sceptical Age* (1994). However, acceptance of the fact that social democracy would be the only alternative available to the forces of the Right for a long period had clear implications for his attitude to British politics, for it meant, in effect, acquiescence in Labour's role as the leading party on the Left.

It would nonetheless be wrong to suggest that Miliband had come full circle back to his position of 1960. When completing the first edition of *Parliamentary Socialism* he had also known that the socialist transformation would be 'a long haul' but had thought that the first step should be Labour's conversion to socialist ideas. By 1994 his own commitment remained undiminished, but he knew socialism was not currently on the political agenda. In the meantime Labour could be supported as the alternative – 'such as it is' – to the Right.

Miliband died in May 1994, the same month as Kinnock's successor John Smith, and so did not live to see Tony Blair become leader of what he would refer to as 'New Labour'. It is worth asking what he might have made of events after 1994, had he lived. Miliband would, no doubt, have seen Blair's Labour Party as preferable to the Conservatives. Yet he would probably have regarded it as much further removed from his own convictions than was the Labour Party he had condemned in *Parliamentary Socialism*. He would undoubtedly have been forced to accept that the 'long haul' was now even longer than he had previously believed. Yet he might also have thought it inadequate either simply to denounce 'New Labour' or to give up all hope of socialism. Rather than despairing, he would have analysed Blair's project as part of an international phenomenon and tried to identify the factors likely to produce a more adequate response to the latest phase of capitalism. Most importantly, Miliband would have insisted that – whatever Labour's role in the process might be – it remained both possible and necessary to create a co-operative, democratic and egalitarian society.

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