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From the NS archive: English Socialism

6 September 1924: Now, when a man calls himself a Socialist, he conveys by the name little information about his ideas and beliefs.

BY GDH COLE

In 1924, with a Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald in power, GDH Cole looked at how the idea of socialism had fared with the responsibilities of practical power and decision making, and found it wanting. "Socialism is still no doubt a faith," he said, "but it is, like the faith of some modern Churchmen, a faith that has discarded all its doctrines – a disembodied faith in the soul of a dead idea." Communism had become the source of radical social and regulatory ideas and Cole, a Fabian economist and political theorist, wanted socialism – "no longer living as a programme" – to rise to the

challenge.

Nothing is more significant in the world of today than the collapse of Socialistic doctrines. Only a decade ago the outlines of the Socialist policy seemed well-defined, and Socialism itself a body of doctrines and a programme as clear as the sun at noon-day. When a man said he was a Socialist, you could tell within narrow limits what he stood for and what he believed. There were differences as to method and rapidity of change. Some Socialists thought of Socialism as a product of revolution, and some – the greater number – as the result of a prolonged course of evolutionary change. But as to the end itself they were substantially agreed. The State, democratised by the extension of the franchise and the growth in popular education, would take upon itself the full burden of conducting the national affairs. Industry and commerce would become departments of State action; we should all become Civil Servants and work for the State in a spirit of mutual service. Such an outcome was in line with the actual tendency of political affairs. It was in line also with the development of industry. The trust was the forerunner of nationalisation. Today, all that structure of Socialist ideas lies in ruins. Men still call themselves Socialists, probably in greater numbers than ever before. But now, when a man calls himself a Socialist, he conveys by the name little information about his ideas and beliefs. A few – perhaps all the younger converts, regard the State and its works with an aloof and critical hostility. Socialism is still no doubt a faith; but it is, like the faith of some modern Churchmen, a faith that has discarded all its doctrines – a disembodied faith in the soul of a dead idea.

All this has come out very clearly in the proceedings of the past fortnight at the Summer School conducted by the Independent Labour Party. The ILP is, or is reputed to be, the pioneering propagandist body of Socialism, as well as the tail that wags the dog of political Labour. It is supposed to supply the ideas which the great Trade Unions then accept and finance. What the ILP thinks today the Labour Party will think tomorrow. But

the puzzle is to discover what the ILP is thinking today. The discussions at the Cloughton Summer School leave us with the impression, not that the ILP has a policy which it is endeavouring to press upon the Government, but that, having recognised the inadequacy of the old Socialist policy, it is seeking feverishly everywhere for a new policy to take its place.

In one sense, this is a healthy sign; for it means that the leaders of the ILP are trying to take stock of their position in the light of present realities. There was a notable tendency to concentrate discussion at Cloughton on actual problems of today and tomorrow, and to propound and argue positive remedies meant for early application. There was much said about next steps in agricultural policy, in the control of banking, and in industrial legislation, and little about plans to be realised on the morrow of the Revolution. The talkers were really trying to face things as they saw them in the world of fact. But – and this is the really significant thing – they were facing the facts in a strictly empirical and particularist spirit, as if each problem stood by itself and had to be judged on its merits. There was no indication of a clear unifying principle in the light of which all problems could be seen in their true aspect. In short, in this representative gathering of Socialists, there appeared no common basis of Socialist doctrine.

Much that was said at Cloughton was excellent. Especially on the agricultural question, the ILP with its plan for collective control of imports and marketing is, we believe, working along sound lines. But the disappearance of the old State Socialist faith is manifest here also. Gone are the days when the Socialist, confronted by the rural problem, could declare for nationalisation of the land, and look round triumphantly, as if that settled the whole matter. The ILP proposes, indeed, State control of the industry; but the distance it has gone from the old faith is measured by the form which the proposed control is to take. No longer is the Civil Servant to be the agent of Socialism; State control is to be administered through the farmers and rural workers organised into a representative

authority for agricultural affairs. Guild Socialism, if it has not secured acceptance for its own schemes, has at any rate made short work of State Socialism in its traditional forms. It is evident that the members of the Socialist bodies have an uneasy sense that the old dogmas of Socialism are melting away. This appears plainly in their attitude to the Labour Government. Those who defend the Government most warmly say that it is not Socialist, and is not pursuing a Socialist policy. Now it is the mission of the ILP to make the Government Socialist and to ensure that it shall launch a Socialist programme. But what is this programme to be? In discussing the Government, the Cloughton Summer School spoke with two voices. One voice commended the Government's practicality in facing immediate issues; the other blamed it for wandering from the straight path of Socialism. Speaker after speaker urged that, while it should continue to deal with the problems of the day much as it has been, it should also make a plain declaration of its Socialist faith by introducing into Parliament really Socialist measures and challenging defeat on this fundamental issue. So much was easily said; but on what issue was the fundamental challenge to be made?

Nationalisation of mines and railways, or even banks? All these are challenges. They would arouse the necessary opposition; but would they evoke the no less necessary enthusiasm on the Socialist side? There were not wanting at Cloughton speakers who held that these things are not Socialism. Perhaps they are not; but, if they are not, what is?

Socialism lives as an idea; it is no longer living as a programme. And, even as an idea, can it live long in its disembodied state? Communism has arisen to challenge it, and to beat it at its own game of bourgeois-scaring. Socialism, now that Communism is in the field, has no longer the attraction of seeming to be on the extreme left. It has still, no doubt, a faint aroma of human brotherhood, and this is its remaining source of strength. It still appeals to men's pacific and friendly impulses and emotions, whereas Communism has stolen its old appeal to their fighting instinct. But a political

creed cannot live on moral impulses, however generous. It must include a policy as well as a moral rule of life, or it will cease to be a gospel for the workaday world and become even as the Musical Banks in *Erewhon*.

The ILP leaders, understanding this, are trying hard to find for the old soul of Socialism a new bodily habitation. They may succeed in devising a new policy and a good one suited for the needs of the day. But we doubt if it will be recognisably a Socialist policy, unified by any principle reasonably to be called "Socialist". It will pick and choose, as the Labour Government has picked and chosen, among proposals drawn from many schools of thought. It will bring forward plans not vitally different from those which might be drafted by clever businessmen, or clever Liberals, or clever Conservatives. There will be indeed this difference, that the new Socialism, more regardful of the claims of the wage-earner, will be less regardful of vested interests in property. But, as the plain declarations against confiscation made at Cloughton show, this divergence is less deep than on the surface it appears. The new Socialism makes to property concessions of expediency which differ little in practice from admissions of right.

The new evolutionary Socialism of the ILP – if we are still to call it Socialism – is already in conflict and will before long be in violent conflict with the revolutionary doctrines of Communism. Communism is as definite as Socialism is now eclectic and accommodating, except in Russia, where, having achieved power, it has also had to face the realities of government. Communism in England or France can be a faith, because it has no need to be really a policy. It lives on its possession of just that simplification of issues which is no longer possible for the ILP. It stands where Socialism stood forty years ago. If it succeeds, it will dissolve, as Socialism has dissolved, in the deep waters of its own success.

But there is this difference. The old Socialism was not merely a faith, but a scheme. It wanted this and that – definite things to be done, the sum of which was Socialism. In urging these things, it has left its mark everywhere. No party, no body of

political or economic opinion, but has been deeply influenced by the Socialist ideas whose full application it has rejected. This power to influence diverse streams of thought was the strength of Socialism. Communism, on the other hand, is a “take it or leave it” sort of doctrine. It is not a programme in the same sense; it does not admit of eclecticism and partial applications. Communism is all or nothing.

And, as in this country with its living tradition of accommodation and adjustment Communism cannot be all, it is doomed, we believe, to be nothing. The virtue which has passed out of Socialism has not passed into Communism. It has passed to no definite group of men, or body of doctrine. It has diffused itself through men of many different groups. In a sense this is a weakness, for only defined groups have the cohesion necessary for effective action. But this is only to say that, while the old groups are in dissolution, the new are yet unformed. The new principle of unification is yet undiscovered. It is groped for, not only by the ILP, but wherever men of goodwill are gathered together for the discussion of public affairs. When it is found, it will group men anew – to their surprise often and mortification at their strange new companionships. Till it is found men will grope on, trying to find in old faiths firm anchorage for changing opinions. There is upon us a time of transition in ideas, when party labels mean ever less, and men uneasy in old faiths cling to them only in default of new. “Lord, I believe,” says the Socialist of today. But he adds, “Help thou mine unbelief.”

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