

Tides of History

In 1959, after Labour had suffered three consecutive election defeats, Nye Bevan made a defiant conference speech in defence of socialism. We republish that speech today.



The Labour Party conference in Blackpool in 1959 was a tumultuous affair. The party – which had just lost three consecutive elections in 1951 (despite beating the Tories in the popular vote), '55 and '59 – was in the midst of an ideological battle over the path forwards.

Hugh Gaitskell, defeated party leader in the general election a month prior, used the conference to argue against Labour's policy of nationalisation and its Clause IV commitment to public ownership. The party's constitution, he argued, "implies that we propose to nationalise everything" whereas Labour had "long come to accept, we know very well, for the foreseeable future, in at least some form, a mixed economy." "Had we not better say so," he concluded, "instead of going out of our way to court misrepresentation?"

The content of this speech had long been rumoured in party ranks and chair of the conference, Barbara Castle, had defied convention for her opening address by defending public ownership – and offering the strong implication that breaking from this would be breaking from the party's traditions.

But it was Aneurin Bevan, leader of the Labour Left, who offered the most strident riposte. Writing in *Tribune*'s conference edition, Bevan would give an overview of his position:

“The Labour Party has been nurtured in the belief that its *raison d'être* is a transformation of society . . . The controversy is between those who want the mainsprings of economic power transferred to the community and those who believe that private enterprise should still remain supreme but that its worst characteristics should be modified by liberal ideas of justice and equality . . . What is quite certain is that the overwhelming majority of the Labour Party will not acquiesce in the jettisoning of the concept of progressive public ownership.” This perspective would find its full expression in Bevan's conference speech. It was to be arguably his last great oration, taking place in November while he died in July of the following year. Bevan's biographer Michael Foot described it as “the classic Bevan speech, shaped to secure an immediate end and yet raising the Party debate to the realms of political philosophy.”

A quote from this speech can be found on the back cover of the latest issue of *Tribune*. But we republish a longer excerpt below today.

Bevan's Speech

My position in this debate is rather an anomalous one. It is like taking part in what we hope will be a symphony the score of which has not yet been published. In fact, I am reminded of the old jest of the man who played the triangle in the orchestra. He went up to the conductor and asked to be allowed to get his part over first because his wife was at home ill.

Hugh Gaitskell said yesterday that he was speaking for himself; Barbara [Castle], the chairman, talked for herself. I am talking for myself. Of course you would imagine that from such a combination as that only discord could be produced, and there has been some suggestion in the newspapers – amongst our comrades there [pointing down to the press table] – that the result of this Conference is going to be the disintegration of the Socialist Party. They are not very perspicacious; they do not seem to be able to see below the surface of things. They do not seem to realise that the speech of Hugh Gaitskell yesterday and the speech of Barbara before did in fact contain a very important ingredient of unity.

I used to be taught as a boy, not at university but even in the Board school, one of Euclid's deductions: if two things are equal to a third thing, they are equal to each other. Yesterday Barbara quoted from a speech I made some years ago, and she said that I believed that Socialism in the context of modern society meant the conquest of the commanding heights of society. Hugh Gaitskell

quoted the same thing. So Barbara and Hugh quoted me. If Euclid's deduction is correct they are both equal to me and therefore must be equal to each other. So we have a kind of trinity – I am not going to lay myself open to a charge of blasphemy by trying to describe our different roles. I am not certain in which capacity I am speaking, whether as the father, the son or the holy ghost. But you will have seen that, despite the attempts which are made to exploit differences of opinion, so as not to inflict mortal wounds upon the Party, those differences are not really fundamental differences of character that should divide the movement permanently.

That is not to say that there are not differences. Of course there are! Hugh Gaitskell and Barbara Castle and myself would not be doing a service to this movement if we did not make our individual contributions to its variety, but making the contributions to its variety and to diversity without mortally injuring its unity . . .

I am told by some of my comrades that one of the reasons why we lost the election was because nationalisation was unpopular. Hugh [Gaitskell] said – and I think he was right – that from the information we can get, a lot of people said that one of the reasons why they did not vote for us was because they did not believe in nationalisation. I think it is correct that they did this; but what does it amount to when they have said it? Are we really now to believe that the reasons people give for their actions are the causes of their actions?

Such a naive belief in the rational conduct of human beings would wipe out the whole of modern psychology. Of course many of them said they did not like nationalisation, and therefore did not vote for us. Is it suggested that because of that we should drop it? After all, comrades, we start off pretty well, don't we? We may not have hung nationalisation around our own necks, but our opponents did it for us. It is not our own propaganda that made us champions of public enterprise, because a great deal of our propaganda kept that very much in the background. It was our enemies that fastened public ownership around our necks, and I am extremely grateful to them for doing it.

What does it prove? If it is said that we lost the election because of our belief in public ownership, then 12,250,000 people voted for us because they believed in public ownership. It is not a bad start-off, is it? Now you may say: 'Ah, but they did not vote for you because they believed in public ownership.' Well, you cannot have it both ways, can you? Or even suppose you were allowed to have it both ways, then you must conclude that 12,250,000 people did vote for us despite their distaste for public ownership. That is the biggest single vote ever given for public ownership in any country in the whole world. Then why the hell this defeatism? Why all this talk that we have actually gone back?

Of course it is true that in the present-day affluent society a very large number of people are not as discontented as they were, and because we are a Party that stands for the redress of discontent and the wrongs caused by discontent, the absence of so much discontent therefore has reduced our popularity. But you know, comrades, I have been in this movement now for many years. I was in this movement in between the war years when there were two million unemployed, and still the Tories got a majority. You would have thought that there was some spontaneous generation of Socialist conviction; but we lost before the war years. Even the unemployed voted against us. Even in the areas where there was as much as 20 per cent and 30 per cent of unemployment we lost seats. Should we not therefore have voted in favour of unemployment? The fact is – and that is accepted, and derive your lessons from it – that a very considerable number of young men and women in the course of the last five or ten years have had their material conditions improved and their status has been raised in consequence and their discontents have been reduced, so that temporarily their personalities are satisfied with the framework in which they live. They are not conscious of constriction; they are not conscious of frustration or of limitation as formerly they were, in exactly the same way as even before the war large numbers of workers were not sufficiently conscious of frustration and of limitation, even on unemployment benefit, to vote against the Tories.

What is the lesson for us? It is that we must enlarge and expand those personalities, so that they can become again conscious of limitation and constriction. The problem is one of education, not of surrender! This so-called affluent society is an ugly society still. It is a vulgar society. It is a meretricious society. It is a society in which priorities have gone all wrong. I once said – and I do not want to quote myself too frequently – that the language of priorities was the religion of Socialism, and there is nothing wrong with that statement either, but you can only get your priorities right if you have the power to put them right, and the argument, comrades, is about power in society. If we managed to get a majority in Great Britain by the clever exploitation of contemporary psychology, and we did not get the commanding heights of the economy in our power, then we did not get the priorities right. The argument is about power and only about power, because only by the possession of power can you get the priorities correct . . .

Therefore I agree with Barbara, and I agree with Hugh and I agree with myself, that the chief argument for us is not how we can change our policy so as to make it attractive to the electorate. That is not the purpose of this Conference. The purpose is to try, having decided what our policy should be, to put it as

attractively as possible to the population; not just to adjust our policy opportunistically to the contemporary mood, but to cling to our policy and alter its presentation in order to win the suffrage of the population. That is our job, and I hope that is exactly what is going to emerge from this Conference . . . The challenge which is going to take place in the next ten years is not going to come from Harold Macmillan. It is not going to come from West Germany nor France. The challenge is going to come from those nations who, however wrong they may be – and I think they are wrong in many fundamental respects – nevertheless are at long last being able to reap the material fruits of economic planning and of public ownership.

That is where the challenge is coming from, and I want to meet it, because I am not a Communist, I am a Social Democrat. I believe that it is possible for a modern intelligent community to organise its economic life rationally, with decent orders of priority, and it is not necessary to resort to dictatorship in order to do it. I believe that is possible. That is why I am a Socialist. If I did not believe that, I would be a Communist; I would not be a capitalist!

I believe that this country of ours and this movement of ours, despite our setbacks, nevertheless is being looked upon by the rest of the world as the custodian of democratic representative government. But, comrades, if we are going to be its custodian, we must at the same time realise what the job is. The job is that we must try and organise our economic life intelligently and rationally in accordance with some order of priorities and a representative government; but we must not abandon our main case. Our main case is and must remain that in modern complex society it is impossible to get rational order by leaving things to private economic adventure.

Therefore I am a Socialist. I believe in public ownership. But I agreed with Hugh Gaitskell yesterday: I do not believe in a monolithic society. I do not believe that public ownership should reach down into every piece of economic activity, because that would be asking for a monolith. In fact, it would be asking for something that does not even exist in China or Russia. But what I do insist upon is this, and as a movement we must insist upon it. We will never be able to get the economic resources of this nation fully exploited unless we have a planned economy in which the nation itself can determine its priorities . . .

[Labour Lord] Frank Pakenham made a speech here yesterday in which he said that his beliefs were derived from his religion. I do not claim to be a very religious man; I never have. But I must remind Frank Pakenham that Christ drove the money-changers from the Temple. He did not open the doors wide for them to enter. He drove them away. If we go on to apply the principles of Christianity to contemporary British society, they have been done elsewhere

rather better than they have been done here. I think there is something evil, something abominable, something disgraceful in a country that can turn its back on Hala, that can turn its back on the old-age pensioners, that can starve the Health Service, and reap £1,500 million from the Stock Exchange boom immediately after the election is over.

What are we going to say, comrades? Are we going to accept the defeat? Are we going to say to India, where Socialism has been adopted as the official policy despite all the difficulties facing the Indian community, that the British Labour movement has dropped Socialism here? What are we going to say to the rest of the world? Are we going to send a message from this great Labour movement, which is the father and mother of modern democracy and modern Socialism, that we in Blackpool in 1959 have turned our backs on our principles because of a temporary unpopularity in a temporarily affluent society?

Let me give you a personal confession of faith. I have found in my life that the burdens of public life are too great to be borne for trivial ends. The sacrifices are too much, unless we have something really serious in mind; and therefore, I hope we are going to send from this Conference a message of hope, a message of encouragement, to the youth and to the rest of the world that is listening very carefully to what we are saying.

I was rather depressed by what [fellow Labour MP] Denis Healey said. I have a lot of respect for him: but you know, Denis, you are not going to be able to help the Africans if the levers of power are left in the hands of their enemies in Britain. You cannot do it! Nor can you inject the principles of ethical Socialism into an economy based upon private greed. You cannot do it! You cannot mix them, and therefore I beg and pray that we should wind this Conference up this time on a message of hope, and we should say to India and we should say to Africa and Indonesia, and not only to them, but we should say to China and we should say to Russia, that the principles of democratic Socialism have not been extinguished by a temporary defeat at the hands of the Tories a few weeks ago! You know, comrades, parliamentary institutions have not been destroyed because the Left was too vigorous; they have been destroyed because the Left was too inert. You cannot give me a single illustration in the Western world where Fascism conquered because Socialism was too violent. You cannot give me a single illustration where representative government has been undermined because the representatives of the people asked for too much. But I can give you instance after instance we are faced with today where representative government has been rendered helpless because the representatives of the people did not ask enough. We have never suffered from too much vitality; we have suffered from too little.

That is why I say that we are going to go from this Conference a united Party. We are going to go back to the House of Commons, and we are going to fight the Tories. But we are not only going to fight them there; we are going to fight them in the constituencies and inside the trade unions. And we are going to get the youth! Let them start. Do not let them wait for the Executive, for God's sake! Start getting your youth clubs, go in and start now! Go back home and start them, and we will give all the help and encouragement that we can.

I have enough faith in my fellow creatures in Great Britain to believe that when they have got over the delirium of the television, when they realise that their new homes that they have been put into are mortgaged to the hilt, when they realise that the moneylender has been elevated to the highest position in the land, when they realise that the refinements for which they should look are not there, that it is a vulgar society of which no decent person could be proud, when they realise all those things, when the years go by and they see the challenge of modern society not being met by the Tories who can consolidate their political powers only on the basis of national mediocrity, who are unable to exploit the resources of their scientists because they are prevented by the greed of their capitalism from doing so, when they realise that the flower of our youth goes abroad today because they are not being given opportunities of using their skill and their knowledge properly at home, when they realise that all the tides of history are flowing in our direction, that we are not beaten, that we represent the future: then, when we say it and mean it, then we shall lead our people to where they deserve to be led!