

## FOREWORD

It took one back to the 1980s. A sunny evening in early August 2015 – warm enough for politics *al fresco*. The street behind Camden Town Hall, just off the Euston Road in north London, had been transformed into a socialist bazaar. Along the pavement stood a row of stalls, in several cases converted wallpaper-pasting tables, selling the many different varieties of left-wing and Marxist newspaper, vying to catch the attention of the hundreds of Jeremy Corbyn supporters who were patiently queuing round three sides of the block, and beyond.

Jeremy Corbyn attracted about 2,000 people that night, far more than could be accommodated in the main hall of the Town Hall building. So Corbyn and his several supporting speakers worked on a shift system, doing the rounds of four separate gatherings on the site – in the main hall; in an annexe upstairs; in the canteen; and finally outside, addressing the 300 or so latecomers

who hadn't been able to get into the building, from the roof of an old fire engine supplied by the Fire Brigades Union.

My editors at *Channel 4 News* had asked me to concentrate on talking to the young people energised that summer by the Corbyn campaign. What struck me, though, was just how old lots of the faces in the queue were – men and women in their sixties, seventies and eighties. These were people who would have gone to similar rallies three decades before, during the heyday of Tony Benn.

'It's unbelievable,' said a familiar figure, Chris Knight, who was out selling the *Labour Briefing* journal he's been editing since the late 1970s. 'I never thought I'd see scenes like this in my lifetime again.' For the Marxist newspaper-sellers in Camden, these, and similar crowds at other Corbyn campaign events, were an obvious source not just of one-off paper sales, but of potential long-term recruits. In several cases – notably *Socialist Worker* – their publications represented groups outside the Labour Party. 'Would they now join Labour if Corbyn was elected leader?' I asked, with a touch of mischief.

Just round the corner, I came across another table piled with copies of *The Socialist*. Trying to sell them was Sarah Sachs-Eldridge, national organiser of the Socialist Party. Here was the link with the subject of this book, for the Socialist Party are the main descendants of the Militant tendency, the Trotskyist group which for several decades successfully infiltrated the Labour Party, before hundreds of their members were expelled and most of the remainder left en masse in 1991.

Militant, in their prime, were brilliant at capturing newspaper

and broadcast headlines. For many people unversed in the minutiae of Labour politics, the word Militant came to represent the hard or far left as a whole. Yet, the group was actually shunned by many others on the left – from the pro-Soviet elements in the Communist Party and left-wing unions such as the miners’; to the metropolitan, socially liberal left of Ken Livingstone and the old Greater London Council.

Jeremy Corbyn was never anywhere near being a member of Militant. And yet, in the mid-1980s, when Militant was fighting efforts by successive leaders Michael Foot and Neil Kinnock (aided by two pro-Labour barristers Derry Irvine and his young protégé Anthony Blair) to expel them, Corbyn defended Militant’s right to remain in the Labour Party. Many Labour figures at that time – on both left and right – rather naively took Militant for what they claimed to be – a group of supporters of a Marxist newspaper. Jeremy Corbyn, as an astute and active member of the London left, and a member of the editorial board of Chris Knight’s magazine *London Labour Briefing*, would have known the truth as detailed in this book – that Militant were in effect a secret political party that had decided to operate clandestinely within the Labour Party. And Corbyn would also have known Militant’s protestations, that it had no organisation, were utterly dishonest.

An article in the July 1982 edition of *London Labour Briefing* illustrated Corbyn’s public stance: ‘If expulsions are in order for Militant,’ he wrote, ‘they should apply to us too.’ And Corbyn, a year before he became an MP, announced himself as ‘provisional convener’ of the new ‘Defeat the Witch-Hunt Campaign’. It was

based at an address in Lausanne Road in Hornsey, north London, Corbyn's own home at that time.

This is the story of Militant, the Marxist, Trotskyist group whose presence inside the Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn tried to defend.

#### A NOTE ON THE TEXT

The first edition of this book was published under the title *Militant* in 1984. The second edition, which contained very substantial additions and updated the story, was published as *The March of Militant* two years later. For this edition, thirty years on, I have made a few small amendments to the 1986 text. Nearly all the changes are stylistic, or for greater clarity.

M. C.

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## ‘I CALL THIS AN OUTRAGE’

When the Labour Party National Executive Committee (NEC) decided, in February 1983, to expel five members of the Editorial Board of *Militant*, it was not the first time the Labour Party had tried to take action against a Marxist newspaper within its ranks. There was an important precedent and one that must have been disturbingly familiar to the then party leader, Michael Foot.

Nearly thirty years before, in the spring of 1954, the NEC had decided that ‘Persons associated in any way with the editing and sale [of a journal called *Socialist Outlook*], or contributing to that journal, are declared to be ineligible for membership of the Labour Party.’ The NEC minutes stated: ‘From complaints that have been received it seems evident that a Trotskyist organisation is functioning within the Labour Party.’<sup>1</sup>

That decision in 1954 prompted a ferocious attack in *Tribune*, the leading journal of the Labour left. Under the heading ‘I Call

This an Outrage', a former editor of *Tribune* wrote: 'For the first time in its history, so far as I am aware, the leaders of the Labour Party have taken steps to suppress a newspaper.' The article went on: 'Such a decree might fittingly be issued within a Fascist or Communist Party. That it should be issued by the leaders of a democratic party is an outrage.'<sup>2</sup>

The author of the article was Michael Foot. In 1982 *Tribune* was to reprint his words more than once, in a new campaign against the Labour Party NEC.<sup>3</sup> This time *Militant* was the Trotskyist paper the Executive was trying to suppress, and Michael Foot was leading the action.

Ever since the Labour Party established itself as the unchallenged representative of the British working class, the party leadership has constantly been in conflict with groups on the left who have felt that the party has not been sufficiently radical in its methods and policies. These groups range from revolutionary Marxists to what is often termed the 'legitimate left' (by those further to the right). They include groups, initially outside, who have decided deliberately to join the Labour Party in order to influence it from within, as well as groups of like-minded party members who have come together to press for some cause or other. But no matter how strong their dissent, and no matter how limited their prospects of advancement, these factions have usually preferred to remain inside the party – aware no doubt that groups which have left the party have always suffered drastically. The result has been a long history of disciplinary action by the party establishment against left-wing pressure groups and 'newspapers'. And one of the

great ironies of this history has been that often the rebels of one generation have become the establishment of the next.

The history of Labour Party internal discipline did not really begin until the 1920s. In 1918 the party had introduced individual membership: until then it had been simply a federation of affiliated bodies, such as trade unions and socialist societies. One of the affiliated societies was a Marxist group, the Social Democratic Federation; another was the British Socialist Party, which later became the British Communist Party. Until 1918 all party members had to belong to an affiliated organisation rather than directly to the party. The advent of individual membership was to bring with it the problem of what to do when individual members grouped together in non-affiliated organisations outside the party's control. The same year, 1918, saw the Labour Party commit itself fully to socialism: the new constitution contained the famous Clause IV, which calls for common ownership. But while the party appeared to move leftwards, many felt that for electoral reasons, and in the wake of the Russian Revolution, Labour would have to distance itself from the ideas of Bolshevism if it was to become a serious party of government.

When the British Communist Party (CP) was formally established in 1920, it applied almost immediately for affiliation to the Labour Party. The Communist leaders pointed to the example of the left-wing Independent Labour Party which had been affiliated to the Labour Party since 1900; they argued that they should be allowed to join in the same way. But time and again in the early 1920s Labour conferences turned down the Communists'

requests. The leadership argued that the CP's aims were not in accord with Labour's 'constitution, principles and programme' and said that the Communists would be loyal to the Soviet-led Communist International (Comintern) rather than to the Labour Party. Labour was perhaps right to be cautious: Lenin had urged his British comrades to support the Labour Party secretary Arthur Henderson 'as a rope supports the hanged'.<sup>4</sup>

It took some years for Labour to expel those Communists already inside its ranks. Under the existing rules Communists were for several years allowed to speak at conference and even to serve as Labour councillors and MPs: one case was Sharurji Saklatvala (one of Britain's first Asian MPs), who in 1922 was elected for Labour in Battersea North while openly being a Communist as well. Gradually, though, the loopholes were closed: Communists were barred from being individual Labour Party members and from selection as Labour candidates, and affiliated unions were asked not to choose Communists as delegates to the Labour conference. And in 1927 the NEC disbanded ten local Labour parties, most of them in London, because they had effectively been taken over by the CP.

Between 1928 and 1935 the problem of Communists in the party died down; the Comintern was now advising its supporters not to link up with the 'social fascists' in Western social democratic parties. After the 1935 election, though, the Communist general secretary, Harry Pollitt, once again applied for affiliation for his party. At one point it looked as though the Labour conference might agree, but a series of show trials staged by Stalin in the

Soviet Union ruined the British Communists' chances. They did not give up, however. A new tactic was employed instead. Over the next four years CP members secretly infiltrated hundreds of local Labour parties. Douglas Hyde, once news editor of the Communist *Daily Worker*, later revealed that he himself had organised a gradual Communist takeover of his local Labour Party in Surrey, secretly signing up the most promising members one by one. Eventually, when Hyde had recruited a large number of individuals to the CP, he gathered them together for what they all thought was just a meeting of local left-wing Labour Party members.

When all had arrived I revealed that everyone present was already a Communist Party member, and suddenly they realised what had happened and just what strength the Party already had in the local Labour movement. Then we got down to business... From then on we functioned as a Communist Party group, continuing to keep our membership secret and working inside the Labour Party and Trades Council.<sup>5</sup>

After Munich, though, the CP decided that undercover members should leave as a political demonstration against the Labour leadership. 'Almost the whole of our group resigned from the Labour Party, getting maximum publicity for their action ... the Labour Party in that Division was all but wrecked, losing all its active and leading members at one move.'<sup>6</sup>

Another 'entrust' at this time was the young Denis Healey, chairman of the Oxford University Labour Club while openly

carrying a CP card as well. 'I read all the basic books, but I never believed in it,' Healey said years later. 'It was more a reaction to Nazism. The really big issue was the rise of Hitler and the coming war. Any young man who was interested in stopping the war became a Communist at Oxford, whether he joined the party or not.'<sup>7</sup>

Towards the end of the 1930s disciplinary action was being taken not only against Communists but also against members who were working politically with the CP. Many socialists believed that the most important political priority at that time was to construct a United or Popular Front against fascism, involving socialists, Communists and even Liberals and Conservatives.

These were the years of Victor Gollancz's Left Book Club, the start of the newspaper *Tribune* and the sending of the International Brigade to fight against Franco in Spain. Thousands of socialists worked side by side with members of the CP: this did not necessarily mean that they were Communists themselves or that they were subject to every whim of Stalin's Communist International, much though some Labour Party officials may have believed that. True, the idea of 'Popular Fronts' with other parties had originated with the Communist International, but these socialists were not simply being manipulated by the CP. There was a genuine desire for unity against fascism; advocates of the 'Popular Front' were not necessarily Communist infiltrators.

At first the left-wing Socialist League, affiliated to the party, was the main proponent of 'unity' in the fight against fascism. The leaders of the League were Sir Stafford Cripps, the MP and

wealthy barrister who provided most of the money; Aneurin Bevan and George Strauss, also MPs; Harold Laski; and G. D. H. Cole. Less well-known League leaders were two young journalists from *Tribune*: Michael Foot and Barbara Betts (the young Barbara Castle). Because it advocated 'unity', the League was disaffiliated in 1937 and, later, in January 1939, Cripps was expelled; a few months later four others followed, including Bevan and Strauss. It did not take long for the rebels to be rehabilitated, however. By 1942 Cripps was a Labour member of Churchill's Cabinet, and he later went on to be Chancellor of the Exchequer under Attlee. Bevan helped to draft the 1945 manifesto and served with distinction in the post-war Labour Cabinet. Strauss was to be a junior minister under Attlee and eventually Father of the House of Commons.

Members of the Labour Party youth section were also regarded as a 'nuisance' by the Labour leadership before the war. The majority left-wing group in the Labour League of Youth was led by Ted Willis, later to achieve fame as a writer. On the opposing side of the League was the young George Brown. The Willis faction of the Labour League of Youth Advisory Committee (its Executive Committee) decided to ignore the League's official paper, *New Nation*, because it was produced by Labour headquarters at Transport House. Instead they published their own journal, *Advance!*, which at one point achieved a remarkable circulation of 50,000. Naturally they supported Cripps and Bevan in their call for a 'Popular Front'. Their reward was suspension of their committee by Transport House; after months of argument Willis and most of his comrades eventually left the Labour Party and joined the Young Communist

League. After the war Willis re-joined Labour, and he has sat on the Labour benches in the House of Lords for the last twenty years.

Immediately after the war the CP hoped that its support of the wartime coalition would help its case for affiliation to the Labour Party, but its new application was rejected overwhelmingly by the 1946 Labour conference. That year conference also decided that no new national political organisation would ever be allowed to affiliate to the party. So CP tactics changed. Rather than infiltrate the Labour Party directly, the Communists built up a whole range of 'front organisations' designed to attract and influence Labour Party members. Some of these had been established before the war and often involved 'peace' or 'friendship' with a Communist country. Among such groups were the British–Romanian Association, the British Vietnam Committee, the British–China Friendship Committee and the World Peace Council. So as not to give the game away too obviously, each group had as its chairman not a CP member but a 'fellow-traveller', someone with Communist sympathies.

The Labour Party's response to these groups was the famous (perhaps notorious) List of Proscribed Organisations, originally established in 1930 to deal with Communist infiltration then. Labour Party members were not allowed to belong to groups on the list. Among the casualties was a trade union official, Jim Mortimer, who was forced to leave the party in the early 1950s for being vice-chairman of the British–China Friendship Association. Thirty years later, as Labour Party general secretary, Mortimer was to establish another kind of list, a 'List of Approved Organisations', in his fight against Militant.

Nearly all groups on the Proscribed List were CP bodies, but in 1951 the name of the Socialist Fellowship was added. This was a left-wing pressure group designed to bring together MPs, trade unionists and rank-and-file party members. It had several branches around the country, held national conferences and had its own policy. But in time the Socialist Fellowship increasingly came to be dominated by a secret Trotskyist organisation called The Club, which was run by Gerry Healy, a former member of the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party and later leader of the Workers' Revolutionary Party. Closely associated with the Socialist Fellowship was the newspaper *Socialist Outlook*, which in 1954<sup>8</sup> was also banned on the grounds that some of its contributors were 'known for their previous association with the Trotskyist Revolutionary Communist Party'.<sup>9</sup> Among those expelled because of their links with *Socialist Outlook* was a 21-year-old called Ted Knight, nearly thirty years later to become Labour leader of Lambeth Council. The NEC's action led to the *Tribune* article by Michael Foot quoted above.

At the time Foot and the group around Aneurin Bevan – the Bevanites – worked closely with Gerry Healy and his newspaper. Indeed, when *Socialist Outlook* was eventually forced to fold because of a libel action, Gerry Healy began writing for *Tribune*. (Years later Michael Foot was to be reminded by Eric Heffer of his close associations with Healy, much to Foot's embarrassment.) The Bevanites argued that the banning of *Socialist Outlook* was just the first step in a large-scale witch-hunt against the Labour left. Foot told a meeting in London that if the NEC got away with

banning *Socialist Outlook*, it would ‘look around for the next one on the list’.<sup>10</sup> It was exactly the same argument as that used by the left today against the banning of *Militant*. In the 1950s the left’s fears were understandable. The period saw several moves against Aneurin Bevan and his supporters, Foot included.

The accusations against the Bevanites will be familiar to observers of the modern Labour Party. Attlee spoke of them as ‘a party within a party, with separate leadership, separate meetings, supported by its own press’.<sup>11</sup> In Parliament the Bevanite group of MPs was forced to open up its meetings to outsiders and in the end had to disband altogether. Quite apart from the action against *Socialist Outlook*, it was suggested by some on the right that *Tribune* should be outlawed as well.

Accounts of party meetings from the period show they were just as bitter, if not worse, than those of today. Richard Crossman said that the NEC had a ‘detestable atmosphere’; according to Ian Mikardo, Tom Driberg was ‘wrung out like a dish rag’ after each meeting, ‘desperate for a large drink’; Michael Foot described Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) meetings as ‘gruesome’.<sup>12</sup> Yet in the 1950s the policy differences between the two sides were minor compared with those of the Labour Party in recent times.

The feud reached its peak in the spring of 1955, as Bevan and Gaitskell squared up for the contest to succeed Attlee. In March Bevan attacked Attlee in a Commons debate on nuclear weapons and was promptly expelled from the PLP. Soon it looked almost certain that Bevan would also be expelled from the Labour Party itself – for the second time. Hugh Gaitskell and Arthur Deakin

saw it as their chance finally to get rid of him. As the crucial NEC meeting approached, Bevan looked doomed. Deakin seemed to have sewn up most of the trade union and women members – the majority of the NEC. The episode had remarkable parallels with recent events. As with the expulsion of Militant members in both 1983 and 1986, the turmoil erupted when a general election was approaching, but the leadership, far from being reluctant to take action because of the prospect of going to the polls, believed that Bevan was an electoral liability and that his expulsion would increase the party's chances of victory. In the end, however, against the odds and almost by accident, Bevan survived by one vote.

Within two years Bevan was *de facto* second in command of the party.<sup>13</sup> In the poll for the new shadow Cabinet immediately after the 1955 election, the PLP voted Bevan into seventh position – just three months after having voted to eject him from their ranks. In the autumn of 1957, when the two former arch-enemies, Gaitskell and Bevan, had become leader of the party and shadow Foreign Secretary respectively, they gave the press a unique political photo. Just before the Brighton conference the two men could be seen walking arm in arm along the sea front at Brighton. 'Remarkable,' said journalist Leslie Hunter to a nearby trade unionist. 'Remarkable?' came the quick reply. 'That's not remarkable, it's a bloody miracle.'<sup>14</sup> And by 1959 Bevan was deputy leader.

Michael Foot, perhaps because he was less important, was luckier than Bevan and always managed to hold on to his party card. But he was less fortunate in the PLP. After Bevan's death in 1960 Foot returned to the Commons as MP for his hero's old

seat, Ebbw Vale. But not long after, the future Labour leader was one of five left-wing MPs who lost the whip for voting against the Conservative defence estimates (the instructions were to abstain). Considering the widespread dissent within the PLP in modern times, it seems surprising that such extreme action should have been taken, but that was how the party worked under the leadership of Hugh Gaitskell. PLP membership was not restored to Foot and his colleagues until after Harold Wilson's election in 1963, which meant that Foot could not vote in the leadership poll. During his long career in Parliament Foot achieved the distinction of being perhaps the greatest rebel of them all: in the period from 1945 to 1970, when he joined the front bench, Foot probably voted against his party more than any other Labour MP; on the Tory side only Enoch Powell rebelled more often.<sup>15</sup>

This chapter has tried to put the events of the recent Militant story into historical perspective. The Labour Party has a long history of expulsions, of discipline by the leadership against left-wing rebel groups that have been considered electorally damaging or just politically irritating: Militant is only the most recent. What is so fascinating about the party's history is that rebels should so easily become leaders. As far as this story is concerned, it is particularly ironic that three of the main leaders of the recent campaign against Militant should themselves have all incurred the wrath of party officials at one time or another: Denis Healey, the Communist 'infiltrator' in the 1930s; Jim Mortimer, member of a proscribed organisation; and, above all, Michael Foot.

But perhaps more important, so far as the story of Militant is concerned, is that the memories of heavy-handed discipline in the 1930s and 1950s were to have a profound effect on the party in later years. Harold Wilson's Labour Party was to be much more tolerant than Hugh Gaitskell's; expulsions were rare, and the Proscribed List fell into disuse simply because nobody bothered to update it. Ron Hayward claims that when he became general secretary in 1972 he personally burned the Transport House files on left-wingers. By the 1970s the NEC contained many people who had once experienced party discipline themselves. They were determined not to allow a return to what they saw as the 'McCarthyism' of the past.