THE LABOUR PARTY AND SOCIALISM PART ONE

The left wing of the Labour Party has always argued that the alternative to Marxism was represented by democratic socialism. This contention will be outlined. In the 1930's the major elaboration of what was meant by democratic socialism was developed by the right wing of the Labour Party, with the notable exception of the work of G.D.H. Cole, who will be the subject of a different article. (1) In the latter part of the twentieth century, Nye Bevan and Tony Benn have been the most notable exponents of the left wing of the LP. So there views will be analysed, but it is also important to study the work of Stuart Holland who has outlined the most systematic conception of what is meant by radical democratic socialism, and the article will be completed by an analysis of the most recent justification of a LP understanding of an alternative to capitalism by Peter Hain.

NYE BEVAN: 'IN PLACE OF FEAR'

Bevan argues that the interests of capitalism undermine democracy which must be upheld by the role of socialism. It is not adequate to attempt to introduce reforms to try and modify the extent of poverty within society, because only the end of capitalism will express the possibility to overcome the inequality that generates extremes of wealth. However this does not mean that he is advocating a revolutionary struggle in order to overcome the limitations of capitalism. Instead: “The function of parliamentary democracy, under universal franchise, historically considered, is to expose wealth-privilege to the attack of the people. It is a sword pointed at the heart of the property power. It is where the issues are joined is Parliament.”(2) Hence Bevan is suggesting that the development of Parliament, via the role of universal suffrage, represents an alternative to the strategy of revolutionary insurrection. This does not mean that the aims of socialism are in any manner diluted because he is implying that they can be effectively realised in terms of the importance of Parliamentary institutions. Marxists would suggest that Parliament is not some neutral organisation that can be receptive to the implementation of the programme of socialism and is instead based on a bias towards the interests of the bourgeoisie. Bevan is implying that the very activity of the Labour government between 1945 and 1951 has repudiated this view, and that reforms can prepare the basis for the effective realisation of democratic socialism. In other words the means should be suitable for the attainment of the end. It is this point which Bevan considers is not fully recognised by the authoritarian impulses of Marxism.

This standpoint does not mean that Bevan denies the view that Parliament is a conservative institution that generally upholds the interests of the status quo. Hence the major impulse for change is the support that can be given by the working class and middle class, and in this manner the democratic and socialist aspirations of the people could create the necessary pressure for the conservative institutions of Parliament to express the will for change. What is also important is that the LP adopts a programme that can gain the support of the people, and that the LP has a leadership that is determined to bring about the transformation of society. It can be said that the LP has only rarely promoted a popular manifesto, and the realisation of a left wing leadership that aims for democratic socialism has been rare. More typical is that the LP has been led by people who are only interested in limited reform of the system. Hence the most formidable opponent of socialism has often been the LP itself! Bevan does not tackle this issue thoroughly because to him the LP is the exclusive instrument of radical change. Instead he considers that the opposition of the Conservatives and the capitalist system represents the most formidable rejection of change. This point is true but this observation means he glosses over the support that is often given by LP leaders for the system. His own left wing standpoint represents a minority view within the LP. Instead he outlines in an abstract manner, without adequately recognising the complex difficulties, the prospects for socialism. He understands the role of the forces of reaction, but glosses over the significance of the opposition within the Labour movement in relation to the possibilities for socialism. However, it could also be argued that Marxism also under-estimates the strength of the forces of reaction within society.

Bevan is aware that the LP should advocate an imaginative programme if it is to obtain support within the working class. In this context an election will indicate whether a person representing the LP has the confidence of the people, and is able to express their interests in an authentic manner. Instead of upholding these principles the Soviet Communist party is indifferent to the fact that it has had little support for its threats against Yugoslavia, and it insisted on acting in an imperialist manner. The point is that instead of connecting politics to the development of genuine democratic support, the CPSU instead insisted on a monolithic interpretation of Marxist politics. This meant they denied the basic rights of Yugoslavia for national independence. This situation indicates that even a principled doctrine like Marxism can degenerate if it is not based on the standpoint of democratic accountability. In contrast, the LP is based on the principles of the importance of Parliament and of democratic accountability. Hence the limitation of trade union struggle is that it lacks the legitimacy represented by Parliamentary elections, this is why Bevan implies the general strike was likely to fail. (3) Indeed, he uses this argument in order to oppose the strategy of revolution: “The opportunity for power is not enough if the will to seize it is absent, and that will is attendant upon the traditional attitude of the people towards the political institutions that form part of their historical heritage.”(4) Thus he is suggesting that only when there is an absence of democratic institutions will people support the tactic of insurrectionary struggle. However, if there is a Parliament in existence the people will not support what will be considered an illegitimate attempt to overthrow its institutions. In a situation of democracy the only principled and popular basis to establish socialism is by electoral activity.

What Bevan seems to be denying is the possibility that working class struggle may acquire revolutionary dimensions, and instead he suggests that the only outcome of this type of activity is defeat and failure. The assumption is that the working class is limited in its strength and so requires the role of the LP in Parliament in order to promote the possibility of socialism. To Bevan, this means the promotion of public ownership, but the point is that without the involvement of the working class in the process of defining the character of nationalisation, the system will instead resemble that of state capitalism and not socialism. Furthermore, it is dogmatic to reject the potential role of mass struggle in the process of promoting socialism. To Bevan, the alternative to these possibilities is to utilise Parliament on the basis of courage and initiative: “From the outset he asserts the efficacy of state action and of collective policies. His failure is the failure of Parliamentary initiative....... The Socialist dare not invoke the authority of Parliament in meeting economic difficulties unless he is prepared to exhaust its possibilities. If he does not, if he acts nervelessly without vigour, ingenuity and self-confidence... He will have played his last card and lost, and in this loss, parliamentary institutions themselves may be engulfed.”(5)

Hence it is boldness and words and deeds that will ensure the success of the process of transition to socialism, via the role of Parliament. But the problem is that historically the LP has not only lacked a programme that would ensure the success of this task, it has also had a Cabinet that prefers to accommodate to the system and only has ambitions to uphold the welfare state and a mixed economy. It would seem that the LP has to change in accordance with the aims and values of Bevan if the prospect of socialism is to become feasible. But there is a greater problem. Can socialism be realised by a process of change from above, which ignores the potential dynamism and importance of socialism from below or the role of mas struggle? Furthermore, when there was mass enthusiasm for socialism in 1945, the Labour government did not utilise this apparent popular legitimacy in order to promote an actual transition to socialism. Thus the boldness that Bevan is calling for seems to be lacking in terms of the character of an actual Labour government. This means that Bevan's standpoint seems to be at the level of wishful thinking rather than being an expression of definite and practical strategy. The Marxist approach would seem to have continued validity because of the very failures of Labour government to introduce socialism despite having popular mandates. It could also be argued that Bevan's standpoint represents a minority view that has little chance of being accepted. The election of a Corbyn leadership would seem to contradict this contention, but the PLP remains right wing.

Bevan has been able to outline that an important limitation of so-called Marxism in the form of Stalinism has been its lack of democratic accountability, which takes the form of national chauvinist politics and the imposition of repressive regimes. However, the only alternative that he advocates is the possibility of socialism via the formation of a LP government based on boldness and integrity. This prospect would imply the development of genuine support for a programme of socialism and the popular potential to create a principled government. The problem has been that the LP has been reluctant to advocate socialism, and indeed is often perplexed by what is meant by socialism, and nor is it typically prepared to express the character of an intransigent government that is prepared to oppose the rule of capital. In this manner there are serious flaws to the strategy of Bevan, and he is only able to gloss over them by suggesting that revolutionary insurrection is either unrealistic or undemocratic. The problem is that his left wing view represents a minority opinion within the LP, and so his conception of democratic socialism seems to be unrealistic, or idealistic. But Bevan is able to effectively ignore these issues by outlining a historical justification for his standpoint. He suggests that there is only one alternative to the competitive society of capitalism and the poverty it generates, or the monolithic society of either capitalist monopolies and increasing state control or the alternative of Stalinism, which is democratic socialism. The only alternative to poverty, nationalism, war and dictatorship is the system of democratic socialism.

However, the problem is that he outlined the limitations of capitalism and the monolithic society, but this does not make the practical feasibility of democratic socialism any greater. Instead the argument is posed in terms of the limitations of capitalism which implies that democratic socialism is a historical necessity. What this does not explain is why the Labour government of 1945 failed to introduce socialism, and instead accepted the limitations of the mixed economy. But instead of directly addressing this question, Bevan outlines the major difference between capitalism and socialism as being that between private or public spending. Hence he suggests that the impulses for increased public expenditure are vital if the problems of society are to be resolved: “The reason for the impermanence of capitalist society consists in the fact that it is merely an accumulation of private values and these take no account of the common values that are the essential condition for social survival and continuity. Disposal of the economic surplus is a function that should belong to the sphere of collective action.”(6) By defining socialism in terms of the extension of public allocation of resources, Bevan can reconcile his conception of socialism with the limited programme of the Labour government and its restricted nationalisation of various economic sectors. The assumption is that Bevan would suggest that this restricted nationalisation could be extended by a later Labour government in order to realise socialism. The problem with this standpoint is that the very conception of socialism is reduced to the perspective of increasing public expenditure. The fact that this has occurred under the auspices of the bourgeois state, and is a narrow technocratic conception of socialism, is a problem for Bevan. Primarily he has ignored the importance of the role of democracy in his shifting definition of socialism. This means that he ignores the issue of the actual transformation of the character of power within society and instead contends that public intervention has resolved important problems like poverty: “If private enterprise had been left to its own devices the standard of living of the British people would have been lower than it is today, and the prospects for the future grim indeed for the population of this island.”(7)

But this comment merely suggests that public intervention has modified the operation of capitalism in terms of the interests of the social good. This activity has been beneficial for the population but it has not promoted socialism in terms of undermining the domination of capital over labour. Instead the capitalist system remains in a modified form. But Bevan does not seem to consider this issue a problem because the assumption is that public expenditure can increase in the future to the point that socialism is realised. The problem is that this very optimistic perspective does not address the issue that a conservative government may come to power that is determined to make cuts to public expenditure. In this context the Thatcher government undermined the basic perspective of the LP. Hence the issue of strategy had to be addressed in the 1980's. The understanding of Bevan could be useful in this regard. He contends that: “Democratic socialism is a not a middle way between capitalism and communism. If it were merely that it would be doomed to failure from the start. It cannot live by borrowed vitality. Its driving power must derive from its own principles and the energy released by them. It is based on the conviction that free men can use free institutions to solve the social and economic problems of the day, if they are given a chance to do so.”(8) In this context the view that partial policies is sufficient for the advance of socialism is rejected. Instead only the total transformation of society is principled, and this implies that the character of social and economic power will be dramatically altered. Hence there is no contradiction between the utilisation of democratic institutions and the aims of change from capitalism to socialism. This definition would seem to contradict the previous partial emphasis on the gradual increase in public expenditure and the related evolutionary transition to socialism. Hence he criticises the creation of the boards of the nationalised industries that are unaccountable to the public, and so do not have the aim of promoting socialism. The nationalised industries should have a democratic character which upholds the importance of socialism and planning: “The conversion of an industry to public ownership is only the first step towards socialism. It is an all important step for without it the conditions of further progress are not established. One important consequence is a shift of power that resolves the conflicts between public and private claims. The danger of the state machine being manipulated by private vested interests is thus reduced. An additional result, and one of greatest importance, is that the nationalized industry is available as a direct instrument of economic planning.”(9)

This standpoint would suggest that it is not sufficient to simply accumulate the influence and power of the public sector. Instead the public services themselves have to be transformed in terms of the role of the workers and consumer, and their aims have to be directly connected to those of socialism such as the introduction of planning. In this context the role of the 1945 Labour government is not adequate because it was content to establish unaccountable and bureaucratic administrative boards of the nationalised industries. The purpose of this form of nationalisation was the administration of capitalism rather than the promotion of advance towards socialism. \Hence Bevan is outlining the view that what is crucial is the creation of a democratic form of nationalisation that is based on the interests and participation of the working class. Hence he is admitting that the alternative is a type of state capitalism that does not represent the possibility for the realisation of democratic socialism. In other words: “The advance from state ownership to full socialism is in direct proportion to the extent the workers in the nationalized sector are made aware of a changed relationship between themselves and the management. The persistence of a sense of dualism in a publicly owned industry is evidence of an immature industrial democracy. It means that emotionally the management is associated with the conception of alien ownership, and the 'workers' are still 'hands'.”(10)

With this comment Bevan associates himself with the views of GDH Cole and revolutionary Marxism. He is not satisfied with the typical role of the nationalised industries as the administration by managers of the role of the workers, and instead is arguing in favour of the important participation by the producers in the process of the organisation of the nationalised sector of the economy. The democratic character of the political process should be extended to the economy if the possibility of socialism is to be realised. This means the workers should be an integral part of the management so that the difference between 'them' and 'us' will be ended. Instead the very character of the board of the nationalised industry should be responsive to the wishes and aspirations of their workers. If Bevan's perspective was seriously promoted it would mean that the domination of capital over labour, and the alternative of state capitalism, was replaced with the process of transformation to socialism. The balance of power within society would favour the role of the workers and the influence of capitalism would be seriously reduced. In this context the extension of nationalisation under workers control would represent the advance of the economy towards socialism. The major problem would be whether the forces of reaction, as a result of victories in elections of conservatism, could reverse and undermine the advance towards socialism. But the assumption is that the transformation of society towards socialism can be popular because it improves the material situation of the people, and results in the generation of participation in the administration of the economy. The development of planning will also provide a secure market for the remaining private sector of the economy, and so will lessen the opposition of capital to the extension of nationalisation. Indeed, Bevan envisages that the economy will still be mixed in terms of a combination of the public and the private, but that the public sector will become increasingly dominant and so defines the character of the economy. (11)

This approach seems to be essentially principled in economic terms. Bevan outlines how the forces of capital can be overcome by the influence of labour in terms of the extension of the public sector, the development of planning, and the role of workers control. But he is being optimistic when suggesting that the capitalist class will accept this situation, and so he underestimates the possibility for the intensification of the class struggle the nearer the victory of socialism is becoming apparent. In this sense he tries to deny the possibility for extra-parliamentary struggle in order to ensure the success of the process of transition to socialism. Instead he assumes that the forces of capital will accept the democratic legitimacy of the process of change. This means he still has a reformist understanding of the development to socialism and considers that this process can be limited to the role of Parliament, and the mass pressure of the working class. Indeed, this would be the most preferable type of change, but the contingent possibility of extra-constitutional developments has to be allowed for and possibly anticipated.

Instead of this flexible perspective, Bevan seems to have a rigid approach that limits the process of change to what is constitutional and can acquire democratic support. He comments: “Revolution is almost always reform postponed too long. A civilised society is one that can assimilate radical reforms while maintaining its essential stability.”(12) This political standpoint is based on the wish that people can recognise the necessity to overcome the problems of society such as poverty and want. But the forces of capital do not act in accordance with this 'common sense'. Instead they act to maintain their condition of domination over labour, and so oppose both reform and revolution. In contrast, Bevan contends that the capitalist system can be made in a democratic manner to accept the logic of socialism: “Once the competitive society is compelled to serve a general social aim the automatism of the market is interfered with at every point and we are no longer in the capitalist system at all.”(13) This view represents wishful thinking, and illusions in both the influence of public production and the role of the democratic system. The point is that class struggle is unavoidable if the aim of socialism is to be realised. Bevan hopes to avoid class conflict, and instead relies on the pressure of the economic and political in order to uphold a reform minded dynamics of change. Bevan does inconsistently admit to the importance of struggle, but in reality he underestimates its importance. (14) This means his strategy tends to accommodate to the premises of wishful thinking, and does not accept the complexity involved in realising socialism. However, his argument in favour of democratic socialism is very powerful, and Marxism has to recognise its importance if it is to elaborate its own understanding of the transition to socialism in the most advanced capitalist countries.

The Marxist objection to Bevan's approach should not relate to his emphasis on the importance of democracy. Instead we should reject his naïve and illusory view that the institutions of Parliament are sufficient in order to bring about transition to socialism. The very success of the process of change will polarise society, and so result in the intensification of the class struggle. It is the task of Marxists to make this point apparent to the left wing of the LP, and to suggest that a revolutionary strategy is still relevant.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Elizabeth Durbin: New Jerusalems, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London 1985

(2)Nye Bevan In Place of Fear Macgibbon and Kee, London 1961 p25

(3) ibid p41

(4) ibid p41-42

(5) ibid p52

(6) ibid p79

(7) ibid p94-95

(8) ibid p124

(9) ibid p128

(10) ibid p128

(11) ibid p144-145

(12) ibid p181

(13) ibid p182

(14) ibid p202

ADDENDUM - TONY BENN'S ELABORATION OF DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM

It could be argued that Tony Benn adds nothing original to Bevan's understanding of democratic socialism. Both are in favour of the importance of Parliament for the process of change and its legitimacy, and both support the significance of industrial democracy in order to sustain the advance of the transformation of society. However, Benn differs from Bevan in that he attempts to extend the moral justification for change. Benn argues that socialism is part of a long historical period of mass struggle in order to bring about a more just and democratic society. In this context there is a similarity between Christianity and Marxism despite differences over belief in God. In other words capitalism, whilst being historically progressive, as Marx explained, is nevertheless inferior to socialism because it lacks moral justification for the virtues of solidarity and compassion. Thus modern socialism is the outcome of the logic of the attempt of many creeds and doctrines to strive to achieve a better world. Thus it was logical for the LP to also be influenced by Marxism, which became the latest attempt to bring about a better world in the form of the struggle for socialism. The 1918 constitution of the LP commits the party to utilise democracy in order to realise its ultimate objective of socialism, via the role of the nationalisation of industry.

In other words, Benn tries to establish the heritage of the LP in relation to the moral and political dynamics of the struggles of people in the past to create a better world. This historical development contrasts with the more cynical and empirical attempt of the forces of capital to uphold their system and to resist the process of historical change. However the problem that Benn is confronted with is that the LP itself is resistant to change. Its most ambitious objectives amount to promoting the mixed economy and the welfare state. The LP hierarchy do not share Benn's perspective that the dynamics of history have culminated in the project of democratic socialism, or they reduce this perspective to mean the limited improvement of capitalism. Hence if Benn was to be serious about his goal of democratic socialism he is confronted with the necessity for struggle within the LP in order to realise hegemony and political domination. In this unavoidable confrontation it was in the interests of Marxism to support Benn and his goal of creating a LP that was adequate for the promotion of the goal of democratic socialism. Benn's general aim can be supported by Marxists, which is: “The Labour Party exists to bring about a shift in the balance of power and wealth. As a Labour Party, born out of the trade union movement, we represent – politically – the same people who the unions represent industrially. We also aim to make economic power more fully accountable to the community, to workers and the consumer. We aim to eliminate poverty, to achieve a far greater economic equality and meet urgent social needs.”(1)

But general support for these aims does not mean that Marxists should uncritically support all of Benn's policies or strategy. Primarily we should question whether the LP is the most appropriate instrument for the realisation of these aims, and this is why Marxism should retain some form of independent voice and ability to express its own distinctive conception of the class struggle. We also have to question whether Benn's opposition to the EU (EEC) is principled, or represents a nationalist distortion of the internationalist principles of socialism. But in general, the struggle to change the LP into becoming an instrument of the above objectives outlined by Benn was progressive. If Benn had succeeded it could have immensely advanced the process of the development of socialism in the UK. However, the problem was that this struggle was often limited to the LP itself, and so did not involve the majority of the working class. Indeed the attempt to change the LP often seemed to be irrelevant in relation to the aim of opposing the reactionary objectives of the new Conservative administration, which was formed in 1979. In other words there was not a unity between the political and industrial struggles. This problem could have been overcome if the left wing of the LP had more energetically adopted the policy of workers control, and so connected economic objectives with the task of transforming the LP. Instead there was a preoccupation with the goal of establishing democracy within the LP, and so the necessity to provide an alternative to Thatcherism was neglected. The left wing of the LP did not connect their policies and objectives to the requirements of the class struggle.

For example, the immense miners’ strike of 1984, despite its militant nature, remained an economic struggle that did not connect with the attempt to establish democracy and left wing politics within the LP. This was because Benn and Scargill neglected to establish a strategy that would connect both of these struggles. Instead the miners’ strike remained about jobs, and did not establish wider political dimensions, whilst the attempt to promote democracy within the LP remained restricted to that organisation. Hence both of these developments remained separate. What could have connected them was the perspective that mass struggle, and a radicalised LP, could advance the aim of socialism via the attempt to realise workers control. The miners’ strike could have created the basis for the promotion of workers control. Indeed occupation of the mines could have become an alternative policy when the strike was proving to be unsuccessful. Instead the limitation of the miners unions was undermining this possibility, whilst the insularity of the LP meant that the attempt to develop democracy remained an internal question that did not connect with the popular struggles of the working class. The tragedy of this situation was that Benn had understood the importance of industrial democracy from his period in government when he strongly supported the occupation at the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders. This experience had led him to support the formation of workers co-operatives and to advocate the transformation of the nationalised industries, via the election of workers to their boards. Hence these experiences led him to be the inspiration behind the signing of a planning agreement between the National Coal Board and the National Union of Miners. This meant the miners had an important role in defining the future of their industry. But this aspect was not present in their strike of 1984. Instead it was a defensive struggle that did not make any demands about increasing the participatory role of the miners in relation to the tasks of the coal industry. Nor did Benn utilise his experience in order to raise the issue of promoting industrial democracy during the strike. Instead he adopted an uncritical stance of solidarity, and so did not use the opportunity to relate this struggle to the objectives of democratic socialism.

Benn was disorientated by Britain's membership of the European Economic Community (EEC, now EU) He considered that: “Continued membership of the Community would, therefore, mean the end of Britain as a completely self-governing nation and of our democratically elected Parliament as the supreme law making body of the United Kingdom.”(2) He also considered that the trade of the UK would become dictated by the imperatives of the EEC, and so the UK would no longer have the ability to conduct independent economic relations within the EEC and wider world economy. But the point is that whilst he considered the EEC as an bureaucratic organisation that would undermine the democratic and economic rights of the UK, he did not also suggest that the answer to these problems was the development of solidarity with the peoples of Europe in order to establish a more democratic and accountable EEC (EU). Hence he accommodated to popular nationalism and provided a left-wing justification for the reactionary view that the interests of the UK were being undermined by European institutions. This perspective could only provide opposition to the development of a genuinely international understanding of the possibility to achieve socialism. His argument seems to suggest that the only valid and principled basis for the realisation of the end of capitalism was via the role of the nation, and to the exclusion of the role of the international. Indeed, his standpoint was compatible with the left-wing inspired Alternative Economic Strategy which advocated an autarkic economy based on import controls and limited world trade. Hence Benn's approach was opposed to the recognition that only the unity of the working class in international terms could advance the prospect of socialism.

Despite these limitations, Benn upheld a principled argument in favour of Parliament becoming the expression of open government if it was to truly express the interests of the people and their aspirations. (3) The problem is that whilst he is concerned with the practicalities of how Parliament could become more open, he does not consider the importance of the role of the people in promoting this aim. The point is that if the people remain indifferent about the political activity of the government, it will be able to maintain a regime that is secretive. Hence the issue is about how to involve the people in the affairs of government. But the problem is that whilst capitalism remains in existence, the interests of the ruling class will dictate that Parliament is a closed affair and is not receptive to the concerns of the people. Thus a process of reforms will not necessarily bring about open government, instead only the transformation of society will bring about this development.

In the 1980's the Tory government embarked on a policy of drastic public expenditure cuts, mass unemployment, and deflation, in order to restore the profitability of British capitalism. Benn argues that the only alternative is democratic socialism: “Democratic socialism which combines direct public investment in industry and expanded public expenditure combined with self-management does offer a real prospect of ending the present deadlock, and protecting personal freedom.”(4) There are three different alternatives. Firstly, the policy of monetarism, which suggests that resources can be given to private industry after cuts in public expenditure. This approach only results in mass unemployment. Secondly, corporatism, which would imply that the leaders of government, industry and the unions would attempt to establish what should be economic and social policy. This approach is opposed to genuine democracy which would imply that government has to be accountable to the people. Thirdly, the development of democratic socialism, which is based on the utilisation of public expenditure to define the objectives of the economy, industrial democracy and the accountability of Parliament to the people.

Democratic socialism can be credible because it does offer an alternative to mass unemployment and advocates growth, and this implies the development of a planned economy that would establish realistic objectives in these terms. The co-operation for this type of society would be obtained in the consensual terms of greater industrial democracy and agreement about the level of wages. All well and good. Or, so it seems. The problem is that Benn does not necessarily consider that these aspects amount to a process of transition to socialism. Instead he seems to consider that what his goal implies is the realisation of a new relationship between capital and labour: “Labour has the capacity to succeed providing capital is available, but capital can't do without the goodwill of labour.”(5) The logic of this comment is to suggest that the development of industrial democracy implies that it is beneficial to the interests of management. Benn conceives of Labour using capital, but he does not elaborate on what this means apart from suggesting that this development will transform society. But if we are considering a new relationship between capital and labour, this does not mean that the domination of capital within society is ended. Instead we have the democratic approval from the forces of labour for the continued domination of the economy by capital. This situation cannot be sustained. It can only be resolved by either the restoration of the complete domination of capital over labour, or else labour brings about the demise of the alienating power of capital. The confusion of Benn on this point undermines the principled integrity of his perspective of democratic socialism. He is advocating strategic confusion rather than clarity.

Benn outlines his proposals for greater democracy including the Cabinet election of the prime minister, and the greater accountability of the media and the armed forces. The problem is that this modification of the state is limited and insufficient. What is crucial is to establish the situation in which the state is accountable to society. This must mean that the popular organisations of the working class, including the trade unions, are able to realise a condition of democratic control of the state. Only in this situation would Benn's programme of democratic socialism acquire practical feasibility. This point is not properly recognised by Benn because he still promotes a conception of socialism from above, or via the role of Parliament. Socialism is something that is bestowed upon us, and is not an effective expression of the self-activity of the people. In this sense he has not improved on Bevan's approach and limitations. Instead his approach is very similar, and it means the influence of Marxism is vital if his standpoint is to be improved and developed. One important problem is his advocacy of the reconciliation of the interests of capital and labour. This indicates that his conception of political economy is limited. However, he may possibly overcome these problems in his next book.

However the beginning of Benn's second book: 'Arguments for Democracy' is not promising.(6) Instead of recognising that the UK is an important centre of monopoly capital, and so an integral part of the world economy, Benn blames the erosion of democratisation on a supposed process whereby the UK has become a colony. He seems to blame the ability of the International Monetary Fund for this development when it imposed economic restrictions in return for a loan in 1976. This situation is reinforced by the political domination of the USA, via the role of NATO: “Some of the colonial relationship is expressed through the multinationals and the IMF, which are overwhelmingly dominated by the USA as the most powerful country in the capitalist world. But it is in the area of defence policy that American dominance has become more pronounced.”(7) This situation is also related to the apparent influence within Parliament of the EEC (EU). The result of these developments is the apparent denial of the ability of Parliament to be its own legislative or decision making organisation, which undermines the possibility to promote democratic socialism. Hence Benn suggests that a national liberation struggle is integral to the attempt to realise socialism.

This perspective is a digression from the real struggle for socialism. The UK is one of the most important nations of the world economy, and so is not in a subordinated situation. However, the view that the UK is somehow oppressed by the USA, or the EEC, could imply that supposed national issues are more important than the aim of socialism. Indeed, only by resolving these questions of self-determination could socialism become a credible issue. This would mean that the role of left-wing ideology could be distorted by the influence of nationalism, and the result could be that the connection of internationalism to socialism is undermined. The point is that the domination of the USA over the UK does not make the UK an oppressed nation. The UK is an imperialist country in its own right because of the role of its multi-nationals. Instead of accommodating to these nationalist themes, it is vital that people recognise that the struggle for socialism is connected to internationalist values and aims. In contrast, the view that national self-determination is on the agenda only undermines the struggle for socialism, and instead the goal becomes autarky and national interest rather than global solidarity and socialism.

Another possible digression concerns the issue of limiting the power of the leader of the LP, such as in relation to the contents of the manifesto and his/her power in the Parliamentary process. This question was of great importance to Benn and the left wing of the LP. But the problem was that the dispute about the contents of the manifesto was conducted in a manner that was not related to the issues that were concerning the people of the UK. The most important issue of the early 1980's was to mobilise working people against the government policy of unemployment, and this would include the ultimate demand of a general strike in order to reject the ruling class strategy of monetarism. Instead of relating to these issues the LP was concerned with internal matters. This point become crucially important when the Tories used the Falklands war in order to boost their popularity. The LP had no answer to pro-imperialist popular nationalism. They had no conception of the alternative of internationalism, and lacked the ability to explain the integrity of an anti-war position. The LP was so embroiled in internal issues that it was unable to communicate with the public, in contrast to the jingoism of Thatcher. It had forgotten that it had to mobilise the people if the possibility of defeating Thatcher at the polls was to be achieved.

Instead of acknowledging the political limitations of the manifesto, Benn almost projects upon it some magical power to implement socialism: “In each election....the specific programme for the following Parliament has been embodied in a manifesto put before the electorate for endorsement, with a view to implementing if a mandate is given. Thus once it has been adopted by the party conference and agreed by the party leadership, and endorsed by the electorate, the manifesto becomes the key link between the people and political power. It is the belief that real change can be made peacefully through the machinery of Parliament and the work of Labour ministers that makes the British Labour Party democratic; and explains why it has never adopted violent revolution as its instrument for social change. Therefore it is of central importance for the maintenance of the system of government that this process of social change can be made to work effectively, and that the manifesto is taken seriously by members of Parliament, ministers and senior officials responsible for implementing it.”(8) In other words the adoption of the manifesto by the party is considered to be the most important aspect for the possibility to realise the objectives of democratic socialism.

What is ignored by Benn is the crucial importance to create support for the manifesto within the wider electorate. Without this development the possibility to implement it, and so advance towards socialism is not feasible. What Benn ignores is the uncomfortable fact that the ideas of the left wing of the LP were considered with scepticism by the electorate. Hence, if the LP was to be elected on a left wing programme it would have to promote its policies in an active manner by attempting to persuade people of the superiority of their ideas. Instead of this campaigning, the LP leadership in the early 1980's seemed unaware how unpopular the party had become. Benn had no answer to this problem because he was embroiled in internal issues. Hence the adoption of the manifesto became an illusory formula that all would be okay with the world. This illusion was shattered at the 1983 general election. The point is that it is not the adoption of a left wing manifesto that will bring about socialism. Instead what is important is the development of class consciousness. This would have meant the undermining of Thatcherism in the 1980's. Only the mass struggle of the Poll Tax campaign began to discredit the aura of invincibility of Thatcher. But the LP was still incapable of adopting a manifesto that could undermine the Tory party. The result of this situation was the ascendency of the moderation of Blair.

Benn was aware that the economic policies of the Conservative government of the early 1980's would result in increased unemployment. However, he politically concludes the following: “They begin by defending capitalism on the grounds that it underpins parliamentary democracy. They now discover that parliamentary democracy, with the exercise of the vote, steadily erodes capitalism by demanding policies of intervention. So if they wish to stick to capitalism they will eventually have to challenge the desires of our people expressed through parliamentary democracy. This is the problem that confronts them.”(9) If Benn really believed this comment, he was living in the land of illusion! Thatcher was winning elections, and so the only basis to oppose her policies was by mobilisation in extra-Parliamentary terms. But Benn is constricted by his illusions in Parliament, and so cannot advocate such a strategy. Hence he becomes a passive follower of events. In this context his version of democratic socialism is not an alternative to revolutionary Marxism. Only the recognition that Thatcherism means the intensification of the class struggle could promote the necessary response. It was necessary to create mass organs of struggle within the working class which could oppose the reactionary power of the Thatcher government, whose policies were being legitimised by successive general election victories. In a limited manner this perspective was realised by the miners’ strike, but this development still lacked a strategy to overcome the repressive actions of the Conservative government.

The logic of the polarised situation meant calling for a general strike, but Benn made no such call and instead it was limited to the views of some of the small Marxist groups. This omission was not incidental for the party of Benn. His effective programme of full employment, re-equipping of industry, planned trade, industrial democracy, expand the public services, restore self-government, a fairer society, makes no mention of the necessity to mobilise a mass movement in order to realise these aims. (10) Instead in a passive manner he presents what is a 'good idea' and does not devote any attention to how it will be realised. The point is that at some point the issue of the overthrow of the reactionary Tory government would have been posed. Benn is reluctant to accept this stark choice. Instead he is determined to limit the process of struggle to the realm of the constitutional. He cannot accept that the situation has gone beyond these limits. The working class will be continually defeated unless it engages in mass struggle with a definite political aim to overthrow the Tory government. Benn cannot accept such an option. Instead parliamentary socialism becomes a dogma.

Benn outlines how the trade unions can have a constructive role in co-operating with the objectives of a Labour government. He suggests that this approach will be an improvement on concentrating on the defensive struggles of the past. (11) The problem is that he is outlining what could be an ideal situation in the future, but it has little relationship to the present, which was based on the Tory confrontation with the power of the unions. Hence it was vital that the trade unions win these conflicts if the possibility of progress was to be made. This meant the success of the trade unions in the defensive struggles was vital if the prospect of the formation of a left wing labour government with trade union support was to become possible. But Benn has nothing to say about how the trade unions could be successful against the Tory offensive against their gains and rights. There is no mention of the ultimate necessity of a general strike in order to overthrow the reactionary Conservative government. Instead Benn effectively ignores the challenges of the present, and instead his emphasis is on the tasks of the future, in terms of the possible relationship between the Labour government and the trade unions. This indicates the limitations of his approach which is based on the importance of Parliamentary politics. The problem is that the intensification of the class struggle has gone beyond this arena and instead has acquired a militant dimension and become based on the need to oppose the Tory offensive against the power of the trade unions. In this context only if the trade unions had been able to successfully oppose the repressive actions of the Conservative government could the balance of power have become favourable to the success of democratic socialism. This point does not seem to have been understood by Benn, who is reticent about the effectiveness of militant action by the unions. Instead he concentrates on the internal struggle within the LP.

Benn maintains that: “The debate going on in the Labour Party is as important as any we have ever had. On the one hand it is about policy and on the other hand about party democracy, but above all it is about the relationship between the two. Nobody should be in any doubt that we are discussing not only the future of the Labour Party, but the future of Britain – because the unity of the Labour Party depends upon greater democracy, and so do our prospect for replacing Mrs Thatcher's government by a Labour government.”(12) Benn is right to suggest that the struggle for a left wing LP is important, and that the task is to promote the formation of a radical government is an important alternative to the reactionary policies of the Conservatives. But this standpoint is aligned with the view that only peaceful change via Parliament is principled and democratic. (13) This approach glosses over the intensification of the class struggle which was caused by the Tory attempts to undermine the strength of the Unions. Benn has nothing of substance to suggest about this situation and instead emphasises the importance of a Labour government. This is why his emphasis concerns making the manifesto the outcome of the policy of the LP rather than the privilege of the leader, and is in favour of ending the omnipotent power of a prime minister to make policy. These are reforms that are supportable, but in order that the LP becomes a campaigning party he ignores the most important aspect. The LP should become the authentic agency of the trade unions in struggle to defend their strength and influence. Only this kind of relationship could have brought about an end to the Tory measures in the 1980's to undermine the trade unions. Instead Benn believed that inner party democracy was a panacea that would generate the realisation of democratic socialism. He did not fully recognise that a defeated trade union movement would increase the sense of omnipotence of the Conservative party, and so this situation would only increase a sense of defeatism within the working class that would enhance the prospect for the formation of future Tory governments.

Instead of tackling these immediate issues, Benn focused on the future possibility of what a Labour government could realise. He argued: “Labour governments, then, have to make one of two choices. They can either implement their manifesto objectives, paralyse the system still more effectively.....or they can abandon the reforms and accept the dictates of the system they were elected to change.”(14) Hence it is the behaviour of the Labour government, and not the outcome of class struggle which will decide whether the aims of socialism are realised: “The Labour movement in Britain has therefore come to a crossroads. It must now decide whether the aspirations of British socialism are to be narrowly defined as the desire to hold those gains we can expect as a by-product of a successful capitalism that can afford them in the rare boom years. The alternative is to set our sights higher, to decide to transform capitalism by democracy into socialism, and to set about strengthening ourselves for that purpose.”(15) Benn does acknowledge the necessity of mass support for this project, but what is vital to him is a transformed LP that is determined to carry out the task of realising socialism. The relationship of this process to the class struggle becomes obscured with this rigid perspective. The central weakness of Benn's approach is its tenuous connections to the development of the class struggle.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Tony Benn: Arguments for Socialism, Jonathan Cape, London 1979 p48-49

(2) ibid p95

(3) ibid p112

(4) ibid p140

(5) ibid p161

(6)Tony Benn: Arguments for Democracy, Jonathan Cape, London 1981

(7) ibid p11-12

(8) ibid p49

(9) ibid p145

(10) ibid p149-150

(11) ibid p170-171

(12) ibid p172

(13) ibid p178

(14) ibid p217

(15) ibid p217-218