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IF LABOUR WINS . . .

THERE ARE COUNTRIES where the looming defeat of a government gives rise to complex judgements concerning the identity of its successor. Britain is not one of them. The decline of the present Conservative government, which has recently assumed spectacular proportions, and its ever-more-likely defeat at the approaching general election, can have only one beneficiary: the Labour Party. Talk of the Liberal revival remains just that, while the Communist Party goes unmentioned when electoral calculations are in question. Of course, nothing is certain in this context till it has come about, and it would be incautious to underestimate the Conservatives' capacity to overcome their disadvantage with energy and effect. But it is doubtful they can now regain enough impetus to take them to victory in the year between now and the date when they must call an election. If the electoral consultation were held today they would be massacred; if in the autumn or next spring, the prediction has it, they would be soundly beaten and Labour, after more than twelve years in opposition, would find itself in government again, with a substantial parliamentary majority. Not that this signifies a mass conversion to Labour, still less to socialism. In effect, the indications are that Labour has gained rather little new and positive support; rather, the Conservatives have lost a great deal of ground in the past year or so—enough, that is, to signal the passage from victory to defeat.

Assuming then that Labour returns to government, I propose to examine what the Party will probably do with its victory, which involves asking what Labour is doing now and what it wants to do. Labour policy has been set out, and it is unlikely there will be significant alteration

to its political line between now and the elections. This, together with an analysis of the recent past and immediate present, will reduce, even if it does not quite eliminate, conjecture about Labour's intentions and attitudes.

Gaitskell era

To start with the recent past: perhaps the most noteworthy characteristic of the history of Labour in the 1950s is its steady succession of electoral defeats. The Party hasn't won a general election since 1945. It is true that it returned to office in 1950, even if its miserable majority of 7 (down from 140) was synonymous with defeat. It lost the 1951 election and went into opposition, where it lost once more in 1955 and again in 1959. However, the wonder was not that Labour had lost the elections of the 1950s but that it did not do much worse. For the second most noteworthy characteristic of Labour in this period, closely related to the first, was the incapacity, or rather the lack of will, of the leadership to shape and fight for a precise programme of a socialist character. In 1951, even before the government's capitulation that year, it had become evident that its zeal for reform was exhausted, and it was increasingly hard to see any significant differences from the Conservative opposition, whether in domestic or foreign policy. Most of its energy was devoted to fighting not the Conservatives but those within its own ranks arguing for a different political line. As a result, the Labour Party in the 1950s appeared tepid, timorous, hesitant, defensive and torn by quarrels. Along with the fact that Conservative rule came without the terrible consequences that had been forecast, such as mass unemployment, this was enough to thwart Labour's efforts to win new support or to hold on to what it already had.

The lesson Labour's leaders drew from repeated defeat was not that they had not been bold enough, but that they had been too much so; that there was too much in the Party's 'image' that was electorally damaging, especially its formal commitment on the issue of nationalization. This was the situation that Hugh Gaitskell, who became party leader in 1955, set out to change. An earlier generation of Labour leaders could hardly have shown less enthusiasm for nationalization; and yet, for all their reluctance to propose invading the citadel of private capitalism, they felt incapable of maintaining that public ownership could be separated from the Party's idea of socialism. But this is precisely what the 'revisionists' affirmed: not only that nationalization was electorally damaging but that

it was irrelevant to Labour's socialist goals. Naturally, there were cases in which the state might be constrained to take over the management of this or that firm, even an industry. But the sole criterion for should be a functional one, strictly economic and related to considerations of efficiency. This meant the acceptance on a permanent basis of a situation in which the 'private sector' would be overwhelmingly predominant, and collectivization would remain marginal, confined mostly to public services. The state would intervene in economic life but only in the form of 'control'.

These views did not represent a major departure from Labour's traditional economic philosophy. The 'revisionists' merely wanted to give programmatic status to what has been the objective of Labour's leadership (as distinct from its activists) from the moment the Party was founded. Other 'revisionist' demands were scarcely newer: the insistence on Labour's 'classless' character and aims, the active discouragement of trade-union militancy, flattery of middle-class voters, the general weakening of Labour's political message—this had always been part of the party's approach. But such demands acquired a new significance in the late 1950s, when the 'affluence' in which workers were supposedly wallowing was used to reinforce the need for a new image, appropriate to a 'post-capitalist' society of an increasingly petty-bourgeois character.

As for Labour foreign policy in the 1950s, the real battle was fought not between Labour and the Conservatives but within the Party, between left and right. On the main political questions, the two parties were officially at peace. Naturally, differences arose over specific issues, as in the case of Suez. But these did not undermine what was essentially a bipartisan approach to foreign policy. It would be a mistake to think that the Labour left, opposing the official lead, was able to offer a consistent and principled line. Its opposition was often ambiguous and inhibited, without firm ideological bases. As in the case of Bevanism, it was more an attitude than a coherent movement, and its parliamentary leadership—in particular—had a propensity for compromise that regularly turned to its opponents' advantage.

After Labour's defeat in the 1959 general election, the internal conflict between left and right entered a more dramatic phase. First, there was Gaitskell's attempt to amend Clause IV of the Party Constitution, so as to reduce the commitment to nationalization implied. Gaitskell's defeat

on this, thanks to fierce and mostly spontaneous resistance in the trade union movement and Party branches, was noteworthy. But it is no less important that the left opposition, while able to thwart the leadership, did not succeed in gaining a decisive victory. The compromise reached at the Annual Conference in 1960 gave the appearance of victory to the opposition but left effective power, and the right to shape Labour's programme, in the hands of the 'revisionist' leadership.

The second problem convulsing Labour after 1959 was the growing demand, within the labour movement and beyond, for Labour, once in government, to commit itself to a unilateral renunciation of nuclear weapons. Party leaders, who were of course averse to unilateralism, had little difficulty in defeating its advocates in the late 1950s. However, in 1960 the Annual Conference passed a unilateralist resolution by a narrow majority, with the support of powerful trade-union organizations, especially the Transport and General Workers' Union. It was this defeat for the leadership that provoked Gaitskell's commitment to 'fight and fight again' to overturn the decision. At the Annual Conference in 1961 Gaitskell made good on his pledge and the 1960 decision was overturned. In any case, the focal point of the defence debate had shifted with the recognition that Britain lacked the means to remain an 'independent' member of the nuclear club. The real question was whether Britain would leave its nuclear 'deterrent' in the hands of the United States and concentrate on its 'conventional' role in NATO, or whether it would quit the Atlantic Alliance altogether. For the Labour leadership, this was not even a consideration; nor, it should be added, was this a choice that a significant part of the Labour left was prepared to face.

Meanwhile, a new problem had taken centre stage, that of Britain's proposed entry into the European Economic Community. The Party divided on this question, and was abandoned by its leader when Gaitskell, after a lengthy delay, came out against the Common Market. The reason for his opposition to terms judged acceptable by the British government had very little to do with considerations of a socialist character. But naturally he gained the enthusiastic support of the left for the first time since becoming leader.

What Labour would have done had the Conservatives succeeded in taking Britain into the EEC, and had a general election been fought on this issue, are questions that de Gaulle's January 1963 veto forestalled any

attempt to answer. But de Gaulle also dealt a grave blow to the Tory government, which was deeply committed to entry and in desperate need of a new pulse of life and the appearance of some political initiative. Well before it was rocked by the Profumo affair, the government had become unpopular for its poor economic management; and in the winter of 1962–63, for the first time since coming to office in 1951, it could not prevent the one misfortune that no British government can allow, large-scale unemployment. All this—not to speak of its patent confusion in defence policy—rather than any particular initiative on Labour’s part, considerably increased the probability of Labour’s success in the next election. When Gaitskell died in January 1963, not only had he seen off his critics and won unassailable authority over his party, he had also reached the threshold of power, after long and nerve-racking years of ineffectual opposition. This gave his sudden death a strangely tragic dimension.

The chameleon

Party leaders, in the British political system, are extremely powerful figures and their influence on party policy, strategy and tactics is correspondingly very great. The point is especially relevant to Harold Wilson, who replaced Gaitskell as leader of the Labour Party. Wilson has generally been thought to be well to the left of Gaitskell. He did, after all, resign with Aneurin Bevan from the Labour Government in 1951 (over the imposition of NHS prescription charges to fund the Korean War); he opposed German rearmament in 1953–54; and he did stand against Gaitskell for the leadership of the Labour Party in October 1960, at the height of the unilateralist controversy and with the support of the Labour left.

Before examining Wilson’s political commitments more closely—and even if these were as radical as some people on the Labour left have suggested—we should take into consideration those of the men who surround him. Wilson inherited from Gaitskell a group of colleagues in the Shadow Cabinet and on the National Executive Committee of whose political orientation there is not the slightest doubt: they are firmly situated on the right, and in some cases on the extreme right, of the Labour spectrum. This is true of George Brown, the Party’s Deputy Leader, and Patrick Gordon-Walker, currently Shadow Foreign Secretary; and more or less true of James Callaghan, the Shadow Chancellor. Most of Wilson’s other colleagues range from the right to the extreme right. If

Wilson had owed his victory to a powerful left current within the parliamentary group that elects the leader, and within the labour movement generally, he might have been able to dispense with the services of at least one of these men. As things stand, Wilson is not in a position to get rid of them and must—up to a point—try to conciliate colleagues who were until recently his fierce opponents. In any case, there are not many people in the upper reaches of the Labour hierarchy who could be counted on to strengthen Wilson's hypothetical left-wing tendencies; the most prominent among them, R. H. S. Crossman, is a man of fertile mind and intellectual brilliance, but his radicalism has always been too erratic and uncertain to make him a serious spokesman for the Left. Barbara Castle and Anthony Greenwood, both members of the National Executive, are less vague but also less influential; while Michael Foot, on whom Bevan's mantle has fallen, is quite an effective orator, journalist and writer, but has not so far shown the qualities needed of a leader; not to mention the fact that his opinions are absolutely unacceptable to a majority of his current parliamentary colleagues. In the Parliamentary Party, left MPs are not a negligible group numerically, and there will be more after the coming general election, but they don't amount to a pressure group of real influence.

Given this disposition of forces, it would be easy to conjure up the vision of a radical leader held back by orthodox colleagues, frustrated in his left-wing leanings by the team he inherited from his predecessor, impatient for change, but temporarily unable to move Labour as far to the left as he himself would wish. Such a picture would be seriously misleading. There are undoubtedly certain political differences between Wilson and his immediate colleagues; and he also differs in a variety of ways from his predecessor. But it would be naive to think that this is simply a matter of Wilson being 'left' while Gaitskell was 'right', or of a socialist Wilson being surrounded by recalcitrant colleagues. These categories are far too crude for this particular situation. The real differences between Hugh Gaitskell and Harold Wilson, quite apart from the latter's considerable technical skill as a politician, are more complex; they may encompass, loosely speaking, the distinction between left and right; but they are hardly exhausted therewith.

One difference lies in the fact that Wilson, unlike Gaitskell, has never shown any great wish to remove the ambiguities, confusions and evasions that surround so much of Labour policy, for instance on the subject

of nationalization. On the contrary, Wilson's whole career since 1951 has been built on ambiguity and a careful avoidance of too specific a commitment in the various disputes that have agitated Labour since that time. Thus Wilson did resign from the Labour government with Bevan, but he kept his distance thereafter from the Bevanite rebels. He was certainly against German rearmament but quickly fell into line when the left was defeated on this issue. When Bevan resigned from the Shadow Cabinet in 1954 because he was being hounded by his opponents, Wilson did not hesitate to take the vacant seat—and it was Wilson who enthusiastically recommended *Industry and Society* to the Labour Conference in 1957. This was the first explicit attempt under Gaitskell's leadership to wean the Party away from its commitments on nationalization. Wilson was not unwilling to let it be said that he did not approve of Gaitskell's later handling of the Clause IV issue, but only because there was no need to raise the issue at all; and while Wilson stood against Gaitskell for the leadership of the Labour Party at the height of the defence controversy, he made it clear that he should not in any way be thought to have unilateralist sympathies. Wilson, in other words, brought cultivation of the political middle ground close to a state of perfection.

Clement Attlee used to say that to be left of centre was the only appropriate position for a leader of the Labour Party, and Wilson has unreservedly subscribed to this axiom. But the notion that Attlee was a left-of-centre leader is one of the more carefully fostered myths of Labour politics. The record shows that on all the issues that really mattered, Attlee was unequivocally *opposed* to left policies. Nor is this surprising: choices have to be made and sets of policies must revolve around one axis or another. In practical terms, leaders cannot be all things to all men. The framework in which choices are made naturally varies according to time and place. In the British context, and in relation to home policy in the 1960s, the touchstone of a Labour leader's commitment is his approach to the question of nationalization. This, of course, is not the only problem over which different tendencies can be distinguished, but at least domestically it is the most critical. As things are, it is also a question on which there is a great deal of evidence for Wilson's personal position, as well as that of other Labour leaders.

Four days after his election as leader of the Labour Party, Wilson was challenged in the House of Commons to say whether he stood by Clause IV in the Party Constitution. He said that he did, and that so did the

whole of the Labour Party. Formally this is true. The Labour Party does stand by Clause IV, as it has stood by it since 1918. In practice, the distance between Wilson and his right-wing colleagues on this issue is not great. As noted above, Gaitskellite 'revisionism' doesn't exclude the possibility of partial and occasional acts of nationalization. A group of Labour MPs made the point in a letter to *The Times* last March. 'The public are weary', they wrote, 'of Conservative politicians resorting to irrational and emotive propaganda to make public ownership a political scarecrow', further extension of which was 'a purely practical question as to the most efficient and economical way of organizing particular industrial processes in the national interest'. From Wilson downwards, moreover, Labour spokesmen have stated again and again that, save for the renationalization of steel and parts of road transport, Labour had no plans for any additional take-over of industries and firms. The only qualification is to be found in some formulations of *Signposts for the Sixties*, the programme adopted at its 1961 Conference, which remarks that when 'competition creates not efficiency but chaos in a key sector of the economy', 'an expansion of public ownership may be necessary to put things right'. By analogy, where 'major changes of ownership and control in a vital industry are threatened by take-over bid or merger, the state must be free to intervene, either by vetoing a proposed transaction or by stepping in itself and asserting the rights of the community through an extension of public ownership.'¹

In addition, there is one type of public ownership which Wilson has advocated with some persistence: the establishment of state-owned enterprises at 'growth points' of the economy, either as pilot plants or as competitors to existing private industry. The idea was much canvassed under the post-war Labour government, without much being done about it. It would undoubtedly be more energetically pursued under a Wilson administration. Such enterprises may be desirable, and they might perform some valuable functions, but it can hardly be claimed that they would transform the basis and character of economic life in Britain, even in a long-term perspective; nor would they disturb the existing power structure of the British economy.

The only concrete proposal is renationalization of steel, about which it is reasonable to think that, had it not been nationalized under the

¹ *Signposts for the Sixties: A Statement of Labour's Home Policy Accepted by the 60th Annual Conference of the Labour Party at Blackpool, 2-6 October 1961*, London 1961, p. 18.

1945 Labour government, it would not now feature in any Labour programme. Bevan's insistence, over the hesitation and reluctance of colleagues, on this measure was one of the better legacies he left to the labour movement. To try to evade a commitment that has been reiterated for decades would create obvious difficulties for the Party. But the argument that would develop after a Labour government came to power would not be, presumably, whether to nationalize, but how—that is, whether to do so in a 'maximum' fashion, which could have important consequences, or minimally, so as to reduce the importance of the measure. This is one of the questions whose outcome remains genuinely open, dependent mainly on the balance of forces within the Labour Party at the time.

Wilson has no more intention than his predecessors of committing a Labour government to any significant additions to the public sector. His aim, and that of his colleagues, is not to begin the difficult task of transforming a predominantly private-enterprise economy into one with a predominantly socialized base; it is rather to direct private capitalism, to extend the scope of state intervention in economic affairs in order to prod, encourage, admonish, cajole and bribe private interests into acting upon a Labour government's policies. Labour's ideal would appear to be a British version of the French *économie concertée*, in which private industry, labour and the state are each to play their part within a general framework of 'indicative' planning.

The Labour leadership is quite naturally perturbed at Britain's comparatively sluggish economic performance over the past decade, at its falling share of world trade, the inadequacy and misdirection of investment, and the waste of material and human skills and resources. They are well aware that contemporary capitalism needs state intervention on a massive scale if it is to continue as a dynamic system. Labour leaders claim they would administer the economy more efficiently than the Conservatives. They may be right. For there accretes around the Tory Party a multitude of vested interests, many of a wholly parasitical kind, of which a Conservative government must take careful account, but towards which Labour might prove less tender. Thus land speculators, large landlords, get-rich-quick financiers may have a thinner time under a Labour government than during the recent golden years, which should still, however, leave them with plenty of fat. Labour would be especially concerned to help and encourage those parts of capitalist industry which

showed enterprise and dynamism; and it is in this sense that Labour may justly claim to be the solicitous friend of 'neo-capitalism'.

If Wilson and his colleagues are to succeed in their aim of restoring vigour to the British economy, however, they will need the co-operation of private industry and finance. Such co-operation has always had its price in the past and there is no reason to believe the future will be different. Nor is there much doubt that the Labour leaders, like their predecessors, would be willing to pay the price demanded. This could take many forms: a 'reasonable' attitude to key industrial and financial interests; a willingness, which has already found repeated expression, to preach to the trade unions the virtues of moderation in wage demands; a 'sensible' attitude to tax reform; and a sympathetic appreciation of the general requirements of an economy geared to the profit motive.

On the other hand, Labour has already said that it wants to see a substantial extension of social services, a major enlargement of educational opportunities, new taxation on very large property and incomes: in short, that it wants to achieve a great improvement in the quality of life in Britain, and reduce the social and economic inequalities which remain among its most offensive and characteristic features. How to achieve these aims and have the co-operation of industry: how to meet popular claims and respect those of property and privilege—these are very much larger problems than Labour leaders have so far been prepared to acknowledge; to solve them in the popular interest will require a good deal more toughness, boldness and determination than any Labour leadership has ever displayed until now.

It remains true today, as in earlier and sadder times, that the Labour Party does not speak the language of audacity to its supporters; that it proclaims no vision of great things to be realized on a grand scale; that it remains desperately preoccupied with establishing its respectability; that it is permanently obsessed with a fear of appearing insufficiently orthodox. The upshot has its comic sides. Asked by an interviewer how far he had been influenced by Marx, Wilson replied: 'Quite honestly, I've never read *Das Kapital*. I got only as far as page two—that's where the footnote is nearly a page long, I felt that two sentences of main text and a page of footnote were too much.' This from a man who is not only a skilful politician, but intelligent and well-educated. Today, having long held out against them, the Labour Party has entrusted its pre-electoral

campaign to experts in public relations. The least that can be said about their efforts to date is that the propagation of socialist ideals does not seem terribly important to these phrase merchants and their prefabricated effects. Nor, to be fair, does it seem to be the main preoccupation of their clients.

The ambiguity that now, as in the past, stamps Labour's message is no match for the degree of discontent and desire for renewal in Britain today, nor for the opportunity offered by the bankruptcy of a decaying Conservative Party. The disgust provoked by the Tories is not accompanied by any feelings of enthusiasm or relief aroused by Labour. A new post-war generation has now come on the scene, whose most encouraging feature is its lack of deference towards the existing establishment. The wave of satirical writing and performance that has swept over Britain in recent years is a movement of the young and confined to them. But it is significant, even strange, that the bitter contempt of their satire is directed as much at Labour as the Conservatives and the society over which they have presided. What the most alert exponents of this new generation are saying is, quite simply, that they do not view Labour's leaders as a genuine alternative to their Conservative opponents. It would be facile to dismiss this phenomenon as a typical expression of irreverent young people in confrontation with their elders. In fact, Labour's political approach makes such sentiments eminently reasonable.

The same can be said with still greater emphasis of Labour's foreign policy. Here too Wilson has made clear that he continues to support the line he has inherited, and there is no reason to think that he or his colleagues nurse any ambition to depart from the principles that have guided Labour foreign policy since 1945. They remain wholly dedicated to NATO and the American alliance, fighting shy of any autonomous initiatives. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Kennedy has no more faithful ally in Europe today. Labour leaders are now free from their previous commitment to an 'independent' nuclear force and have repeatedly emphasized that their main concern in relation to NATO is to strengthen Britain's contribution in 'conventional' forces.

The Labour Party, it is true, has long advocated certain initiatives it would like to see the Alliance develop. It has subscribed for many years to disengagement in Central Europe, as a variant of the Rapacki Plan; urged Western compromise over Russian requests for a nuclear test-

ban treaty; called for more frequent summit conferences; advocated greater efforts to secure general disarmament; and Wilson himself, who gained his ministerial stripes several years ago in the course of commercial negotiations with the Soviet Union, can be expected to propose a substantial expansion of trade with the Communist world. To date, however, Labour's foreign-policy hopes have been subject to clearance by the United States. The Shadow Foreign Secretary set out the Party's position with the utmost clarity in Washington in June this year: 'The Labour Party will honour any agreement reached by the Conservatives for participation in the multi-nuclear force, and indeed if the United States cannot devise any alternative, Labour itself will accept the idea'. Such attitudes are not the stuff from which actions of any significance in the field of foreign policy will emerge. Not all of Labour's frontbench may be as ductile and accommodating of American opinions as Gordon-Walker. Wilson himself has expressed categorical opposition to West Germany sharing in the possession or control of nuclear weapons, and has spoken of a *de facto* recognition of East Germany. At the same time, there are few indications that Labour leaders are likely to resist American pressures. What they may be expected to do is try to 'restrain' the United States from impetuous actions in certain critical moments and at times of emergency, as in the Cuban crisis of October 1962. But this falls a long way short of independent initiatives and has, of course, nothing in common with 'third force' politics, let alone an active neutralism. The Labour Party has shown much sympathy with the 'third world', but this is not accompanied by any interest in a non-aligned Britain. In the endemic conflict between the capitalist and Communist spheres, Wilson and his colleagues will remain firmly aligned with the United States.

All this suggests that it would be a mistake to expect the next Labour government to set in train any structural changes in Britain, or to embark on new foreign policies. But this is not the whole story, for what a Labour government does or fails to do is not simply the product of its own wishes and predilections. A great deal must also depend on the pressure to which it would be subjected, in this case from within the labour movement. The left of the party—in the unions, constituencies and House of Commons—from which this kind of pressure ought to come, has rarely been so acquiescent as it is now. One reason for this is that the major issues which formerly divided the party have been temporarily shelved: 'unity' is now the order of the day, the more so since left

Labourism sees Wilson as a more acceptable leader than his predecessor, a man likely to listen sympathetically to its point of view.

Whatever eventuates—and the Labour left is historically prone to illusions in this matter—it is clear that the only guarantee of being listened to is the force that the left is capable of mustering to make itself heard. On the other hand, its current acquiescence may obscure the left's potential strength. Its effective use is the only hope of getting a Labour government bolder than the Party's present political line and declarations might tend to suggest. Even then, it would be difficult for the left to put basic problems of socialist change in British society on the political agenda. Such problems must wait until a Labour government, and probably more than one, achieves real leadership of public life.

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