

# RADICAL POLITICS AND THE CONSTRAINTS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY SYSTEM

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In what follows I argue it is increasingly wrong to talk of parliament as an important institutional actor exerting national control and sovereignty. I agree with those Marxists who argue that as a result of the of the globalisation of capitalism, it is erroneous to talk about British institutional, and constitutional, politics in purely national terms.

## SOCIALISM AND PARLIAMENTARY CONSTRAINTS

For most Marxian theorists Britain's parliamentary system has little to do with the politics of democratic representation. Instead, parliament, as a formal institution, is argued to be inextricably tied to the wider, subtly constraining forces of "omnipresent capitalism". Eric Hobsbawm, for example, has argued that by gradually institutionalising representation under the rubric of parliamentary sovereignty, British democracy has always been less about representation and more about the legitimisation of a system based upon the private ownership of the means of production and property.<sup>1</sup>

The Labour Party, as a major player on the twentieth century's parliamentary stage, has been only too aware of the frequently problematic and often contradictory aims of trying, on the one hand, to operate within the parliamentary system (with all its checks, balances and conventions), and on the other, of trying to articulate and politically fulfil the radical goals of orthodox socialism.

For Colin Leys Labour's famous Clause Four was interpreted from the outset as a way of achieving a "more regulated form of capitalism rather than overthrowing it".<sup>2</sup> He bases this view on the claim that the party's lack of a mass membership base outside parliament, after World War One, enabled Labour MP's largely to ignore their party's rank and file socialist demands. He argues that although the authority of the annual conference and N.E.C. is 'acknowledged' the MP's themselves have always had "a good deal of freedom to go their own way":<sup>3</sup> to turn their backs on Socialism. For example, Gaitskell's 1961 defeat of unilateral disarmament and his famous resultant cry: "[the] leadership will fight, fight and fight again conferences under decision"<sup>4</sup> proves that Labour leaders have always had the upper hand on policy matters.

It is a popular view among many radical socialists that parliamentarianism automatically constrains what a socialist party, like Labour, can do when they are in power. However, Louis Minkin goes so far as to argue that Labour Party's 'Conference policy-process' is itself indicative of the wider socio-economic system's constraints. He asserts that the Labour's Conference decisions are the convergence of two streams of political activity. The first process, partly private but mainly public, is that in which the policy mandates of the constituent or-

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ganisations are decided by representation - that is by votes. The second process, on the other hand is almost totally private and secretive. Here the policy alternatives to be presented to the Conference are pre-determined, largely by members of the parliamentary party. For Minkin, the essential point is that Labour's conference policy process mirrors the contradictory roles of representation and legitimisation.<sup>5</sup>

Countering Minkin's views, Robert McKenzie has defended the parliamentary system as being ultimately grounded upon the principles of representation. He argued that: "the primary function of the (political parties') mass organisations [...] is to sustain competing teams of parliamentary leaders",<sup>6</sup> and that under British 'constitutional convention' MPs are responsible to their constituencies, not their Party - or as in the case of the Labour Party: its Annual Conference.

However, Samuel Beer, like Minkin, argues that the British Parliamentary system is primarily about legitimisation and not, as McKenzie has claimed, about representation. For him McKenzie is wrong to 'blur' the issue and identify both major parties (Labour and Conservative) as being 'fundamentally similar'. For Beer what is important is their contrasting sub-cultures.<sup>7</sup>

Beer argues that a British Labour government is inspired by very particular values and beliefs. Not only is there a distinct conception of 'liberty', and a greater stress on equality, but also the Socialist's commitment to 'fellowship'. While he argues that for Conservatives 'authority' means 'strong leadership' and overt 'authoritarianism'<sup>8</sup> which in turn is simply designed to legitimate 'government', Socialists are inextricably tied to the representative principles of 'massification'. In short, the Labour Party's authority structure is embodied within a 'syndrome' of political ideas which are essentially egalitarian and participatory.

Ralph Miliband,<sup>9</sup> whilst accepting the Labour Party's distinctive 'ethos' (as Drucker<sup>10</sup> calls it elsewhere) argues that there are 'structural' reasons constraining Labour's Socialism. For example, although the Parliamentary Labour Party (P.L.P.) has become less representative of the working class (by 1974 only 25% of it was working class) it has been increasingly inclined towards a middle class non-Socialist, Parliamentary outlook.<sup>11</sup> As such it accepts the constraints of capitalism, which is of course re-enforced by electoral considerations. Finally Miliband, in a similar argument to that of Colin Crouch, argues that Trade Union leaders see their primary task in the context of a short term

defence of their member's interests. As Crouch says: "There is no other country in which an autonomous union strength has been concentrated at shop-floor level with such power, for so long, and across so broad a range of industries."<sup>12</sup>

For Miliband the Labour Party is constrained by a parliamentary structure which automatically dilutes its socialist impact, and contrary to constitutional myth regarding the concept of sovereignty, restricts any radical Socialist project.

Following this line of thought, David Coates argues that whenever the Labour Party is in a majority in parliament: "it faces a complex set of interlocking centres of private power whose general effect has been to erode the early radicalism of successive Labour ministers."<sup>13</sup> He argues that:

"the situation of a Labour Government is very like that of a stone dropped into a pool - surrounded by an ever widening set of ripples. If the innermost set of constraints (ripples) are parliamentary, and the next the civil service, followed by the institutions of private capital, then the ultimate ripple-circle of constraints is set by the competitive processes of the world market through which capital is accumulated and realised."<sup>14</sup>

Many Labour policies (between 1974-79) - such as planning agreements regarding the top one hundred companies - were themselves the direct casualties of such private concentrations. For example, the ability of the multinational company Chrysler to negotiate with a British government on the basis of equality is directly indicative of the broader controls which constrain any government and hence ultimately the power of parliament, that is, its majority party at any one time.<sup>15</sup>

Coates goes on to assert however that in his opinion the 1974-79 Labour Government's tightest constraints came from the world of finance and from direct negotiations on credit, trade liberalisation and world economic growth. For instance, the IMF were only willing to lend an extra credit-tranche in December 1976 in return for a written undertaking that domestic economic policy would follow the lines agreed in negotiations between Treasury officials and IMF investigators. This government faced a higher degree of industrial concentration than any previous Labour Government. In common with other Western governments, the 1974-79 Labour Cabinet faced a world economy in which the largest 650 companies, operating on a multinational scale, were responsible for a combined turnover of 773

billion dollars a year, greater than the G.N.P. of any country outside the USA or USSR.<sup>16</sup>

By 1970 one-half of the manufacturing output of the British economy came from just 140 firms, and financial institutions (particularly insurance firms) accounted for 55% of all shares quoted in the stock market. Hence it must be understood that the growth of industrial concentration and capital ownership had not only gone hand-in-hand, but were also to have major consequences for the distribution of political power and for the autonomy of the subsequent Labour government. Thus for Coates: "It is not the class structure alone which constrains Labour radicalism, but the impact through that class structure of the capitalist economy on which it is built."<sup>17</sup>

### WHY THE LEFT ARE WRONG

David Coates, Ralph Miliband, Samuel Beer and Louis Minkin represent a political camp which paints a very simple picture. In general terms, it is argued that radical socialism in Britain has not been achieved because of the forces - and hold - of both national and international capitalism. That not only do these forces impact upon the class system (read: thinking, autonomous, voting individuals) but through that class system the institutions upon which this society is built. It is assumed by such authors that these "structural constraints" hold absolute sway.<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, Colin Leys appears to understand the dangers of such determinism and, in opposition to Ralph Miliband, points out that an equal number of radical Socialists have been recruited from the middle and working class. Again, he argues that under a system of Proportional Representation, short term electoral considerations would no longer necessarily tell against the adoption of a more radical programme and that it is therefore conceivable that a radical Labour government, in parliament, could change the system and overcome its deradicalising tendencies.<sup>19</sup>

### LIBERTARIANISM, PARLIAMENT AND ANGST

The great German sociologist Max Weber called British politics 'elitist', and because of its 'exclusionary nature' a 'non-democratic' system. Weber's concern was justifying the right of lay persons, with only 'commonsense notions', to judge with their votes the state's experts. Like Ostrogoski, Weber was concerned about the 'inevitable' rise of power-

ful political parties and hence ministerial, and/or excessive, cabinet power.<sup>20</sup>

Weber's work is important here because it enables us to understand what Habermas was later to call 'technocratic practices'. Because industrialisation requires specialisation, parliament throughout the twentieth century has increasingly relied upon 'external experts' who have subsequently gained power by achieving ever higher levels 'consultative status'. Again, an important part of this process has been the rise in the power of not only the civil service itself but also the cabinet. Hence it was the case that as Edward Heath's Civil Service reforms were being carried out Lord Crowther Hunt's survey of the Civil Service's power stressed its growth, and the fundamental difficulties involved in modern ministerial control.<sup>21</sup>

Today it is widely accepted that too much government, state bureaucracy and centralised regulation is an inherently bad thing. As Robert Nisbet has recently asserted:

"The day would seem to be past in intellectual circles where centralization of power, collectivism, and bureaucratization of function are automatically accepted as not merely good but inevitable."<sup>22</sup>

However, things were not so clear all those years ago when individuals like Lord Crowther Hunt were commissioned by the state to question the internal workings of the state. When they should have been questioning its existence. Public Choice theory, which demonstrates that public officials maximise their utility just as do market participants, was not then so popular. As the political scientist Nigel Ashford has noted, with regard to the close relationship between state bureaucrats and interest groups:

"[State] Bureaucrats are in a strong position to obtain their objectives because of their strategic location, their control of information, their low costs of organisation and their ability to cooperate with interest groups."<sup>23</sup>

Public choice theory is important because it gives us a unique insight into the logic of government, and the dynamics of internal political trade-offs. It does much to explain the British government's post-war growth which culminated in the 1976 IMF loan crisis and the subsequent election of Mrs Thatcher in 1979.

However, while Thatcherism has used both parliament and the law to restructure British industry along more competitive - anti-lame-duck - lines, it is obvious that, contrary to the suggestions of many

socialists mentioned above, libertarians also face many 'systemic constraints'. For undoubtably libertarians and anarcho-capitalists also face a multiplicity of centres of power in society which are (for a range of reasons) inherently opposed to radical economic liberalism.

It was Benjamin Tucker who astutely argued back in the late nineteenth century that political-economists and businessmen are ultimately afraid of their own *laissez-faire* doctrine.<sup>24</sup> In short, Tucker accused the merchants of being inconsistent; on the one hand they believed in liberty to compete with the labourer, but not in the liberty to compete with the capitalist in order to reduce his usury.

For Tucker and the other individualist-anarchists of the day the ruling class simply used state authority and legislation to avoid real economic liberalism.

## THE PARLIAMENTARY ROAD TO ANARCHO-CAPITALISM

As a libertarian, I agree with many of the socialists mentioned above in this paper, when they complain that radical socialist ideas have been diluted and constrained by civil servants, the secret services and large corporations funding bureaus like the Economic League. However, I cannot accept their suggestion that the phenomenon known as Capitalism is behind this. Instead, it seems to me that these actions simply reflect a desire to enable specific corporations and interest groups to gain access to the structures of political authority. What follows from this is that libertarians also face similar problems. They too face powerful centres of vested opposition.

It seems conceivable to me that a generation of libertarian MPs could get into parliament and 'sell off the system'. It seems theoretically possible that anarcho-capitalist ideology could be enacted by parliament. But what sort of opposition would such a project face from within the state and the business community?

## CONCLUSION

I personally am attracted to the incremental approach of deregulation, but we cannot possibly assume that businessmen and entrepreneurs will necessarily support the construction of this libertarian, free-market, capitalist world. Marxists assume that the 'withering away of the state' is historically inevitable: libertarians can only hope to make it so.

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- Note: these authors do not seriously question whether a viable orthodox socialism is possible - irrespective of systemic constraints. For in the real world, all forms of orthodox socialism logically rely upon the market mechanism. The criminalisation of markets under socialist law automatically results in the individual being forced to utilise the illegal - 'black' - economy, so as to obtain not only worth while employment, but desirable goods and services too. As such it is my case that real socialism (that is, the total collectivisation of the economy) is an impossibility.
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