The only published output from my doctoral thesis.

Labour's foreign policy divisions

by Richard Rose 5/6/51

UNITY is a major theme of sermons in the Labour Movement, perhaps because it is more easily preached than achieved. The advocates of unity on foreign policy have made significant headway in recent months. Messrs Crossman and Padley, and the AEU and USDAW resolutions, speak for a significant block in the party when they call for an end to controversy on foreign affairs. Those who sincerely advocate unity assume that the current dispute about the H-bomb is only a matter of detail, and that there is wide agreement within the party on fundamental principles. If harmony is to bloom through many seasons of politics, it must be rooted firmly in such soil. Only if politicians reason from the same set of axioms will they consistently agree on what to do.

But the history of Labour foreign policy suggests that unity is a chimera. Today's differences on the H-bomb are really symptomatic of a congenital infirmity. Foreign policy has been disputed just as much as domestic policy in the party's long and disputatious past. Mr Gaitskell and Mr Cousins are only the most recent antagonists; their predecessors include Hardie and Hyndman, MacDonald and Morel, Lansbury and Bevin, Bevin and Crossman, and Morrison and Bevan.

Before the First World War the Labour Party showed little interest in international affairs. The war forced it to develop a policy, and disenchantment with wartime diplomacy made its approach a radical one. Like the Wilsonians, most Socialists would not settle afterwards for anything less than a fundamental transformation of international society. Only in this way could peace and socialism be assured. This transformation was easily achieved in the world of ideas; it automatically followed from a redefinition of the basic nature of international relations. In this new vocabulary, terms such as law, conciliation, co-operation, and world public opinion provided key concepts far different from those such as power, force, and alliance. Much of this new language is still familiar, for ideas invoked at Scarborough in 1960 were also in the foreground at Hastings in 1933 and Edinburgh in 1922.

The radical, or Socialist, approach to foreign policy started from the assumption that the interests of all peoples are fundamentally the same. Apparent antagonisms are the product of The System. Balance of Power alliances are termed unnecessary, for antagonisms between groups of nations are based upon delusions. Socialists have preferred to try to dispel so-called illusions rather than prepare for a trial of force. Negotiation has come before armaments. The best way to advance the common interests of mankind is assumed to be through collective international action, preferably undertaken by world government. Particularly when the party is out of office, and it usually is, it is more congenial to argue that international institutions are more democratic than nation-States. The League, and now the United Nations, are assumed to speak with the massive force of world public opinion, whereas national Governments (whose rôle in the UN is conveniently ignored) are assumed to be rather selfish.

Socialists developed Woodrow Wilson's argument for a democratic foreign policy into one for a social-democratic foreign policy. All peoples are equal, but those who have gone through a social and economic revolution are more equal than others. Between the wars the Labour Party looked for support in its international aims to Moscow—though with typical British illogic, shunning the support of King Street. Now it often looks to New Delhi or Bandung, and perhaps a few MPs are even now building hopes on Cuba or the Congo. In this interpretation of foreign affairs, economic conditions, not military force, govern the flow of history. The fact that a bullet may not stop an idea is considered far more important than the fact that an idea will not stop a bullet. It was a favourite theme of the Bevanites that Britain's contribution to world peace could best be made by developing production and the Welfare State, an appeal neatly mixing self-interest and altruism. Today the argument is that money now spent on arms could better be spent on aiding the underdeveloped countries to develop economically and socially.

Between the wars these beliefs were widespread in the Labour Party, and those who held them, including Konni Zilliacus, played the major part in drafting foreign policy statements. Power politics was as much discredited in the Labour Movement as it was in the Government of Neville Chamberlain. Only a few spirits such as Bevin and Dalton consistently thought in terms of power. The rising tide of fascism caused much rethinking, especially among party leaders. This culminated in Labour joining the Churchill Coalition in 1940. As Lord Attlee later admitted, Labour's postwar outlook towards foreign affairs was hammered out there, and it was hammered on the anvil of power politics.

The postwar Attlee-Bevin-Gaitskell line is based upon a far different picture of world politics from that held by Arthur Henderson, Lansbury, or, for that matter, the younger Attlee. Since the war the leadership has always started from the assumption that the interests of nations are as likely to be in opposition as those of trade unions and employers. Bargaining can take place, but it does so in an atmosphere charged with caution and self-regard, not brotherly love. Hence Mr Gaitskell's desire to preserve an independent British H-bomb, and not to rely solely upon America's.

Because they see the world so divided, the leaders now do not trust international institutions to solve basic difficulties; they could only begin to work if these difficulties were resolved. International combinations must be limited in size, and include only those nations which have a common purpose in joining. On this basis, the Attlee Government helped to start the Marshall Plan and NATO. And because it found no common economic interest with France and Germany, it refused to support European Union. Only at the time of Suez have Labour leaders treated the UN as a strong body—perhaps because then the alternative appeared far worse.

Men such as Bevin and Gaitskell have never denied the importance of world economic development, but they have never rated it as immediately more important than military defence. Economic changes take decades to complete, whereas war can literally arise overnight. A half-finished irrigation project in Iran would not stop Russian troops if they decided to cross borders tomorrow. This is as true today as it was when Aneurin Bevan quit the Cabinet in 1951. Because postwar party leaders have looked first to national interests, they have been loth to judge other nations by the standards of international socialism. Live and let live has been the motto, whether the question was relations with Franco Spain or Communist China. The Labour Government did not try to assist Socialist parties elsewhere—and it expected Conservatives elsewhere not to offer assistance to Tories here.

At times since the war, notably from the start of the Marshall Plan to the outbreak of the Korean war, there has been relative calm in Labour discussions of foreign affairs. But calm does not mean agreement; it has only meant that one faction was too distracted, or too weak, to argue. Unity in a crisis has been followed by disagreements on what should be done once the crisis subsides. The goodwill generated by a document, such as that approved at Scarborough in 1958, promising peace and world disarmament, is soon dispelled by fundamental differences on how to achieve this great end.