

# How Should We Fight Blairism?

**Martin Sullivan**

WELL, THAT was a bit of a waste of time, wasn't it? My article on the London mayoral election, which appeared as a supplement to *What Next?* No.24, was intended to convince the left, or at least that limited section of it that reads this magazine, that it was necessary to rally behind Nicky Gavron in the Labour selection contest, in order to defeat the leadership's favoured candidate, Tony Banks. I might as well not have bothered.

Of course, in the event, Gavron won a fairly comfortable victory, mainly due to her substantial lead in the affiliates' section. The trade unions who rallied behind her campaign, notably the TGWU and GMB, deserve credit for that. However, in the individual members' ballot Gavron won by only the narrowest of margins. If it had been Banks who had finished slightly ahead in that section, this would not have affected the overall result, but the Blairites would have been able to use it as an excuse to attack the union link, by claiming, as they have after recent defeats at annual conference, that ordinary party members are supportive of the leadership but their decisions are being overturned by the trade unions. So it was crucial that Gavron should win a majority among the membership. This didn't fall from the sky, but was achieved by hard work and consistent telephone canvassing right up to the wire.

The strength of Gavron's campaign was that it had behind it a broad coalition of forces, who were united on the basis of an understanding that the hardline New Labour strategy, of concentrating on attacking Ken Livingstone rather than the Tories, was electorally suicidal. In so far as sections of the party have gone along with the Blair project, this has generally been on the pragmatic grounds that it made Labour electable. Yet here was the leadership advocating a strategy that could well have produced a Tory mayor in 2004 and minimised the number of Labour members on the London Assembly, handing our political enemies an important victory in the crucial period preceding the next general election. This produced a political realignment in the party, as the centre, supported by a number of hitherto loyal Blairites,

rebelled against the self-destructive strategy of the hard right. Serious sections of the left, it should go without saying, had no hesitation in forming a bloc with these forces.

You might have thought that the Labour left in its entirety would have enthusiastically backed Gavron. Here was a chance to defend the immediate interests of the Labour Party and at the same time inflict a telling defeat on the ultra-Blairite tendency. But most of the hard left in the London party (with some honourable exceptions) were completely uninterested in Gavron's campaign, if not downright hostile to it. To such comrades, building a broad and effective alliance against the hard right is apparently tantamount to treachery. They are interested in a campaign against the right wing only if it is led by themselves, or by others on the left who are politically close to them, and their conception of an alliance is to set up a hard left campaign and then tack a couple of rather more mainstream figures onto it in order to give the impression of political breadth.

Anyone who needs to be convinced of the sectarian irrelevance of this element within the Labour left should have a look at the debate that took place on the *Labour Left Briefing* discussion list ([http://groups.yahoo.com/group/LLB\\_Readers](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/LLB_Readers)) over the Gavron campaign. Pete Firmin accused Gavron of having "policies not much different to the Tories", while Andrew Berry offered the equally balanced assessment that "Gavron is just another Blairite pro-privatising Labour candidate and is proclaiming her position on Livingstone in order to advance her own career". Ian Malcolm-Walker added the helpful comment that "formal bourgeois politics hold out no potential for the pursuit of our interests". Of the participants in the discussion only Dorothy Macedo and Matthew Willgress (plus of course the editor of this journal) showed the slightest grasp of elementary tactics.

The same coalition of forces that backed Gavron also supported Len Duvall, who was standing for chair of the Greater London Labour Party against the Blairite incumbent Chris Robbins. As chair of the Labour Group on the London Assembly,

Duvall has been a leading advocate, along with Gavron, Toby Harris and others, of constructive engagement with the mayor, and has opposed the tendency within the Group (headed by Trevor Phillips until he decamped to the Commission for Racial Equality) who have set themselves the aim of obstructing everything Ken Livingstone does, irrespective of the damage this causes to the implementation of a progressive agenda for London. After Gavron's victory, Robbins evidently decided that his position was untenable, and he stood down from the contest for GLLP chair, allowing Duvall to be elected unopposed.

Overall, Gavron's victory significantly changed the relationship of forces within the London party, shifting the centre of gravity leftwards (i.e. towards the political middle ground), and marginalising the hard right. This became clear at the GLLP conference in November 2002. The Blairite hardliners were obviously still in a state of shock after the double blow of Gavron's success and Robbins' resignation, and barely raised a voice throughout the proceedings (although the results of elections at the conference, which were by no means entirely favourable to the left, indicated that the right wing were certainly not absent).

Writing in the December issue of *Briefing*, London Unison convenor Geoff Martin described the scene: "Even the blessed Margaret McDonagh [the ultra-Blairite former Labour Party general secretary] pitched up, but she left in disgust as new London Party chair Len Duvall introduced democratic votes and launched a barrage of left and trade union speakers into debates that would have been closed down by ousted former chair Chris Robbins."

But the majority of *Briefing* supporters were as hostile to Duvall as they were to Gavron, if not more so. They had argued in favour of standing a hard left candidate, such as Geoff Martin himself, or even Maria Exall of the CWU, for GLLP chair. Neither of these comrades could conceivably have won. Martin is a prominent and outspoken opponent of the party leadership, whom he regularly denounces in his *Briefing* column and elsewhere, while Exall is publicly associated with a particular left group. Anyone who supposed that the level of political development, either in the trade unions or in the constituency parties, was such that an anti-Blairite *Briefing* columnist or a well known supporter of a pseudo-Trotskyist sect could be a credible candidate for chair of the London Labour Party was lost in the realms of political fantasy – which, of course, is where a lot of leftists permanently reside.

None of the reports in *Briefing* gave any credit at all to Gavron's campaign for having played such an important role in changing the political

complexion of GLLP conference. You might find this a bit odd. After all, here was a political shift of some importance in the London party, and it could perhaps have been anticipated that a magazine which regards itself as the flagship of the anti-Blairite left would try to draw some political conclusions from all this. But apparently not. *Briefing* didn't even see fit to report Gavron's victory, never mind subject it to any political analysis.

Indeed, from the main conference report on the *Briefing* email discussion list, by Pete Firmin, you wouldn't have thought that anything much at all had happened in the London party. Firmin opined that Robbins' replacement by Duvall was "only marginally a step forward" and moaned about the supposed inadequacies of the new chair, whom he blamed for allowing the morning session of the conference to overrun slightly. The fact that this was the product of Duvall's admirable concern for delegates' democratic rights, as a result of which a succession of trade unionists and CLP members were given free rein to criticise the leadership, was lost on comrade Firmin. In another posting, Dave Statham chimed in with the thoughtful observation that Duvall's supporters might "like to comment on why electing a crap chair who is a Blairite represents an improvement".

This sort of response is a classic product of what I would term the miserablist wing of the hard left. If the opposition to Blair isn't emerging in the way they want and under their political leadership, they stand on the sidelines whingeing, and deny that the limited victories others have fought for and won represent any kind of progress at all.

There are some general lessons concerning tactics and strategy to be learned from all this. We are now entering a period which may well see the shipwreck of the Blairite project and the break-up of New Labour. This situation opens up real possibilities for the left. However, unless we can relate to these developments seriously, and with a firm grasp of political tactics, we will squander our opportunities.

The fundamental flaw in the political methods of the left, in my opinion, is its tendency to sectarianism. This is of course to be found in its most extreme form among the various groups who try to "build the revolutionary party" for the working class outside of, and in opposition to, the party that the working class has actually built for itself. But it is also a feature of the various left-wing tendencies inside the Labour Party, and it afflicts straightforward left reformists in the Socialist Campaign Group of MPs almost as much as it does those who have a background in the Trotskyist tradition, as many comrades around *Briefing* do. All of these tendencies, inside and outside the Labour Party, see the role of the left as

being to organise itself, around a distinctive set of policies, and appeal to the masses to gather around its spotless banner.

This method perhaps made some sense for the Labour left in the Bennite period, when at least there were substantial numbers of hard leftists to organise, but as a strategy for intervening in the Labour Party at the present time it is worse than useless. It is absurd to imagine that the break-up of New Labour will take the form of party members rallying en masse to the small forces of the hard left. What will happen, and in fact already is happening, is that a series of uneven and ragged ideological splits will take place within the party around a series of specific issues. The process won't at all take the form of a clear division between left and right. The challenge for the left is to build the necessary alliances with the various oppositional formations that will emerge.

One of the issues that has the potential to explode the whole New Labour project is the question of Iraq. Here the main anti-war campaign within the party is Labour Against the War (LAtW), which is basically a product of the Campaign Group/*Briefing* axis. It has done some useful work, notably in publishing the *Counter-Dossier* on Iraq, which appeared under the names of Alan Simpson MP and Glen Rangwala (the Cambridge lecturer responsible for exposing the fraudulent character of the government's own clumsily plagiarised dossier). But LAtW has proved incapable of acting as a focus for broad anti-war opinion in the party – and its sponsors evidently have no intention that it should do so. The platform for its conference on 29 March consists (at least at the time we go to press – see the advert on p.11) of the usual Campaign Group and hard left suspects, with the addition of GMB general secretary John Edmonds.

No-one could pretend this represents the actual forces within the party that have come out in opposition to the leadership over Iraq. The 122 MPs who defied Blair in the Commons on 26 February were not by any means all left-wingers, hard or soft. Indeed, one of the most vociferous critics of government policy on Iraq has been Peter Kilfoyle, a former defence minister and the man responsible for purging the Militant Tendency from its one-time stronghold of Liverpool. But LAtW has no apparent interest in rallying these forces. So, in reality, it isn't actually Labour Against the War at all. Perhaps it should be renamed "The Socialist Campaign Group, *Briefing* and Their Allies (Plus One or Two Token Representatives of Mainstream Party Opinion) Against the War". A rather cumbersome title, it's true, but one that does at least have the merit of political accuracy.

This is not exactly the first time that a workers'

party has found itself saddled with a right-wing, warmongering leadership which is contemptuous of party democracy and has alienated a wide spectrum of the membership. Another notable example was during the First World War, when the German Social Democratic Party leadership enthusiastically and uncritically supported the military objectives of German imperialism, in the face of mounting opposition within the ranks of their own party. But this opposition was not led by the left. Its most prominent representatives were from the centre of the party – Karl Kautsky, Rudolf Hilferding and others. It even included people who would normally have been considered part of the SPD right wing, notably Eduard Bernstein, the father of the anti-Marxist revisionist current within the party.

How did the German left respond to this political challenge? With almost complete tactical ineptitude, is the answer. The Bremen left radicals refused to have anything to do with this centrist opposition, even after the latter split from the SPD in 1917 to form the Independent Social Democratic Party (USPD). How could principled Marxists associate themselves with reformist traitors like Kautsky and ideologists of the right like Bernstein, they demanded. The Bremen comrades preferred to continue building their own organisation, on what they believed to be the correct political principles. Not a million miles removed from the pseudo-left moralising employed by the hard left to reject support for Gavron, I would say.

Even the Spartacus League, headed by Rosa Luxemburg and Leo Jogiches, failed the test. They did join the USPD, but grew increasingly restive when party members refused to follow the left and stubbornly maintained their political allegiance to the centrist leadership. Consequently, at the end of 1918, the Spartacists broke away to join the Bremen sectarians and other ultra-leftists in forming the Communist Party of Germany, which attracted no more than a small fraction of the USPD membership at its foundation. This was a classic example of leftist impatience, a self-defeating attempt to leapfrog the actual development of political consciousness within the ranks of the opposition.

Needless to say, I am not drawing any parallels between the politics of the SPD leadership's centrist opponents and those of Blair's critics. Nor am I suggesting that organisational splits are imminent in the Labour Party. But there are some basic questions of political method here. If an opposition to the right wing emerges, but is dominated by forces from the centre of the party and even includes dissident elements from the right, it has to be recognised that this is in large part a reflection of the existing level of consciousness among the

membership. The left has to relate to this, and accept that as yet its own views are only those of a minority. Rather than set up a “pure” opposition of its own, the task of the left is to work as a political leaven, so to speak, within existing oppositional movements, and win the support of the rank and file by demonstrating that it has the best perspectives for taking the movement forward.

The emergence of a struggle against the right wing in circumstances where the relationship of forces, and the level of political development, is such that the left cannot form the majority leadership of that struggle, is a situation that repeatedly confronts Marxists. For a more positive historical example of an attempt to grapple with this problem, it is worth looking at the strategy adopted by Marx and Engels in the German Revolution of 1848-9. Here the issue did not, of course, involve a struggle inside a workers’ party but concerned the tactics to be employed by the left in a bourgeois revolution. But, once again, it is a question of basic political method.

Marx and Engels, as is well known, reasoned that the left (in the form of the embryonic workers’ movement) was not strong enough to act as a contender for power in Germany in 1848, and that the task of the Communists was to support the bourgeois-democratic opposition against the monarchy and the forces of feudal reaction generally. They therefore suspended agitation for the Communist League’s programme, dissolved the League itself, formed a bloc with the bourgeois democrats and turned the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* under Marx’s editorship into the voice of the broad democratic opposition. When elections to the National Assembly took place in February 1849, Marx argued that the Workers’ Union in Cologne should refrain from standing its own candidates, who had no hope of getting elected, and should give its backing to representatives of the liberal bourgeoisie. Marx explained that “plain common sense demands that if ... we cannot get our own

view ... accepted in the elections, we should unite with another party, also in opposition, so as not to allow our common enemy ... to win”.

This strategy came under fire from the ultra-left of the day, in the shape of Andreas Gottschalk, Marx’s main opponent in the Cologne workers’ movement. Gottschalk rejected any bloc with the bourgeois democrats, whom he saw as the enemies of the working class, and he poured scorn on the Cologne deputies whose election Marx had supported. Instead of supporting these “weaklings and nobodies”, Gottschalk asserted, the workers’ movement should put forward its own candidates, even when they stood no chance of success. According to him, the task of the left was to build its own organisation and defend its own specific interests. Making due allowance for the different class content of the two situations, it is not difficult to see in Gottschalk an ideological precursor of those sectarians whose postings on the *Briefing* discussion list were quoted earlier.

Of course, this is not an argument in favour of the left in the Labour Party liquidating itself and renouncing all forms of self-organisation. London Labour Left, for example, has performed a useful role in co-ordinating the efforts of activists in the capital, and at a national level the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy has long been a serious organising force. But, at the risk of labouring the point, the effectiveness of the left’s organisations in the current period will lie in their ability to make alliances with wider anti-Blairite forces in the party.

I’m sorry if this has turned out to be a rather lengthy and rambling article (we were let down by a couple of contributors and I had to fill up some space, to be honest). But my objective has been to outline some elementary points regarding tactics and strategy, and to try and convince certain Labour left activists to take a less sectarian and inflexible approach to political organisation. On past experience, it must be said, this appeal will almost certainly fall on stony ground. ■

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