

economies. Here George argues that debt cancellation per se is not the requisite aim. What is required is that the debtor nations offer to continue repayment on certain conditions, namely:

“the replacement of the IMF and the World Bank with an arrangement which automatically establishes a balance of trade.... The poor would thus offer the rest of the world a choice: it can opt either for a soft landing – a gentle transition from the existing system to the new one, and a staggered redemption of the debts accumulated as a result of the IMF’s past mismanagement – or a crash landing. The markets will demand the soft one. Both courses of action will lead to the cancellation of debt. One of them, the crash landing, will internationalize the financial crisis already afflicting many of the indebted countries. The other will introduce a system which, while denying the G8 nations their control of the rest of the world, will provide a more stable global economy, less prone to the cycles of boom and bust.... The poor nations need not wait for the rich to establish a Clearing Union. They can found it themselves, fix the value of their currencies against the bancor (or whatever they might call it), then invite the rich countries, at the point of their financial gun,

to join” (pp.177-8).

It could be objected that the adoption of such a course requires the overthrow of those ex-colonial or non-metropolitan elites who see their interests as tied to Western ones, but that is not a decisive counter-argument: the elites must be overthrown in any case. Anything which helps us to achieve that should be welcomed. The same goes for George’s notion of a Fair Trade Organisation charged with enforcing civilized standards on transnational companies – UN guidelines already exist in this area (see p.229). Internationally also no company should be allowed to dominate a particular market sector in deleterious fashion (see pp.233-4). The WTO, of course, must be scrapped.

There are a number of other recommendations in *The Age of Consent*, but there is no need for a discussion of them here. What we already have outlined represents the main thrust of George Monbiot’s ideas. With the proviso already made concerning the treatment of international debt, it is clear that George’s proposals fit in well with those put forward by Alex Callinicos, as well as opening up a strategy for their implementation. In my view the main course is now set, and the ball is in our court. ■

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## DIANE ABBOTT SELF-DESTRUCTS

CONVINCED AS I am that socialism in Britain will have been fully achieved only when the last Andrew Neil has been strangled in the guts of the last Michael Portillo, I’d long regarded Diane Abbott’s jolly banter with her right-wing fellow presenters on BBC1’s *This Week* programme as highly dubious. It seemed to me that such public displays of mateyness with enemies of the labour movement sent a message to viewers that she didn’t take her own politics terribly seriously. But I was persuaded by the argument that her television performances did at least put across a favourable image of the left, by suggesting that contrary to rumour (and, some might say, reality) we are actually normal human beings not entirely devoid of a sense of humour.

As it turned out, in this case first impressions were not far wrong. The Hackney North and Stoke Newington MP’s decision to send her 12-year-old son to a £10,000-a-year private school has conclusively demonstrated her light-minded attitude towards the political principles she was supposed to uphold.

The arguments against private education scarcely need rehearsing here. There can be no possible excuse for such a prominent figure from the Labour left publicly spurning the local comprehensive schools to which the vast majority of her constituents, black and white, send their children, and taking advantage of her superior wealth to buy educational privilege for her own offspring. The objection that Abbott had no alternative but to put the interests of her child above ideology is little more than a liberal version of the Thatcherite view that there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families.

When the news of her decision leaked out, Abbott attempted to disarm her critics by frankly admitting that as a result of her “indefensible” and “hypocritical” action she had ruined her own political reputation. But this was simply a continuation of the self-centred attitude that got her into this mess in the first place. Abbott’s personal reputation is hardly the issue. By her irresponsible action she has severely undermined the standing of socialists in the eyes of Labour Party supporters, who could be forgiven for concluding that, far from representing an alternative to New Labour, the left itself in practice espouses the same individualism and contempt for collective provision that lie at the heart of Blairism.

Though some members of Abbott’s constituency party immediately called for her resignation as MP, the left in Hackney North CLP was correct to reject this. The right wing have for years been itching to replace the off-message Abbott with some Blairite clone, but have been thwarted by the broad support she has enjoyed within the local party. It would have been a serious mistake for the left to allow its understandable revulsion at Abbott’s selfishness and political stupidity to play into the hands of the Labour right. Instead, Hackney North CLP passed a very moderately-worded resolution that “deeply regretted” Abbott’s decision, on the grounds that it undermined state education. What is less comprehensible, however, is that a section of the left actually voted *against* this resolution. We can only assume that, in their narrow focus on political tactics, they too have lost sight of political principles.

**Martin Sullivan**