

LETTERS

Livingstone Betrays!

MARTIN SULLIVAN writes ('Diane Abbott Self-Destructs', *What Next?* No.27): "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."

I can't make up my mind whether Diane Abbott has committed a greater media crime than Ken Livingstone taking Murdoch's shilling (or reportedly £750 a week) as a *Sun* columnist in the aftermath of the Wapping dispute. Can the *What Next?* editorial board assist?

Richard Price

The editor replies: Having consulted the *What Next?* editorial board (a powerful and influential body on which all sections of the labour movement are fully represented) I was asked to convey our collective response. Which is, to put it bluntly, don't be so silly. If Livingstone had written for the *Sun* while the Wapping dispute was under way, you'd have a point, but he didn't. Furthermore, he used his column to put over political arguments that *Sun* readers never usually get to hear. What was wrong with that? It was no different from Paul Foot using his *Mirror* column to reach a mass readership, unless you think that being paid by Robert Maxwell was somehow morally superior to accepting money from Rupert Murdoch. A famous quotation about conveying one's message by writing on the walls of latrines and brothels if necessary comes to mind.

Diane Abbott and Private Education

MARTIN SULLIVAN (*What Next?* No.27) accurately outlines the manner of Diane Abbott's self-destruction, and what the left's reaction should be. The best that can be said of Abbott now is that she is indeed an off-message Labour MP, and the left in the relevant constituencies should defend off-message MPs, whether it be Gwyneth Dunwoody, Peter Kilfoyle or others, against their replacement with a Blairite clone. Abbott has lost any worthy

claim to be defended by the left on her own terms.

Despite these efforts that the left should make, Abbott is essentially politically discredited. But here Martin's (probably intentionally) short piece encounters a problem. He says the "arguments against private education scarcely need rehearsing here", but the problem is they don't seem to have been rehearsed anywhere throughout this debacle. Why did some on the left in Abbott's constituency oppose the motion condemning her outrageous decision?

Diane Abbott has been too partisan throughout her career to be universally popular. Many of the attacks on her decision were undoubtedly made with a gleeful awareness that past grievances could be vented through this issue. Meanwhile some of Abbott's supporters seem so used to defending her whatever the criticism that they adopted the traditional tone without actually addressing the issue.

Living in a capitalist society, most people on the left commit ideological impurities many days of the week, particularly in the field of consumer choice. We drive when we could easily get the bus, we satisfy our addiction to chocolate rather than wait for the next time we see a fair trade bar, and some of us prefer designers to NHS prescription glasses.

And in London, particularly, the issue of secondary education is indeed complex. With a private sector proportionately higher than the national average and some state selection, there is no such thing as a pure comprehensive.

The problem with Abbott's choice is not so much her impure choice in an impure world – it is what that choice says about her values. They are values evidently inconsistent with a socialist agenda. To confine our criticism to her doing what is "best" for her son but which is not available to the rest of her constituents is to give political ammunition to the right. In opposing private schools we are advocating the destruction of centres of excellence, the Tories say.

No. We don't just support comprehensive education because it is fair and equitable – though it is. This is not about levelling down standards of education in the pursuit of equality. An inclusive education is a good education and that Abbott has moved so far from that principle is what destroys her political reputation.

Of course Diane Abbott sending her middle class son to a private education denies his would-be classmates in the state sector of his experiences, his perspectives and his aspirations, and

although Abbott has previously made much of her concerns at the state of London schools, particularly for Black children, by taking her son out of the system she has made herself part of the problem.

But that isn't all there is to it. Why does Diane Abbott think her choice of school is such a good choice for her son? Tory MPs send their children to private schools and they are also doing what they believe is "best" for their children. I have less of a problem with them; they are my political enemies, with an attitude towards education that fits their choice. But if Abbott believes doing this is good for her son, she is one of them and cannot possibly represent my politics. Diane Abbott is no longer a comrade of mine.

Daniel Blaney

Green Sectarianism

WITH THE London and European elections approaching, the maximum unity of progressive forces to stop the political right making political gains is more necessary than ever.

Those who believe that the Green Party represents a progressive alternative to the major political parties will therefore have been rudely disillusioned by its leaders' refusal to call for a second preference vote for Ken Livingstone in the London mayoral election.

Only a few days earlier, a YouGov opinion poll had revealed that the London mayoral contest is a two-horse race. It had Ken on 40%, with Tory candidate Steven Norris, on 31%, as his only serious challenger.

Darren Johnson, the Greens' mayoral candidate, was quoted as saying in defence of this decision: "There is no way that I am campaigning for a Labour Party that took us into the war in Iraq and has downgraded our public services."

This ignores the record of Ken Livingstone as mayor in opposing the war on Iraq and top-up fees.

Can anyone who claims to hold progressive views honestly regard it as a matter of indifference whether London is governed by Ken or by Norris, a privateer who would scrap environmental regulation in London?

The Green Party leadership's stance is more sectarian than that of the Respect Coalition, which has a position of second-preferencing Ken.

It is a shame, with threats to public services in London very real if either Simon Hughes or Steven Norris is elected, that the Greens would put advances such as the congestion charge and the Respect festival at risk, in the hope of gaining a few more votes.

The likelihood is that, if the Greens don't reverse their stance, they will lose support themselves in the GLA and European elections.

Matthew Willgress

Blair and Europe

BLAIR PROMISED the EU that Britain would reach agreement on the "Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe" by June. But he has no mandate for this – none of the proposed changes appeared in any party's manifesto. Parliament has no right to pass a Bill authorising the government to sign this Treaty. Our rights are not Parliament's to give away.

A Constitution is not an inter-governmental agreement like an ordinary Treaty but a body of rules for an organisation, in this case a supra-national body that is giving itself new powers and a new "Single Legal Personality", which EU President Romano Prodi described as a "gigantic leap forward". It would give the EU sweeping new powers. For instance, Title 1's Article 17, the "flexibility" clause, allows the EU to take "appropriate measures" to achieve its aims even where "the constitution has not provided the necessary powers".

The vast majority of us demanded a referendum on the EU Constitution so that we can vote against it. We have won a great victory by forcing Blair to concede a referendum. We will win again when we vote down this EU Constitution and keep our national sovereignty and independence.

Will Podmore

Respect: Learning from History

THE DEBATE in *What Next?* over the attitude socialists should adopt towards the Labour Party seems to go on and on without getting anywhere. Given the domination of the discussion by comrades arguing fiercely for a "stay in and fight" perspective, the debate has become increasingly irrelevant to developments on the British left, as more and more socialists disengage from the Labour Party and set about building alternative organisations.

Bob Pitt's most recent outpouring of bile against those who reject his deep entryist approach is an example of this ("British Politics at the Crossroads"? Prospects for the "Respect" Coalition', *What Next?* No.27). Blinkered by his contempt for those who recognise that the political future lies in building an alternative to Labour, he fails to see any difference between the Socialist Labour Party, the Socialist Alliance and the recently formed Respect – The Unity Coalition. He claims that we are trapped in a far left version of *Groundhog Day*, repeating the same process over and over again with only minor variations. He obviously hasn't been following developments in the left outside the Labour Party very closely. If he had, he would see that the comrades who have launched Respect have in fact learned from experience and adapted their political tactics and organisational methods accordingly.

The SLP was a brave attempt to build a new political party to challenge New Labour. Although ultimately it proved a failure, there was no lack of analysis on the part of the left as to why and how the SLP degenerated into the tiny Stalinist-dominated leadership cult around the personality of Arthur Scargill which is now all that remains of it.

The basic error which was committed at the start, and which ultimately destroyed the SLP's political potential, was Scargill's refusal to accept a democratic structure for the new organisation. Militant had indicated their willingness to participate in the SLP if they were granted factional rights within the organisation. If Scargill had accepted this, not only would the SLP have benefited from the participation of a relatively large number of seasoned socialists including the likes of Dave Nellist, but the whole culture of the party would have been vastly different. It would have been much more difficult for Scargill and his allies to commit the bureaucratic idiocies which eventually destroyed the SLP as a living organisation.

The Socialist Alliance, far from mindlessly repeating the mistakes committed by the SLP, as Pitt suggests, drew on the negative experience of that party and, more importantly, from the positive example set by the Scottish Socialist Alliance and its successor the Scottish Socialist Party. The SA was not built on the bureaucratic top-down model of the SLP, but as a much more flexible organisation in which factional rights for minorities were explicitly recognised – and, as readers of the *Weekly Worker* will confirm, enthusiastically exercised by certain sections of the left.

The SA may have been dominated by the Socialist Workers Party, but that is not surprising, given that the SWP is by far the largest socialist organisation in England. The SWP has played the same role in the SA as the former Militant comrades do in the SSP. This did not prevent the SA developing as a multi-tendency organisation in which groupings and individuals who opposed the SWP's politics on a range of issues were fully represented.

The healthy internal life of the SA meant that it avoided the implosion suffered by the SLP. That the Alliance failed to provide the vehicle for the left to break out of its relative isolation and win wider popular support was not the fault of its structures or any alleged lack of democracy. The explanation is to be found in the broader social context. The Scottish SA had emerged out of a mass struggle, namely the anti-poll tax campaign; no equivalent struggle attended the formation of the SA south of

the border. When such a mass movement did arise, in opposition to the Iraq war, the SA proved too narrowly based to provide the political expression of this movement.

Hence the formation of the Respect Coalition. It arose directly out of an anti-war campaign which in February 2003 organised the biggest demonstration ever seen in Britain. This movement changed the political landscape in Britain. It brought together socialists and members of minority ethnic communities who wouldn't necessarily sign up to a full socialist programme but who do share the anti-imperialist sentiments of the left. This movement combined with a mounting disaffection with New Labour in the trade union movement, which has seen the RMT expelled for revising its rules to allow support for non-Labour candidates.

A broad-based organisation that gives a voice to those who reject not only Blair's support for US warmongering but the whole New Labour project was therefore urgently required. The formation of the Respect Coalition was the outcome of this shift in political relations in wider society. The involvement of figures such as George Galloway, Salma Yaqoob and prominent trade unionists shows how much more political weight Respect has, and how much more broadly based it is, than the SA.

The formation of the Respect Coalition has come under attack not only from Labour loyalists like Bob Pitt but also from the real sectarians within the Socialist Alliance itself, who would prefer that the left should remain small and isolated but politically pure. This runs entirely counter to the approach adopted by Marx and Engels. The latter, as is well known, supported the formation of the Independent Labour Party on a loose programmatic basis because, unlike the "pure" Social Democratic Federation, the ILP represented real social forces.

Of course, no-one can guarantee that Respect will provide the political breakthrough that we need. Personally, I think we can hope to win a maximum of two or three seats in the June elections to the European Parliament and Greater London Authority. But this would give Respect a foothold in mainstream political institutions and enable us to raise our profile in the way the SSP did after Tommy Sheridan's election to the Scottish Parliament. Those who bury their heads in the sand of the Labour Party will hopefully be forced to look up and recognise that developments in the real world are passing them by.

Jim Mulligan

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