

# Editorial – Fears and Hopes

*Patrick O'Sullivan*

If I am ever asked (I think it unlikely) to fill out one of the questionnaires often published in the colour sections of weekend broadsheet newspapers, my answer to the question 'If you could bring something extinct back to life, what would it be?' would be 'The British Labour Party!'<sup>1</sup> Of course, events during the recent UK party conference season, including Mr Miliband's apparent rediscovery of at least part of his mojo, and the shameful attack on his late father by 'the newspaper that supported Mussolini, Mosley, Franco, and Hitler', may lead me, over the next few weeks and months, to modify my view, but if so, I would consider that something to be applauded.<sup>2</sup>

And for once, I do not seem to be alone. Over the past year, judging by the letters page of *The Guardian*, the same subject has been a major pre-occupation of the UK chattering classes, with correspondents asking 'Where is the Labour Party?', and 'Who can revive the spirit of '45?', and asserting that while 'Labour's achievements are something to be proud of', the party now needs 'to inspire hope', to 'assert fundamental principles', and 'connect with the new generation'. Its leader, when not being told to resign, is exhorted not to be timid, and reminded that 'voters cry out for bigger ideas'. There has also been discussion of 'the Labour Party we'd like to vote for', and the recent announcement of 'Left Unity', a new party 'to the left of Labour'.<sup>3</sup>

Various columnists have covered much the same ground. The principal exponent is Polly Toynbee, who thirty years ago was campaigning vigorously for the SDP, but who over recent months has asked 'What would Labour do?', and 'Will Labour have the guts to fight ...?', while exhorting Ed Miliband (not for the first time) to 'be of good cheer, be bold [and] stop jumping at shadows', and suggesting that 'A Labour win is still on – if alienated Tories and Lib Dems play ball'. Much of this literature is pessimistic, however, so that we also read Catherine Bennett claiming that 'all for one and one for all is so old-fashioned now', and Jonathan Freedland maintaining that, nowadays, 'life in the UK just isn't fair'. John Harris asks 'Where is Labour going wrong?' and 'Is it time for a left-wing version of UKIP?', while Deborah Orr believes that 'it's time for a better capitalism' (urgent reading of *News from Nowhere* recommended, Ms Orr!), and that

today, idealism gets you nowhere. Similarly, Andrew Rawnsley believes that ‘The two Eds ... (must) convince voters (that) ... a Labour government will be disciplined’, Geoffrey Wheatcroft asks ‘What is the Labour party for?’ (and claims that ‘The decline of interest in politics is worse news for Labour’), while Suzanne Moore argues that ‘ordinary people have lost interest on party politics’.

Martin Kettle, a man who has long proclaimed ‘the death of socialism’, asserts that ‘A Lib-Lab deal in 2015 may be Ed Miliband’s only chance of government’. However, the great Iain Banks, interviewed shortly before his recent death, may have been much nearer the mark: ‘Squeeze practically any Tory, any Blairite, and any Lib Dem of the Orange Book persuasion, and it’s the same poisonous Thatcherite pus that comes oozing out of all of them’. The only regular *Guardian* columnist who seems to me not to have lost his nerve in the face of the great god of the free market is Seumas Milne, who even during the days leading up to her funeral advocated ‘It’s time to bury not just Thatcher, but Thatcherism’, and – and *à propos* of ‘Falkirk’ – that ‘Labour’s links with the unions are its greatest asset’, and that ‘The real problem is that trade unions ... aren’t influential enough’.<sup>4</sup>

Part of the ‘real problem’ here is not right-wing politicians implementing right-wing policies – who could quibble with that? – but that nowadays many so-called ‘centre-left’ parties also concede that capitalism and the ‘free’ market are the only game in town. Thus, even under the (re)new(ed?) dispensation of ‘Red Ed’ Miliband, the Labour party’s current economic platform is still based on the idea of ‘caring capitalism’, and its claim to be a better manager of the economy than its opponents – a pitch still requiring a certain suspension of belief, even when compared to the thundering ineptitude of the present administration. Consequently we have not one but three main parties, all of whom maintain that the sole cure for our current economic ills is ‘austerity’ – i.e. an *increase* in inequality – one of which makes the feeble claim that it will implement its programme of cuts more kindly than the others. But if capitalism is the only viable economic system, why not vote for the party of rentiers and ‘greedy gamblers on the stock exchange’ – i.e. those who understand it best?

As to what *New Labour* was for, rather than ‘governing the country’, or ‘serving the people’, it is of course the case that it possessed only a single goal – to be re-elected. All policies, all responses to all issues, from day one of Tony Blair’s first administration, were subordinated, via the ‘focus group’, to this sole strategy. Remember the campaign against single mothers anyone? (Implemented, to her eternal shame, by Harriet Harman, although at least she had the decency [?] to do it incompetently, and get the sack.) Notice the constant references throughout thirteen years of *New Labour* to ‘hard working families’? Both of these campaigns – and their associated rhetoric, now taken up by the coalition – set the agenda for the reinstatement of the concept of ‘the deserving poor’, and the reversal of the

great principle on which democratic socialism was originally built – ‘from each according to their ability, to each according to their need’.

Of course we might say that the United Kingdom is a special case, in that its electoral system is so manifestly unrepresentative that parties can only govern if they capture the electoral ‘middle ground’ – i.e. appeal to petit-bourgeois *mores*. This is a principle long known to psephologists, who have eponomised it as ‘Essex man’, ‘Worcester woman’ or ‘white man van’, and also to Rupert Murdoch, who was maybe one of the first to appreciate that in order to control the outcome of UK parliamentary elections, all you need to do is secure the votes of a small number of lower middle class electors in an even smaller number of constituencies. Hence the embracing by New Labour of the social values of the *Daily Mail*, and the craven attitude of successive New Labour cabinet ministers in their dealings with the Murdoch empire.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, were our politicians to study economic history, they would learn that almost all of the same austerity policies they now advocate were tried during the 1930s, and failed.<sup>6</sup> As we are currently seeing, not only in Greece and Spain, but all across Europe, austerity only works if you force down wages, casualise labour, increase job insecurity, de-skill work, and create general misery (thus demoralising the workforce). Most of this is due, of course, to implementation of ‘supply side’, ‘free-market’, austerity economic policies by right-wing politicians, at least some of whom, like the well-heeled clique at the heart of our current coalition, several of whom inherited (or married!) their own wealth, have seized on ‘the recession’ as an opportunity to put in place economic and social measures which contribute little to actual economic recovery (e.g. caps on welfare spending), but which they and their political antecedents have been itching to implement for at least a generation.

Although he *may* later have changed his mind, throughout most of his political career, as documented by Florence Boos in her introduction to his *Socialist Diary*, Morris remained militantly opposed to socialists standing for parliament. His reasons were that ‘many of them will be drawn into ... error by the corrupting influence of a body professedly hostile to Socialism’, and that ‘the effort towards success in parliament will swallow up all other effort, that such success in short will come to be looked upon as the end’. Above all, there was his ‘deep ethical’ contempt for the ‘failure and disappointment and stupidity and causeless quarrels, and in short all the miseries that go to make up the degrading game of politics’. And in *News from Nowhere*, he explained his position in what may have been, at least at the time (1890–1891), its entirety.

## CHAPTER XIII, 'Concerning Politics'

Said I: 'How do you manage with politics?'

Said Hammond, smiling: 'I am glad that it is of *me* that you ask that question; I do believe that anybody else would make you explain yourself, or try to do so, till you were sick of asking questions. Indeed, I believe I am the only man in England who would know what you mean; and since I know, I will answer your question briefly by saying that we are very well off as to politics, – because we have none. If ever you make a book out of this conversation, put this in a chapter by itself, after the model of old Horrebow's Snakes in Iceland'.

'I will', said I.<sup>7</sup>

Instead, what Morris believed was needed was

(A) revolutionary body (which) will find its duties divided into two parts, the maintenance of its people while things are advancing to the final struggle, and resistance to the constitutional authority, including the evasion or disregard of the arbitrary laws of the latter. Its chief weapons ... will be co-operation and boycotting ...

And again in *News from Nowhere*, he states that one major reason for the workers' success, was that they possessed '... a regular organisation in the struggle against their masters (the Combined Workers), ... (which) had now taken the form of a federation of all or almost all the recognised wage-paid employments, ...'<sup>8</sup>

Somewhat ironically, given the recent furore, Morris's position is not so very different from that of the late Ralph Miliband, who in *Parliamentary Socialism* (1979) concluded that 'the party's deep attachment to parliament, and with it to the British state, overrides episodic and largely rhetorical commitments to socialist change, and leads to an under-valuation, and indeed often an outlawing, of extra-parliamentary, social and industrial struggle and politically oriented civic organisation'. Instead, what was needed was for socialists inside and outside the Labour party to collaborate closely, including on broad, non-electoral, political projects of socialist education and consciousness-raising through every possible means. However, Miliband also argued – again, at the time – that a new party of the left was still needed, along with a change in the electoral system and political collaboration across party divides, so that he still retained his faith in the institution of parliament. (So much for his having 'hated Britain' and for his Marxist ideas being inimical to 'British values').

Hilary Wainwright, writing before the current controversy, believes that what has happened since Ralph Miliband's time, under New Labour, means that the factors which for so much of the twentieth century kept socialists active in the Labour Party have been destroyed, but that at the same time 'we are ... sur-

rounded by the carcasses and fading memories of numerous attempts to create new parties of the left’.

Thus (current) material and political imperatives converge for all those broadly on the left to collaborate outside of electoral politics. The need presents itself in a more acute way than ever it did in Ralph Miliband’s lifetime to create an independent political force far wider than the Labour Party – and reaching out to social liberals as well as to environmental, feminist and community activists – whose leadership and primary political orientation must be rooted not in Westminster but in communities and workplaces in every city, town and village.<sup>9</sup>

In a wider context, movements such as UK Uncut, Occupy, Los Indignados, 98%, and democratic elements of early phases of the Arab Spring (mostly young people), many vindicate this view. If so, as has been iterated on these pages many times, Morris’s ideas have never been as relevant as they are today, and we Morrisians have much work to do.

However, demographic factors may be against us. We have also recently learned of the existence of a new cohort of potential voters – ‘Generation Y’ – whose political values and ideas are well to the right of those of their parents and grandparents. This group is said to feel less connection to society at large than previous generations, to be less supportive of social institutions such as the NHS, and less likely to favour benefits for those who fall on hard times. It is also said that the Tories are winning over this generation (while losing touch with older voters), and that even Labour voters are increasingly turning against the poor. Consequently, in order to get back into power, the British Left must re-connect with this new generation.<sup>10</sup>

Whether such fears are justified or not – and there does seem to be some doubt about the validity of this story<sup>11</sup> – the fact that they gained credence, even for a ‘media moment’, is perhaps symptomatic of a more general unease regarding the political values of those raised during the decades since the ‘victory’ of the free market – say since about 1980 – along with a similar feeling that the legacy of the French Revolution, that the world will somehow continue to ‘get better’, no longer applies. John Peel, not a man given to political analysis, once said that it would take three generations to rid this country of the impact of Thatcherism, but maybe he was being optimistic. But what such fears, however unjustified, lead us to, is a question which should indeed preoccupy those who want a ‘better’ world, which is – Why, during periods of economic hardship, do people often vote for right-wing parties, not left-wing? And the answer lies, I think, in that part of the ‘degrading game of politics’ which means that while left-wing parties appeal to people’s hopes – a very ‘Morris’ word – right-wing politicians appeal to their fears. Thus, in conceding political and economic hegemony to the free market, ‘centre-left’ parties such as New Labour have robbed young people of hope.

The key syllogism which ‘justifies’ ‘austerity’ appears to be ‘All debts are bad. Therefore all debts must be paid. Anyone who does not pay their debts is a bad person’. However, this argument is currently applied much more to nations than to individuals, as witnessed by the policy of German bankers towards Greek and Spanish ‘debt’. But as Ann Pettifor regularly points out, there is currently about ten times as much private debt in the UK as public, yet no-one seems to pay it much attention. According to David Graeber, there is no moral dimension to debt, as debt is merely exchange which has not been brought to completion (p. 121). Such unresolved exchange must be between equals, however (p. 120), which is why it has also been easy, if it is not, for puritanical moralists from Luther onwards to castigate the less-equal parties as ‘undeserving’; the reason why interest rates inflicted on poor people are much higher than those charged to the rich.

In fact, again according to Graeber, debt is so deeply embedded in our economic system, and has been since Sumerian times, that it is difficult for us to conceive of any other kind of arrangement. However, *modern* debt is qualitatively different from its historical antecedents in one very important respect, which is that whereas throughout most of human history private debt has been owed ultimately to the state – the king or the emperor – with the foundation of the Bank of England in 1694, public debt (i.e. that of King William III), became owed to private individuals – the bankers. As Graeber continues

This was a great deal for the bankers (they got to charge the king 8 per cent annual interest ... and simultaneously charge interest on the same money to clients ...) but it only worked as long as the original loan remained outstanding. To this day, the loan has never been paid back. It cannot be; if it ever were, the entire (UK) monetary system ... would cease to exist. (p. 49)

The ... origins of (modern) capitalism then, (are) not the [modernist] story of the gradual destruction of traditional communities by the impersonal power of the market. It is rather the story of how an economy of credit was converted into an economy of interest; of the gradual transformation of moral networks by the ... impersonal ... power of the state’. (p. 332)

Even at the time of Adam Smith, it was not the case that an impersonal market operated via the influence of an impersonal ‘invisible’ hand. Most traders still carried on the main part of their business on credit. Smith could hardly have been unaware of this. (p. 335)

In fact the politician ultimately responsible for the current financial crisis is not, as often said, Bill Clinton, who deregulated the US home loans market, thus causing much of the ‘sub-prime’ crash of 2008, or Ronald Reagan, whose earlier deregulation policies the film director Michael Moore blames for the same crisis, or even his cold-war ally Margaret Thatcher (who certainly was responsible for

the widespread return of beggars to UK streets). No, the real culprit is, according Graeber, good old Richard Milhous Nixon, who on 15 August 1971 announced that foreign-held US dollars would no longer be convertible into gold, (p. 360) thus meaning that ‘all national currencies were henceforth ... “fiat money”, backed only by public trust’. (p.53)

The idea that there is something called ‘the market’ is not so very different.

Markets aren't real. They are mathematical models created by imagining a self-contained world in which everyone has exactly the same motivation and ... knowledge, and is engaged in the same self-interested calculating exchange. ... There's nothing wrong with this. The problem comes when it enables some(one) ... to declare that anyone who ignores the dictates of the market shall be surely punished or that since we live in a market system, everything (except government interference) is based on principles of justice: that our economic system is one vast network of reciprocal relations in which, in the end, ... all debts are paid. (pp. 114–115)

But there's a deeper scandal. ... The moment ... unlimited profit was considered a perfectly viable end ..., this political, magical element became a ... problem, because it meant that even those ... who ... made the system run[,] had no convincing loyalty to anything, even ... the system itself. (p. 345)

Thomas Hobbes, who in *Leviathan* (1660) developed this pessimistic version of human nature into what he clearly considered an adequate philosophical theory of society, also realised that truly ‘free’ markets, in the modern sense, can only fully exist under the aegis not of the shrunken state so many right-wing ‘libertarians’ long for, but in a closely governed, authoritarian society. Hence perhaps the economic success of ‘communist’ China, and probably the reason why most ‘fiscal conservatives’ are usually economic liberals, but social authoritarians.<sup>12</sup>

By using the collapse of an inherently unstable world economic system as an excuse to implement their own ‘put people back in their place’ class agenda, right-wing politicians, over the past three decades, have perpetrated a stupendous confidence trick on the rest of humanity. But by conceding them the political, economic, social and moral high ground, particularly in the matter of the supremacy of the ‘free market’, so-called ‘left-wing’ parties such as New Labour have allowed them to destroy our young people's hopes. After thirty-seven years in higher education, I think I know which is the greater crime.

In this issue, Peter Faulkner traces the relationship between Morris and that author of truly vigorous verse, Robert Browning. David Kopp then discusses the influence on Morris, and similarities and differences between their ideas, of William Cobbett, a man whose thought, for those of us who live in the coun-

tryside, especially ‘Tory anarchists’, have never really been completely eclipsed. Stephen Williams gives what we hope will be the first of two accounts describing the life of Georgiana Burne-Jones in Rottingdean, and David and Sheila Latham contribute the latest installment of their Morris bibliography (2010–2011). We also carry reviews of books on Morris’s ‘Poems of Protest’, Morris and the uses of violence, and a Burne-Jones special issue of the *Journal of Stained Glass*. Morris is then discussed in the context of Victorian poetry, followed by books on ‘Morris and craft’, and the impact of Morris’s ideas on the architect Charles Spooner, the Arts and Crafts country house, art museums in industrial Britain, and art publishing in Victorian England. Finally, we review a collection of some of Jonathan Meades’ diatribes, ‘Museums without walls’.

## NOTES

1. I was recently somewhat nonplussed to read Imelda Staunton (‘The Q&A’, *The Guardian*, 29 June 2013; <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeand-style/2013/jun/29/imelda-staunton-q-and-a>, as accessed 3 October 2103) saying much the same thing, and realising I’d been scooped! However, my hard disk contains a draft of this article pre-dating publication of Ms Staunton’s statement. Honest!
2. Jonathan Freedland, ‘Behold, Ed Miliband’s new populism of the left’, *The Guardian*, 22 September 2013; <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/sep/24/ed-miliband-leftwing-positions-brighton-speech>; Geoffrey Levy, ‘The man who hated Britain’, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2435751/Red-Eds-pledge-bring-socialism-homage-Marxist-father-Ralph-Miliband-says-GEOFFREY-LEVY.html>; both as accessed 3 October 2103). If to be Marxist is to be unpatriotic, I suspect many readers of this *Journal* would qualify for that label. Besides, this is an old Reagan-Thatcher shibboleth from the mid-1980s. I once asked an Oxford professor, during those Cruise and testosterone-fuelled days, if he had any idea that it was ‘namby-pamby lefties’ who first gave their lives to oppose fascism, long before World War II. His (geographical) eyebrows hit his hairline.
3. I make no apology for confining my survey, and my sources, to the pages of *The Guardian*: any wider casting of my net would seriously (further) jeopardise my sanity. In any case, this is the main public forum for the people whose views I am discussing. However, in order to avoid further repetitive citation of <http://www.theguardian.com/uk>, from now I list only dates on which particular letters or articles were published. Some citations refer also to *The Observer*, but electronic versions of both newspapers are located on the same website. Letters columns referred to are – in that order – 18 January, 13 and 19 September, 26 April, 30 July, 20 March, 22 September, 11, 14

- and 12 August 2013.
4. Dates of articles cited: 21 August, 23 July, 20 and 13 September, 17 August, 12 July, 11 August, 9 September 2013, 28 December 2012, 3 August, 9 June, 29 July, 19 August, 10 July, 22 August, 14 June, 16 April, 10 and 11 September 2013. Interesting how it is not only the younger Milibands who are nowadays politically well to the right of their parents' generation. Martin Kettle is of course the son of Arnold Kettle, author of *Introduction to the English Novel*, and *The Guardian* also boasts as one of its leading lights Simon Hoggart, son of the great Richard Hoggart, whose *Uses of Literacy* is, for me anyway, 'up there' with *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* in the very short list of books which come anywhere near accurately depicting twentieth century working-class life, but nowadays a man whose views on wind turbines are beginning to read like those of a 'climate-denier'.
  5. In which case I fail to understand why members of the current Labour shadow cabinet object to being labelled 'boring' (13 September). Their entire strategy, after all, is to appear so bland that they cannot possibly offend anyone. Surely the term 'boring' is therefore, in this context, not so much an insult as a compliment? As for New Labour's courting of right-wing tabloids, did they never notice that, as with the Tea Party, such people are *never* satisfied? Concede them one set of ridiculous 'free market', 'small state' policies, and they come up with another, even more rabid wish-list.
  6. H.W. Richardson, 'The basis of economic recovery in the nineteen-thirties: a review and a new interpretation', *Economic History Review*, 15 (2), 1962, pp. 344–363. According to an economic historian friend, degrees in economics rarely if ever nowadays involve the study of economic history. I suspect this may be one of the main roots of our current difficulties, 'although some students – including, ironically, some at the traditionally 'free market' Manchester School – appear to be fighting back. ('Economics students tear up free-market syllabus', 25 October 2013; <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2013/oct/24/students-post-crash-economics?INTCMP=SRCH>)
  7. Florence S. Boos, 'Introduction', *William Morris's Socialist Diary*, London: London History Workshop Centre, 1985, pp. 1–18. (Afterwards Boos) Quotations are from Morris's letter to John Glasse, 23 May 1887, 'The Policy of Abstention' (1887), Boos herself, and 'What we have to look for' (1895), all as cited by Boos, pp. 7–8; James Redmond, ed, *News from Nowhere*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, Chapter XIII, 'Concerning Politics', p. 72. (Afterwards *NfN*) As to whether Morris did later change his mind, see Anna Vaninskaya, 'William Morris: the Myth of the Fall', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, XVII, No. 2, 2010, pp. 48–57.
  8. 'The Policy of Abstention' (1887), Boos, p. 7; *NfN*, Chapter XVII, 'How the change came', p. 91.

9. Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism. A study in the politics of Labour*, second edition, London: Merlin Press, 1979, 384 pp.; Hilary Wainwright, 'Our favourite Miliband', *Red Pepper*, August 2010. As seen at <http://www.redpepper.org.uk/our-favourite-miliband/> (16 October 2013).
10. *The Guardian*, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk>; 11 March, 18 June, 14 May, 20 March.
11. According to David Stuckler and Aaron Reeves ('We are told Generation Y is hard-hearted, but it's a lie'; 30 July), 'this narrative is misleading, (and based on cherry-picking of the data'. Support for welfare spending among young people has in fact risen 3.5% since 2010. What is more, Oliver James (16 April) detects, in a separate set of polling data, a switch among the wider British public away from 'the greed is good, selfish individualism ... Thatcherism and Blatcherism engendered'.
12. David Graeber, *Debt: the first five thousand years*, New York: Melville House, 2012, 534 pp. Pagination of quotations listed in text; Ann Pettifor, *The Coming First World Debt Crisis*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 232 pp.; Gillian Tett, *Fool's Gold: How Unrestrained Greed Corrupted a Dream, Shattered Global Markets and Unleashed a Catastrophe*, London: Abacus, 2010, 338 pp. That debts in a modern, 'fiat money' economy can *never* be paid off is witnessed by the experience of the US Federal Reserve under Bill Clinton when, under pressure from a Republican Congress dominated by fiscal conservatives such as Newt Gingrich, the administration began to run a surplus, at which point the markets panicked. Tax cuts then implemented by George W. Bush 'appear to have been specifically designed to ensure that the deficit was maintained'. (Graeber, Note 110, p. 450)

As a teacher of science, I was always disappointed (but not surprised) that so many of my students believed so deeply that 'the laws of the free market' represent 'scientific' laws, when in fact all they really are is a set of rules for managing only one of several possible kinds of economic system. In science, as demonstrated by Galileo, a law must either be 'general' ('universal'; i.e. there can be no earthly realm where one set of laws apply, and another, celestial realm, in which a different set operates), or, as Einstein later showed, 'special' (i.e. it operates only in one specific set of conditions). Therefore, because the free market is only one of a number of perfectly workable economic systems, its 'laws' are not universal laws in a scientific sense, but merely a set of arrangements between humans ('rules'), designed to operate one particular kind of economic system. (Whereas as we also all know, 'gravity is not a custom'). They are probably therefore not even the 'special laws' of the free market, and even if they are, in my opinion we cannot allow them to continue to operate for much longer, as they cause far too much human misery, and are seriously damaging our planet.