

Electoral Concerns

Far more than the SDP, the Communist Party has become the party for people who believe themselves above the messy business of politics and in particular that of actually winning votes. Incapable of winning themselves, they seek to tell others how to do it. The problem of this approach is amply illustrated by the recent article by Grahl and Rowthorn (MT, Nov) (GR).

Contrary to GR's assertion that our target of 1m off the dole in two years was kept as modest as possible, I believe that it is an ambitious but credible target. If it proves easy to hit as they infer, then of course we shall better it. What do they suggest our motive would be for not wanting to reduce unemployment by the maximum possible? But all they offer is criticism of our target rather than electorally attractive and economically feasible policies to beat it. Similarly they devote much space to the absence of an incomes policy – particularly a virtual freeze on the top 50% – but do not describe the practicalities of how it might work.

Turning to their criticism of our tax proposals, do they believe that significantly higher taxes on the middle income groups would improve or diminish our chances of winning votes from those floaters unable to make up their minds between

ourselves and the Alliance or Tories?

In any case I'm not convinced that shortage of cash is the major constraint on policy in the short run. It is lack of capacity and skilled labour and the horrendous balance of payments constraint we shall inherit from the Conservatives. The Conservatives project in excess of £20 billion in unallocated resources over the next three years. On top of this Labour could probably spend an extra £6-7 billion financed by borrowing, an extra £3.6 billion financed from tax increases on the rich, and an extra £3-4 billion from repatriated funds channelled via the NIB; it could also utilise extra resources saved by reducing unemployment and shifting to a non-nuclear defence policy.

GR do not mention that our anti-poverty and redistribution package includes the introduction of independent taxation and the reallocation of £4.4 billion saved from ending the married man's allowance. Taken with our other tax and benefit proposals, our minimum wage and our employment policies, this represents a massive, radical and feasible assault on poverty within the early years of a Labour government. ●

Doug Jones, Economic Assistant to Roy Hattersley

Incomes Policy

John Grahl and Bob Rowthorn's unanswerable argument for redistribution and incomes policy is like a breath of fresh air cutting through the stale evasions and excuses that have stifled serious discussion on the Left in this area for so long. Let's hope it's not too late for a Labour government elected at the next general election.

If redistribution is to be achieved by consent, through taxation and incomes policy, the economic, moral and political case must be argued and become widely understood and accepted. Unfortunately the Left has historically argued the case against, thus reinforcing the narrow sectionalist consciousness that is such an obstacle to solidaristic class action.

As John and Bob remind us, a problem common to the last Labour government's social contract and the present Labour Party's national economic

assessment is that neither was preceded by discussion involving more than a handful of those who would have to carry them out and/or be affected by them.

The language of incomes policy is that of priorities and planning. It has often, though not always, been used to buttress the existing distribution of income, wealth and power. But it need not be. Socialists cannot opt out of discussion over priorities nor run away from the need for planning. Only by arguing for the priorities that reflect our values and political judgement, by making the case for the redistribution of political and economic power needed to make possible the planned achievement of these priorities, can we help create the conditions in which a Labour government would have the popular support necessary to carry through its redistributive and modernising policies. ●

Pat Devine, Manchester

Girls and YTS

Cynthia Cockburn (MT, Dec) makes some crucial points relevant to the effort to improve occupational possibilities for girls, and illustrates the dilemma experienced by those struggling to implement change at the practical level.

It is becoming a truism to say that young people are asked to make decisions about their educational and occupational future which will have far reaching implications at a point when they are attempting to establish their sexual identity. They experience an ideological and material bombardment, in which they themselves play a part, pushing them into traditional patterns of gender relations.

With little contrary pressure from any source, and gender divisions in work so dramatic, it is very easy for sexual identity to be mapped onto occupational destiny.

Easy but not inevitable. The buck of responsibility for gender stereotyping is passed to and fro between individuals in different institutions, but all contribute to the process, and there are strong arguments that the school contributes more than most. Education becomes a critical

intervention point to effect change in gender expectations and full use must be made of this potential.

We can also question the view that girls' stereotyped choices are a response to the realities of their situation and the labour market. It is a macro level explanation (these are the jobs for which they are destined in general and statistical terms) which underlies both the interpretation of such choices as realistic, and the choices themselves. But the specific work suggested is frequently unrealistic given the actual demands of the labour market; there is after all a limit to the number of hairdressers, air hostesses and nurses which can be absorbed. And changing technology is squeezing the favoured secretarial and clerical fields.

Careers advice is most frequently too little too late, and girls are left to make decisions in an informational vacuum into which ready-made traditionally-oriented messages from peer group, media, family and school rush. That vacuum could be filled with information, advice and support for non-stereotyped choices. ●
Janet Holland, London

YTS Campaigning

Since the introduction of Youth Training Schemes, trade unions have campaigned locally and nationally to achieve a better deal for YTS trainees. This has centred upon securing a 'topping-up' allowance. A campaign on sex-stereotyping would offer the opportunity to make some interesting and radical demands of YTS. We could campaign around the strategies that Cynthia Cockburn suggests – single sex schemes, assertiveness training, and self defence classes.

To 'move from equality of opportunity to similarity of outcome and achievement' will require a co-ordinated and concerted commitment by all agencies who are involved with YTS.

I recently spoke to a group of YTS supervisors about

sex-stereotyping and discrimination: attendance was half that anticipated by the course organiser, who felt that the training option on equal opportunities was not taken seriously enough. One supervisor explained how difficult it was to raise the aspirations of trainees, when they felt the schools, and careers officers, regarded the schemes themselves as second best.

Challenging sex-stereotyping will require more than a single option on an MSC training programme. A beginning would be a proper induction course on the MSC equal opportunities guidelines for YTS. What is urgently needed is a broad based campaign which not only seeks to improve the allowance paid to trainees, but to transform the training given. ●
Julie Lawrence, Brighton

Identity Problem

As an unrepentant adherent to traditional marxism, as one who believes that class is critical and that gender, colour, sexual orientation etc are all peripheral to political struggle, and that alliances, popular fronts (or call them what you will) between the

Labour movement and the SDP are treachery to the working class, I would be grateful if, through your letters column, I might stress that I am *not* the Alex Wood listed on your sponsorship page. ●
Alex Wood, Edinburgh District Council

Reykjavik

In John Cox's letter, (MT, Dec), he seems to attribute to me views which I did not express. I did not say that Gorbachev's policy was a cynical continuation of past arms control policy; and I certainly do not need to be persuaded of the past failings of arms control. However, there may be some substantive points on which John and I disagree, and on which I could have made myself clearer.

I don't think we have a simple choice between dismissing Gorbachev as just another arms control cynic, and accepting Soviet positions without any scepticism whatever. It seems clear to me that the USSR is seeking genuine constraints on the arms race, involving measures of disarmament as well as 'arms control', however defined. There are obviously interesting and significant developments taking place in Soviet foreign policy, and the commitment to a nuclear-free world is indeed qualitatively different from positions taken in

the Brezhnev era, and an effective way of isolating the Reagan administration politically.

However, neither John Cox nor I can say with any confidence how Gorbachev himself expects the next 15 years of US-Soviet relations to develop, or what relation Gorbachev's proposals have to Soviet military planning for that period. In addition, US obduracy over SDI and the ABM Treaty was not the only obstacle to agreement at Reykjavik, since the Soviet position on 'de-linking' INF negotiations from SDI changed.

In my view this was perfectly comprehensible, since a European INF agreement might well have relieved the political pressure on the US leadership over SDI. But in that case some of the previous Soviet flexibility over INF must have been more part of a traditionally bipolar Soviet foreign policy, and less of an innovative political approach in Europe, than has been claimed. ●

Gerard Holden, Brighton

Love and Politics

I welcomed the discussion on the family (MT, Dec); however, at the end of the day the participants lost their nerve – ceasing to make much sense as soon as they felt they were confronting the overwhelming forces of nature. The only defence we are left with is that families are there, they are part of life, messy, necessary, burdensome but vital. And still there are these troublesome men who perpetrate violence.

Mothering and fathering need

to be thought through not as irrational bondings arising from some arbitrary sexual act, but as a complex of human relationships involving the facilitation of growth and independence of each family member. The family isn't about sex – except in so far as this word is a reductionist cop-out for something more complex. It is about the possibilities and obstacles to forming close loving relationships. The concept of love needs to be made political. ●

Maggie Urmston, London

Sinn Fein

I found the article 'Biting the vote' (MT, Dec); riddled with sweeping statements that disguise the true nature of the Provisional IRA and its political wing Sinn Fein.

Phrases such as the 'Northern military battleground' gloss over the sectarian nature of their violent campaign which makes no

attempt to unite the working class.

The philosophy of republican socialism I would not equate with the national socialism of the Provos. I would like to see a much more balanced, in-depth analysis of the chances of 'mass support in the South' for Sinn Fein. ●

Eamonn O'Neill, Northern Ireland

Misogyny

In his article on the NHS Steve Iliffe suggested that medical treatment for car accidents and sports injuries might be financed by motor insurance and 'sports insurance'. He asks 'who should pay for *in vitro* fertilisation'?

In vitro fertilisation is the appropriate medical treatment for women who cannot get pregnant because their fallopian

tubes are damaged. Why should the financing of it differ from the financing of treatment for men who cannot walk because their legs are broken? Or cannot breathe properly because they need lung transplants?

I can only interpret Steve's singling out of IVF as a special case as being motivated by misogyny. ●

Fran Hazelton, London

Families

The roundtable on the family in December's issue was a great disappointment. It didn't come to grips with many of the important questions which need to be tackled if the left and progressive movement is going to find the answers to Thatcherism's 'holier than thou' moral stance on the family.

The Left has quite rightly espoused the cause of gay and lesbian liberation – the right of every person to be free to have the sort of sexual relationships which they want to have. But we seem to have ignored the need to discuss heterosexual relationships except in terms of

women's rights within the family and *vis-a-vis* her male partner. But the problems of building a loving and caring relationship in which each partner has equal rights and responsibilities have not really been addressed by the Left.

In my view these are important questions. After all, the majority of people do have heterosexual relationships, and live in a family situation based on a heterosexual relationship. Does it always have to be what Bea Campbell describes as 'very messy . . . all blood and guts', or is it possible to create something better than this? ●

Margaret Woddis, London

Childcare

Printing the provocative letter from Nick Waterfield (MT, Dec), could only be intended to provoke a sizeable response from parents on the way 'society' (including perhaps Nick Waterfield) leaves it to parents to find individualistic solutions to the 'problem' of child care.

The reality faced by parents, particularly of under 2s, given the unavailability of local authority day nurseries, or of workplace provision, is for one parent (who may be a sole parent) to give up work or else use a child-minder. Is to chose the latter by definition exploitative? And does it add to the 'misery and oppression of the minder'?

Alternatively is it possible that working class women, having weighed up the limited range of options available in a patriarchal and class society, actually choose child-minding for sound economic, social, practical convenience.

There is no doubt that pay is low. However minding at home

may allow a woman to be paid while looking after her own children, who may be provided with companions of a similar age; and school age brothers and sisters can be collected, and amused during school holidays. Child minding incurs no work expenses such as fares, meals outside. A woman who minds children while receiving supplementary benefit has 2/3 of such earnings ignored; if she works part-time (often the only alternative) only £4 (or £12 if a single parent) is disregarded.

Given that low paid part-time work, where the poverty trap bites into take-home pay, is often the sole alternative, then unless we prefer to view working-class women as always passive victims, is it not possible to view child-minding and minders in a more positive way and recognise that such women can act in their own interests? Alternatively of course we could all defer having children until the day when universal and free child care on the state arrives. ●

Sue and Mick Bradley, London



Cartoon: Nick Newman

PS



John Cole/Network

Down but not out. Gay solidarity in the face of public hysteria at an aids remembrance ceremony, May 1986.

Love In A Cold Climate

Rarely has a disease carried such powerful moral and social overtones. At last, however, the government has been forced to act. **Jeffrey Weeks** looks at the aids crisis

Aids may be the most serious health crisis to face the world this century. But during its relatively brief history it has become more than a ghastly and relentless disease. It has come to symbolise an age where fear, prejudice and irrationality battle against reason, responsibility and collective endeavour. At the moment it is by no means clear which will triumph.

The reasons for fear are real enough. Some 10m people worldwide may be infected with the HIV virus, the cause of Aids. Many, perhaps most, of these will go on to get the full blown syndrome. In the USA there have been 25,000 cases of Aids, and 10,000 dead. It is estimated that up to 2m people carry the virus. Aids is already the major cause of premature death among adult males in many North American cities. In parts of central Africa the disease is rife. In the next five years up to 1.5m cases of the illness are expected on the whole continent.

The UK figures are less dramatic but still worrying. There are probably already more than 30,000 HIV carriers. Over 550 people have been diagnosed as having Aids. Half of these are dead. And the number of people with Aids doubles every 10 months. Cases of Aids are expected to rise six-fold by the end of 1988, to envelope 3,000 people.

This is a major worldwide health crisis. It has been likened to the great plagues that ravaged Europe in the Middle Ages; and to the influenza epidemic at the end of the first world war, which wiped out more people than all the fighting on all the fronts of the war itself.

But this health emergency seems all the more frightening because, at least in the West, we have grown accustomed to the triumphs of medicine in controlling disease. Even with this virus, medical science has shown its efficiency. We now know almost everything there is to know about HIV – *except* how to destroy it. In the meantime, the incidence of Aids doubles every 10 months.

This is the background to the British government's new sense of urgency. After months of prevarication – it apparently took a last-ditch direct appeal to the prime minister by the permanent head of the DHSS and the chief medical advisor to wrench her into action – the government has set up a cabinet-level committee to coordinate action. An unprecedented health education campaign has been launched, with press, radio and TV advertising, a leaflet drop on 23m households, and a £20m budget. The health secretary, Norman Fowler, has echoed the words of his advertising copy: 'Stick to one partner; if you don't, use a condom'. And for drug misusers, 'don't inject drugs; if you can't stop, don't share equipment.'

In the absence for the foreseeable future of a cure or of a vaccine to prevent the spread of the virus, the only safeguard appears to lie with changes in people's behaviour and with the public education needed to achieve that. This has been clear for some time, and has been the burden of all the expert advice and all the pressure from the groups in the population most affected.

It is some indication of the prejudice and irrationality surrounding the dis-