

The "IS-SWP tradition" 8

The experience of the left

TO help traumatised ex-members of the IS-SWP get their political bearings and to establish before younger readers its real history, we continue our symposium on the "IS/SWP tradition".

Some of those who participate in this symposium have moved a long

way from the politics they had in the IS/SWP, and from the politics of *Workers' Liberty* now. Nonetheless, at the end of this discussion we — and the thinking left in general — will be better equipped to formulate the lessons of the IS-SWP experience.

Beyond international socialism

By Martin Shaw*

THE INTERNATIONAL Socialism group (IS) was the most important independent socialist current in Britain in the 1960s and early 1970s, and it could just conceivably have contributed to the formation of a serious left-wing alternative to the Labour Party, instead of leading to the formation of a small party-sect operating on the fringes of the labour movement and the new social movements.

I provided in *The Socialist Register* 1978 a detailed critique of the development of IS between 1965 and 1975, which covered what I still regard as the period in which it had the greatest significance. This critique was based on the assumption that an open, non-sectarian Marxist alternative could have been created in this period. I argued that IS squandered this potential for what amounted to three main sets of reasons.

Politically, IS was too workerist and failed to engage constructively with movements like the students' and women's movements which were not organised on a specifically class basis, or with specifically political issues like parliament, democracy and nationality.

Organisationally, its leadership handled the transition from small group to mini-party badly, with illusions of grandeur as well as paranoia about threats, and an increasingly cavalier attitude to internal democracy.

Theoretically, IS had both the strengths and weaknesses of a Marxist fundamentalism which emphasised economy and class: its rejection of the contortions of orthodox Trotskyism (the nonsense of "degenerated workers' state") provided an

insufficient foundation for a contemporary politics, and its leaders' re-embrace of Leninism in the late 1960s provided unfortunate cover for their anti-democratic tendencies.

I left IS over these differences amidst the usual internal conflicts, in early 1977 (just after it proclaimed itself the Socialist Workers' Party). Many others had left the organisation, sharing much of the above cause, in the previous two years, including a large body, the IS Opposition, who formed a new group called the Workers' League. I kept my distance from this group, as did a number of other critics; in my case it was because I felt that it shared the workerism which I saw as a major fault of IS. I tried shortly afterwards to regroup the ex-IS forces in a loosely-based International Socialist Alliance, and to ally them in a wider grouping of the 'open' revolutionary left called Socialist Unity, centred on the then International Marxist Group (in its Socialist Challenge phase under Tariq Ali) and also incorporating *Big Flame*. Socialist Unity mounted a weak electoral challenge in 1979, underestimating the Thatcherite threat, and disintegrated rapidly in the aftermath of the election. I had foreseen the problem, opting out of my Hull candidacy for Socialist Unity, and rejoined the Labour Party, individually, later in 1979.

The critique of IS outlined above seems to me still valid, but I would now cast it in a broader frame. There was a huge disillusion with Labourism in the depths of Wilson's government, which, allied to the winds of cultural change blowing through the mid and late sixties, might have made it possible for a small 'new left' party to emerge, occupying some of the space briefly represented by the Green Party in the later 1980s and occupied in other countries by leftist parties ranging from the Parti Socialiste Unifié in the early 1970s to the German Greens from the 1980s and the

various left socialist parties in Scandinavia and the Netherlands.

Such a party, if it had existed, would have had to be what Leninists call a 'centrist' party; it would have had to be open, broad, loose, embracing the spirit of the times, and not centred on Marxism in general or a particular sort of Marxism. Marxism would inevitably have been a part of it, but not the sole or main contributing strand. IS, with the modest, 'non-sectarian' ethos it had in the early and mid-sixties, might have been an important part of it; IS as it increasingly became after 1968, with the cult of 'the party' could not. The mistake of IS's big turn in 1968 was not to raise the idea of a party independent of Labour, but to mistake itself for it and especially to think that such a party could be built on essentially Leninist lines.

Clearly, given the political ferment of the late 1960s, it is not easy to see how an open 'new left' party could have been put together in practice. It would probably have collapsed in confusion and disagreement. Still more, it may well have been sidelined, as IS began to be, by the reinvigoration of the Labour left during the Heath government of the 1970s, and still more in the years after Thatcher's election in 1979. It would have needed a broader agenda to recruit, for example, those who turned to the Communist Party in its final Euro-communist phase and to Bennism and the politics of the GLC, if it was to have survived the politically changed times.

Any party to the left of Labour faces, of course, the huge obstacle of the unreconstructed British electoral system, which condemns even a party with wide appeal beyond the left, like the Greens, to non-representation and marginality. In the face of this obstacle, it is unlikely that a 'new left' party would have survived and grown through to the 1990s.

The SWP, of course, has survived, like Militant with its more devious undercover course: but only at the price of a different sort of irrelevance. The only party political space for the serious left since the 1970s has been with Labour (although of course there are many movements and campaigning organisations which offer important political outlets).

The conclusion I draw from the IS experience is, however, that serious politics cannot start either from its (or the SWP's) version of Marxism, or any other Marxism which attempts to correct that doctrine. The whole idea of basing politics on a theoretical tradition is arid and there is now enormous experience, of which the IS/SWP case is only a small part, of how wasteful and disorienting this is. The challenges of the post-Cold War world cannot be answered with the theoretical categories of the opposition to the Cold War, still less with those of the world of 1917. ■

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