



# Turnings taken and not taken on Britain's road to 1945

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## Spirits, blips and makings: turnings taken and not taken on the road to Britain's 1945

**Kevin Morgan**

What use to us now is the 'spirit of 1945'? And how might the conjuring up of such a spirit contribute to the mapping out of alternatives representing the spirit of our own times? In a year of multiple commemorations of E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class*, the importance of radical counter-histories need hardly be restated. That the lamentable Andrew Marr epitomises the contribution of public-service broadcasting to the understanding of our recent national past, and *Downton Abbey* its re-creation in dramatic form, suggests that the need for less glibly mythologised and conformist accounts is as great as ever. Paeans to the legacy of Thatcher, while again demanding vigorous counter-narrative, also included frequent allusions to the Attlee governments as the one other instance within living memory of a radically reforming administration, but one impelled by entirely different values and aspirations. From Peter Osborne on the right, to Owen Jones on the left, commentators seem agreed that these two leaders alone headed 'transformative governments' in post-war Britain. Dutifully, Ed Miliband has also thrown in the example of 1997; but none but the staunchest Labour loyalist could swallow that. With Labour seemingly having lost the ability to set its own political agendas, it is not surprising that the one occasion on which it indisputably did so should retain for many an exemplary status.

For all of these reasons, there can be few on the left who cannot have been favourably disposed in principle to the idea of Ken Loach's documentary *The Spirit of 1945*. A consummate film-maker, Loach has dug out some marvellously evocative contemporary footage which he interweaves and intersperses with commentary from his own interviewees. Though some of these have obvious academic or political credentials, the great majority have been asked about their own experiences of 1945, and of the inter-war social conditions whose rectification provided the Attlee governments with their central *raison d'être*. In thus providing vivid personal witness they counteract preoccupations with the views of legislators and opinion-formers very much in a Thompsonian tradition of history from below. At the same time, the importance of programme and political vision is underlined by Loach's interpolation of extracts from Labour's 1945 election manifesto, *Let us Face the Future*. The overall impression, reinforced by the brutal intrusion of images of the Thatcher years, is of a world we have lost in which values of solidarity and social justice seemed, if only for a moment, to be in the ascendancy.

It would be missing the point to scrutinise the film as one might an academic work of history. On the other hand, we are clearly not expected merely to wallow in it as an exercise in nostalgia. Conceived as a political intervention, *The Spirit of 1945* has been put forward by Loach as a catalyst for a reconfiguration of the British left that will bypass both the Labour Party on the one hand and the main established formations to Labour's left on the other. The object, according to Loach, is 'a new political party of the Left founded to bring together those who wish to defend the welfare state and present an economic alternative to austerity'. At the time of writing the idea has attracted some eight thousand on-line signatories of support, and a number of local organising meetings have already been held.

It is not the place here to enter into the discussion regarding the prospects for this new initiative. As will become clear later on, I think the case for some such reconfiguration of the left is compelling. It is not so obvious, however, that Loach's

spirit of 1945 is the spirit in which to approach it. One might pass over the irony of invoking a document enjoining us to face the future some seventy-five years after its main stipulations were enacted. Though coal, which the film features prominently, provides indictment of the past, one may wonder what it represents in terms of possible futures. Regressive modernisation continues to provide a fertile seam for our opponents. The left, however, needs to be careful how it summons up its own equivalents of Thatcher's Victorian values. Particularly in its relations with the wider world, Britain has changed a good deal since 1945, and the more retrograde tendencies lurking within Blue Labour can offer a cautionary message here. Emerging from Loach's film into the Manchester streets of 2013, it seemed disquieting that he had found no space for the workers in the health and transport sectors who, with the bedding in of Attlee's welfare settlement, began to be recruited from Britain's as yet intact but seemingly invisible empire.

However, I am not so interested here in where the spirit of 1945 may have got to, but with where it came from. Loach rightly describes the projection of a new left party as the triumph of hope over experience. This does not, however, mean that the massive body of experience that we do have can simply be discounted. In recalling his successive personal disillusionments since the Wilson years, Loach suggests that things have not essentially changed since the inter-war political ascendancy of Ramsay MacDonald. Combined with his romanticisation of the Attlee settlement, this is not optimism of the will but political fantasy. From *Days of Hope* in the 1970s to *Land and Freedom* in the 1990s, Loach has consistently upheld a position that is dismissive, on the one hand, of the contribution of social democracy or labourism, and, on the other, of that of orthodox communism or stalinism. What then, one may well wish to ask, can the spirit of 1945 have represented politically? 1945 was the moment when these two defining expressions of the twentieth-century left were at or near their apogee. Eric Hobsbawm, with his strong affinity for both, anticipated something rather like Loach's sense of temporality with his once-so-controversial *Forward March of Labour Halted* (1978). But if Hobsbawm's was a view of British labour history in which the road to Attlee's 1945 was readily comprehensible, Loach is reduced to describing the government as a 'blip'.<sup>1</sup>

Of course, such a notion is ridiculous. But unless one understands how to reproduce such blips, it is also politically counter-productive. Incomparably in *The Making of the English Working Class* one gets a sense of how a radical politics has to be actively constructed, and of the diverse forms of association and communication by which, over a period of decades, this was achieved in English history in the period leading up to Chartism. There is no reason why the 'spirit' of 1945 should not be reconstructed in such a fashion. This was not, as one might imagine from Loach's film, the gift of a genie from a lamp, but represented the coming to fruition of a collective endeavour of similarly lengthy gestation. Through the longer histories of activism on which it depended, through years of swimming against the stream as well as with it, both hope and experience may be registered of how such watershed moments in history are actively made, even by those who may not live to see them. Before the war it needed *Labour's Immediate Programme* and the Left Book Club, anti-fascism and the hunger marches, constituency labour parties and the rebuilding of grassroots trade unionism. Without them it is difficult to see where 1945 could have come from. For Loach, on the other hand, the 1930s may be airily dismissed as 'a very quiet period' awaiting the jolt of war. As we are not just yet at another 1945 moment, and as we may hopefully avoid the catalyst of war, it might be that these years of sedulous preparation are a better pointer as to how we get might get there.

By reconstructing these histories of activism one may also register those other possibilities, with some of which Loach would certainly be in active sympathy, which have tended to get overlooked in the preoccupation with Labour's forward march. One of the problems with the historiography of the modern British left is the seeming inescapability of the Attlee settlement. Rather than a blip it usually appears as a *terminus ad quem* towards which the gathering forces of the movement are conceived of proceeding teleologically. It was precisely such a narrative that, during the cold war, assisted the closing down of alternative scenarios on the left. It was the reaction against the new managerial collectivism, as well as against stalinism and mass consumerism, that fed into the new left revival after 1956. 'In some of the lost causes of the people of the Industrial Revolution', Thompson wrote, 'we may discover insights into social evils which we have yet to cure'.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on the past to face the future means rejecting teleology for the sense of both realised and unrealised potentialities, and of what, of course, made the difference between them.

I had gone to see Loach's film having already agreed to write for *Soundings* about a series of books I have just completed on the theme of 'Bolshevism and the British Left'.<sup>3</sup> We are well past the time when one might have set the spirit of 1917 against that of 1945, as communists used to do that of the (glorious) Russian October, that led only to Stalin, against that of the (infamous) German November that led to Hitler. Instead, the story of the interactions between Bolshevism on the part of diverse sections of the British left offers a way of uncovering some of the missed turnings and blind alleys that may be overlooked in discussions of Labour's road to 1945. Though the forward march metaphor is a familiar one, the underlying dynamic is typically one facing the other way, as if it were preordained that other possible roads or detours would necessarily be closed off. Reviewing Labour's formative decades through the prism of attitudes to the Bolsheviks reveals a picture that is at once richer and less teleological. It is also an antidote to the insularity of so much British labour history and political discourse, so much so that one may routinely evoke the spirit of 1945 primarily as an epoch in the British welfare state.

The Labour Party which surged to its first parliamentary majority in 1945 represented a formidable mobilisation of electoral support. Though it usually dated its origins from 1900, the year the Labour Representation Committee was formed, it was not until as late as 1918 that Labour established a real national party organisation with individual members and a policy-making apparatus. Given what had seemed the embeddedness of the dominant political alignment of Liberal versus Tory, the speed with which Labour moved from marginal-party status to fulcrum of the party system remains a demonstration of how even Britain's electoral rules have not always precluded seismic shifts of allegiance. Nevertheless, once Labour was established as the dominant political expression of the left, and exclusive beneficiary of the solidaristic ethos of unity of its union affiliates, the opportunity for any serious electoral competition was extraordinarily circumscribed. From the handful of communist MPs, to George Galloway and Caroline Lucas in the present parliament, the candidates successfully resisting this logic can be counted virtually on one's fingers. It is by these criteria that the teleology of Labour's forward march has become focused on the party as institution culminating in the Attlee years.

If not exactly the invention of tradition, this reduces to a single plot and denouement a historical narrative that is at once more convoluted and more fecund in precedents having a bearing on our own predicament. The Labour Party for as long as most of us can remember has seemed an immovable fixture on the British left. It satdms there waiting to be worked through (or round, or in) or 'captured' (whether by

Bennite left or Blairite right) or strategised, or renewed or, increasingly in recent years, simply despaired of. If we have to think beyond this party-centred narrative, there is something to be said for returning to the period of intense political flux in which it was originally established. This, moreover, not only offers a clue to Labour's long history of electoral dominance. It also reminds us of deep-rooted organisational and ideological weaknesses which remain today both opportunity and a challenge to the left.

Compared with the social-democratic parties of the continent, what every well-informed observer of the 1920s seems to have noticed was the relative organisational feebleness of the Labour Party. Internationally, Labour's standing as one of the strongest national affiliates of the reconstituted Second International was to be reinforced by the suppression of so many sister parties by fascist and authoritarian regimes. Nevertheless, the secretary of the International, Friedrich Adler, referred to the movement's *désorganisation* as a distinctively British attribute. In exploring the neglected and little-publicised world of Labour's political finances, it became apparent that Labour had never had such membership subscriptions or fund-raising abilities as befitted its ambitions as a party of government. Compared with a genuine mass party like the German SPD, it not only had fewer individual members but they contributed far less of their income to the party. The result, prefiguring the shadowy arrangements of our own times, was a pattern of informal material dependencies that eluded proper control or accountability. Not only was the party ill-equipped for anything but contesting elections. Its central disciplines were also attenuated by the latitude it necessarily extended to its affiliated components, whether these be the unions and socialist societies on which it had always relied or the new constituency parties of the inter-war years.

Usually the unions are seen as filling the gap. When organised socialism appeared in Britain in the 1880s, the associational culture of the working class was already well-established. Doubtless this is the main reason why British socialists never established an effective mass party or political counterculture as in Germany or, in a later communist variant, in Italy. Socialism itself was beholden to the older formations of the unions. In the classic accounts of labourism, whether from right or left, this is seen as the key to the solidarities that both underpinned the party and constrained the articulation of political alternatives. Back in the 1960s Tom Nairn wrote of the 'permanent hegemony of trade unionism over socialism' as overseen by a leadership drawn from Britain's traditional elites. Fifty years on, the boot is on the other foot and Loach compares the unions to dogs creeping back to master when they're kicked. It's a curious sort of metaphor if you're trying to build left unity. Nevertheless, even Loach regards the unions as the key to the coalescence of any new political alternative.

We all know how union membership has plummeted under Thatcher and her successors. The figures do not look so bad if one compares them with Labour's formative years between the wars. Moreover, many used to argue that it was precisely in times of difficulty that the unions were likeliest to turn to legal redress and the political means by which to achieve it. Standard critiques of labourism depict the unions, however many millions strong, as if they were a grey homogeneous bloc. But in one of the studies in *Bolshevism and the British Left* I was particularly interested in the TUC 'lefts' – analogous to the latterday 'awkward squad' – who came briefly to the fore in the years before the 1926 General Strike. Theirs was in part a common generational identity, that of socialist activists of pre-1914 vintage who had found congenial employment as union officers. There also survived distinct occupational

cultures and traditions of organisation, and two of the foremost TUC personalities of the period, A.A. Purcell and Fred Bramley, were both drawn from the relatively tiny but highly politicised Furnishing Trades' union.

In both cases there was distrust of the assumed direction of the movement by Labour politicians. Crucially, this was most of all expressed in terms of a sort of labour internationalism. The parochialism of the British left is often stressed, and in future *The Spirit of 1945* can provide yet another supporting reference. Once more, however, there are alternative traditions to be recovered. By British standards, the Furnishing Trades had a highly cosmopolitan membership and cadre of activists, and its embrace of radical causes reminds us of how first or second-generation migrants can provide a potent source of democratic engagement and renewal. Radicalism was thus expressed in particular through the union's unsurpassed commitment to internationalist values. Throughout the First World War it not only maintained its forthright opposition to militarism and national chauvinism but did so on the democratic basis of general membership ballots.

To immense controversy, this sense of internationalism later became channelled into an attempted rapprochement with the bolshevised Russian unions. Nevertheless, Purcell also developed a more thoroughgoing discourse of internationalism and anti-imperialism and for three years expounded it as president of the International Federation of Trade Unions. In his final address in this capacity, he dealt with the shifting of production to hitherto underdeveloped countries, China in particular, and sought to evoke the awakening of transnational solidarities with which the unions would need to respond. Given the present development of globalised markets, and the doubtful feasibility of any effective means of controlling them at a purely national level, it would be regrettable if his injunction to 'think and act internationally' were forgotten in discussions of our present predicament.

It was after the General Strike, indeed by means of the General Strike, that the smaller radical unions were definitively marginalised by the big battalions. In particular, this was down to Ernest Bevin, then fast emerging as the personification of a corporate labour interest which was to be recognised in high political office throughout the 1940s. Put very crudely, the unions have been seen as dominating the party through the material resources that made up for its deficiency in personal subscriptions. Ross McKibbin expresses a commonly held view when he writes that Labour even at constituency level was utterly dependent on the unions and union personnel. In reality, Labour's formative years between the wars were ones of mass unemployment, deunionisation and, from 1927, legal constraint on the use of the unions' political funds. The expansion of Labour's parliamentary presence from the early 1920s was thus overwhelmingly a matter of non-union sponsored MPs.

In his belated parliamentary career, Bevin was therefore something of an anomaly. In theory, the new constituency parties now controlled both selection and funding of party candidates. In practice, it was often the other way round. As late as the 1950s, when even the Tories had got to grips with such practices, Labour was described as the only party in which it was possible to buy a seat. Recording the old journals and minute books, it is truly dispiriting to encounter the forms of patronage and social deference to which such a relationship gave rise. Notorious, of course, was the future fascist Mosley, who bankrolled the Birmingham Labour Party, and his wife Lady Cynthia, glamorous daughter of a Tory grandee, who was virtually mobbed by her Potteries constituents. ('If the Labour Party is good enough for my husband and myself ... surely it is good enough for you ...')

Peter Mandelson might positively have beamed his sense of relaxation. In terms of Britain's representative democracy, it was nevertheless a definite step backwards. The calibre of Labour's early trade-unionist MPs has given rise to much scathing comment. In part, it is simply misconceived. If working-class MPs struggled to adapt to an unreformed parliament, the solution was not the Brechtian one of dissolving and re-electing the working class; rather, one might look to the clublike, exclusive and archaic culture and modus operandi of the institution with which they were expected to conform. Today's parliamentary modernisers would recognise the force of Purcell's satirical observations on parliamentary mores, delivered to weekly report-back meetings of his constituents, and similar criticisms were expressed by MPs with backgrounds in the women's movement or local government. With the professionalisation of parliamentary politics, the worst of its abuses have been corrected. Labour's MPs are drawn largely from the reputable professions, and of course that extends to women in a way that the old manual unions did not. The fact nevertheless remains that a working-class Briton, with the social origins and educational opportunities that that implies, now has less chance of getting into parliament than some ninety years ago. And that was thanks almost entirely to the unions.

That is one reason why 1945 offers such an ambiguous legacy. An interviewee in Loach's film complains of today's Labour Party having been hijacked by the middle class. This is subliminally reinforced by the recitation of extracts from *Let Us Face the Future* in the working-class accents of the unmediated British people. The voice of Aneurin Bevan, architect of the NHS, suggests corroboration. But how could you hijack a party whose leading members included old Etonians like Strachey and Dalton, whose fathers respectively owned the *Spectator* and tutored the royal children? Attlee himself (Haileybury and Oxford) was not exactly cut from Keir Hardie's cloth; among his colleagues, the proportion of union nominees had fallen, and even the unions now looked beyond their own ranks for candidates to sponsor. One of them in due course was Tony Blair.

The roads to Labour's 1945 were just as convoluted ideologically and programmatically. Everybody knows the old Clause IV that symbolises the Labour we have lost. Attlee's nationalisations were its first enactment, and Loach's film therefore reminds us of it: *To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof ... upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange...* When I asked a friend and long-time socialist activist who actually wrote these words, he had no idea. John Rees, who provides the context in the film, brings in the peasants' revolt of 1381, the diggers of the 1640s and Robert Owen's utopian socialism. In reality, of course, the document was drafted in 1918 by the Fabian socialist Sidney Webb. Not only was it Webb who interpolated the characteristic extension of Labour's aspirations to workers 'by brain'. With his wife and collaborator Beatrice Webb, he also features in Labour mythology as the epitome of the top-down, elitist and bureaucratic collectivism by which ordinary workers were disempowered and their managers accorded a new sense of power and entitlement. How many Labour activists must have brandished Clause IV and damned the Fabians at the same time?

There might have been some good reason to have done so. Like Tony Benn, Rees comments in the film on the top-down nature of the reforms carried through in 1945. Raymond Williams described the Britain that emerged from these reforms as a 'Webb world'. The Webbs had confirmed their own attraction to what was apparently a technocratic dystopia by devoting the last years of their lives to their notorious

magnum opus *Soviet Communism: a new civilisation*. Drawn to the Webbs by what I assumed to be the basic affinities of bolshevism-stalinism and managerial social democracy, I was nevertheless amazed to find the elements of a more attractive and libertarian social vision to which the free democracies of producers and consumers – the unions and co-operatives – were central. Clause IV itself was not originally a nationalisation clause and does not refer to the state but only *the best obtainable system of popular administration of each industry or service*. Beatrice Webb in particular was involved in fertile exchanges with the younger guild socialists; Purcell in Manchester was among those who actually set up a working guild aimed at eliminating ‘all those people between the actual *User* and the *Producer*’. Contrary to expectations, it was not the state socialists who were most likely to be drawn towards soviet communism but diverse non- or even anti-statist socialists extending in certain cases even to former anarchists.

Socialists in this earlier period confronted an uncertain world. Continuous mass unemployment, the North-South divide, a not-nearly-so-squeezed middle Britain that was far more South than North: there are certainly some analogies with our own times. Politically, there was volatility and multi-party politics, with peelings away and novel political platforms to both left and right. It was also the period in which a viable alternative to Conservative hegemony had to be constructed, both through and alongside the active contention of the social costs it imposed in the here-and-now. Though certainly not a blip, 1945 did represent a moment of convergence when all main currents both within and beyond the Labour Party came together on a minimum programme for post-war reconstruction. Nevertheless, if we want a better sense of what was won and lost in 1945, and may again be in the future, a Thompsonian accent on how the alternative was actually made requires a better understanding of the period of its making.

What conclusions might be drawn from that is open to question. The future shape of Britain’s electoral system, of its relations with Europe, and of those within the component parts of the UK itself, are all difficult to predict in the longer term. As long as national elections are fought on something like the current rules, the prospects of a significant haemorrhaging away to Labour’s left have so far amounted to very little. Within the discussions around Loach’s Left Unity project, reference has been made to a possible UKIP of the left. The prospect of a Farage-cum-Galloway nevertheless gives one pause for thought. To the extent that UKIP does continue to attract defecting Tory voters and activists, a likely outcome is to increase the chances of a Miliband government. That is not an outcome we would want to entertain to reverse – which is, of course, precisely the argument that has always inhibited the development of electoral alternatives to Labour’s left. In any case, a UKIP-type formation opens the prospect of individuals with money and other forms of capital circumventing the democratic ethos of the left. There is, between the wars, quite a history of these – one thinks again of Oswald Mosley – which warns against the temptation of short cuts through the politics of the well-connected .

On the other hand, the insufficiency of the Labour Party is no less obvious than its durability. You need more than the Labour Party to get a decent Labour government. But you especially need more than the Labour Party when there isn’t such a government, or when issues or interests it has forgotten need pushing with or against it. David Marquand once made the point that Labour in the 1980s dominated the left in votes ‘but hardly in ideas’. The same was arguably true through most of its history. The Fabians are only the best-known of the ginger groups and think tanks who played such a role in the generation of Labour policy. Without rebel elements led



by George Lansbury it would never even have had its own daily newspaper – and, of course, for fifty years it hasn't. Labour's weak development as a party, except – unevenly – as regards electoral machinery, meant that much scope remained for interventions from the left in respect of publishing and other campaigning activities. The ILP, the communists, the Left Book Club, the new left and the Fabians themselves – all can be seen as examples of the more-or-less militant permeation or parallelism that this demanded if Britain was to have any sort of vibrant socialist culture. If the Labour Party, to use Eric Shaw's terms, has decisively plumped for preference-accommodating over preference-shaping, it is because it has always been indifferently equipped for what William Morris, in those early years when all seemed possible, could describe as 'making socialists'.

Perhaps 1945 can be invoked here after all. Labour's victory in the post-war election confirmed its electoral ascendancy over the rest of the left and this has never since been shaken. Nevertheless, there is universal agreement that the political sea-change on which this depended had taken place between 1940 and 1943. At both national and local government levels, Labour in these years had become closely identified with the successful prosecution of the war and the more collectivist values that this represented. Its individual membership had nevertheless fallen to half the pre-war level, and its public campaigning activities and always exiguous output of literature were overshadowed by independent publishers (like Victor Gollancz) and a movement away from the mainstream parties. As Paul Addison noted in his book *The Road to 1945*, the main source of radicalising propaganda was 'certainly not the official Labour apparatus, but the leftish intelligentsia', which included an activist intelligentsia in the factories and localities which in this period was often identified with the communist party.

The spirit of 1945, in other words, was assisted by an element of complementarity on the left. Factional distinctions were thus overlain by the different political functions which the unofficial left ended up performing by default as well as conviction. It is possible, though unlikely, that shifts in opinion such as that registered in 1945 occur spontaneously, as the refraction of experience unmediated by politics. If, on the other hand, preferences, and electoral majorities, are not predetermined but constructed, not least through the projection of competing ideas of what is politically possible and desirable, then activist minorities may play as important a role in challenging political orthodoxies as more powerful ones do in maintaining them.

Over the past three decades, the existence of a significant body of left opinion has been demonstrated in sporadic mobilisations over issues from the miners' strike to stop-the-war and anti-cuts. With the one obvious exception of the poll tax, it is nevertheless hard to recall which of these succeeded in fundamentally shifting government policy. Worse still, the Labour Party has been politically fixated on the electoral challenge from its right. Activists or constituencies exist who seem a long way from the proverbial middle England, but Labour's prevailing political strategy has been to distance itself from them or else to take them for granted. That is why a counterweight is certainly needed to Labour's left, and can only strengthen the hand of those within and around the Labour Party who do favour genuine alternatives to the politics of austerity and ugly nationalism. But while it is in the nature of UKIP and its bedfellows to hark back to a Churchillian past, the left, in connecting with the Britain that UKIP can never speak to, will need more than just the mystique of its own finest hour.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Oliver Huitson, 1 March 2013 at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/oliver-huitson-ken-loach/left-needs-to-start-again-interview-with-ken-loach>. All quotations from Loach here come from the same interview.

<sup>2</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Gollancz, 1963, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Published by Lawrence & Wishart, the three volumes are *Labour Legends and Russian Gold* (2006), *The Webbs and Soviet Communism* (2006) and *Bolshevism, Syndicalism and the General Strike: the lost internationalist world of A.A. Purcell* (2013). All further assertions and citations are derived from these accounts.