

The British Political Fringe

by George Thayer
Foreword
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"We are rich in minorities, as Mr. Thayer shows. Did you know that Contemporary Welsh nationalism was born in 1886 with the establishment of an organization called The Cymru Fydd, one of whose founding members was David Lloyd George? Did you know that the nationalists of Cornwall are the only ones in this island who do not want to break away from England entirely? Did you know that there is a man who for years has been known as "The Prime Minister of Wales"? Or that many brave Cornishmen believe that King Arthur will return? Did you know that the various neo-Nazi groups dislike each other almost as much as they dislike the Jews? That in 1960 one of them formed a secret corps called "Spearhead", a uniformed group of militants who were trained in imitation of Hitler's Brownshirts? Do you know the full history of C.N.D.?"

"All this is observed with a neutral eye and a stranger's detachment: so the voice is the more valuable. Mr. Thayer's researches have occupied two thorough and toilsome years. He has interviewed more than 400 individuals. He gives us portraits of many who before were merely names in the papers—or the courts; and he disinterred some fascinating facts.

"Mr. Thayer finds much virtue in the existence of The Fringe. Though none of those he surveys has any appreciable political power, they do play a role in British society which cannot be overlooked. For one thing, they are a possible source of new ideas. They are also convenient outlets for rebellious spirits so I was very glad to read Mr. Thayer's tribute to British tolerance in this sometimes provocative corner of life; especially to the tolerance of the English, whose partners in these islands throw so many stones at them." *From A. P. Herbert's foreword.*

7 The Outside Left

'... Using our traditional institutions and rights, we can transform Parliament ...'

THE CPGB'S *British Road to Socialism*

'It must be smashed from without, by force!'

MICHAEL MCCREERY.

'Eventually the organization of the Bolshevik Party will replace the Party itself; the Central Committee will take the place of the organization; and finally, the dictator will supplant the Central Committee ...'

LEON TROTSKY.

'Socialism can only come about through education ...'

AN SPGB MEMBER.

'You're all a bunch of bloody dictators!'

ANARCHO-SYNDICALIST CRY.

By my definition, the Outside Left consists of all left-wing groups that are either officially or unofficially outside the Labour Party proper. At the moment, there are twelve recognizable Outside Left groups in Great Britain; and, as pointed out in the previous chapter, they can be readily classified into four major categories: Communist, Trotskyist, independent Marxist, and anarcho-syndicalist.

Within the British Communist camp, there exists a Moscow-Peking split in miniature, between the Communist Party of Great Britain and the Committee to Defeat Revisionism for Communist Unity (otherwise known as either 'the Committee against Revisionism' or 'the McCreery Group'). The argument between these two factions is over the choice of roads to Socialism and who is to lead the way down it. The CPGB, following Moscow's cue as it has done consistently throughout its history, claims that Socialism can be achieved

through peaceful co-existence with the West. It has rejected 'Stalinism', the open support of 'colonial' wars, and the need for violent revolution. In Marxist circles, the CPGB has become a conservative organization, more willing to adapt its ideology to British customs and less willing to upset the *status quo*. It demands 'reasonable' solutions; it speaks more in terms of 'flexibility' and 'adaptability'; and it seeks to replace its image as an outcast party with a respectable image. On the other hand, the Committee against Revisionism – the pro-Peking of Stalinist faction – rejects the 'revisionism' of the CPGB, claiming that Socialism, as implicit in Marxism-Leninism, can only be brought about by destroying the capitalist states and the 'Ownership Class'. The Committee reflects all the restlessness of the Chinese Communist Party: its dissatisfaction with the divisions of world power, its truculence and its militancy. It has the same tendencies to invoke the name of Stalin, to support the revolutionaries in Cuba and Viet-Nam, and to resort to name-calling and sloganizing.

Perhaps the one phrase in *The British Road to Socialism*, the CPGB's official programme, which most irritates the Committee is the one which states that, by 'using our traditional institutions and rights, we can transform Parliament into the effective instrument of the people's will, through which the major legislative measures of the change to Socialism will be carried'.¹ To the Committee against Revisionism, this statement is heretical Marxism implying peaceful co-existence, an acceptance of capitalist institutions, and a betrayal of the revolution:

Marxists have always held that the capitalist state machine cannot be captured and transformed, but must be smashed from without. As Lenin wrote in *State and Revolution* 'It was Marx who taught that the proletariat cannot simply conquer state power in the sense that the old state apparatus passes into new hands... As we have seen Marx meant that the working class must smash, break, shatter (sprengung – explosion, the expression used by Engels) the whole state machine'.²

The Committee goes on to say that the only way to revive the spirit of Marxism-Leninism within the CPGB is not through reform but by destroying the power of the 'revisionists' in their King Street headquarters:

We can only build a revolutionary, Marxist Party by *smashing the old party*, by appealing over the heads of the leadership of the CPGB to all honest militants within the working class movement.³

The Committee carries its differences with the CPGB into the

field of foreign affairs. On the question of peaceful co-existence and nuclear weapons, for example, Arthur H. Evans, a member of the Committee, writes in his pamphlet, *Against the Enemy!*:

The Chinese leaders assert that Khrushchev's policy of peaceful co-existence is a laying down of arms, an outright betrayal of colonial and semi-colonial peoples now moving into action in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Khrushchev, state the Chinese, is attempting to frighten people with nuclear statistics, pointing out that in an all-out nuclear war, half the world's population would be destroyed, and much of Western civilization wiped out. The Chinese have replied that even if the worst came to the worst, if such a catastrophe occurred, even then half of the world's population would remain, and that they, on the ruins of the capitalist system, would rebuild and bring into being a flourishing Communist civilization. But the Chinese point out, they don't think this will happen... In the Chinese view, the nuclear weapon is a weapon that can only be used once, retaliation... is swift and certain. Certain people, in my belief, have overlooked the fact that rockets and long-distance missiles need not necessarily have to carry atomic war-heads. A city can be destroyed a little bit slower, but just as effectively by conventional warheads. Particularly when you recall the amount of petrol stored in large cities such as New York City, the height of its buildings and the impossibility of control of major fires under attack.

The McCreery Group indulges in name-calling, much in the manner of the Chinese Communist Party. The CPGB, for instance, is called at various times: 'the cunning King Street gang', 'revisionists' (often thought to mean those people who revise Marxist-Leninist theories; more often, it simply means anyone with whom you disagree), 'tailists' (someone who hangs on to the shirt-tails of the Labour Party), or 'Left-Social Democrats' (those on the extreme left-wing of the Labour Party). The CPGB leaders are also known as 'racialists', 'centrists', 'bureaucrats', and 'opportunists'. Occasionally the Committee against Revisionism will cast doubt on the honesty of CPGB members ('... their life work is a *living lie*'); it criticizes the structure of the Party ('In short, democratic-centralism has been replaced by bureaucratic-centralism within the CPGB'), and the Party's very nature ('... a radical appendage to the Labour Party'), Khrushchev himself, while he was Premier, was the subject of sustained and bitter attacks. According to the Committee, his '*entire career stinks of opportunism*', whose 'brain is becoming addled', and who is 'losing whatever self-control he once possessed'.⁴

The CPGB does not let these remarks pass without reply. When

it answers these charges, it uses two strategies: it either attacks the Committee against Revisionism directly, for example:

The McCreery Committee against Revisionism has since made clear its desire – a vain one! – to destroy our Party... Our Party has repulsed all previous attempts, whether from the right or the ultra-left to disrupt our unity, discipline, and adherence to Marxism-Leninism and democratic centralism. We shall also repulse the present attack...⁵

or, more often, it attacks the Committee indirectly by criticizing the attitudes and activities of the Chinese Communist Party. For example, in reply to the attacks on its nuclear policies, it claims that the pro-Chinese Communists:

... Use a phrase about the 'unprecedented destructive' power of nuclear weapons. But simultaneously they defend the description of the atom bomb as a 'paper tiger', say that the victorious peoples after a nuclear war 'will very quickly create a civilization a thousand times higher on the ruins of destroyed imperialism', and claim they are 'optimistic' because they think that only half, and not the whole of mankind, might perish in a nuclear war...

The culmination of their campaign against the Soviet Union is the wild charge that it has the conscious aim of allying with the U.S. imperialists for world domination...⁶

The argument between the two groups continues today to follow closely the policies and tactics of their respective 'allies'. When tempers flare in Moscow and Peking, they flare a few days later in King Street and Anson Street (where the Committee against Revisionism has its headquarters); when they cool, so the taunts and polemics between the two British factions lose some of their vehemence.

The Committee to Defeat Revisionism for Communist Unity emerged on to the political scene in November, 1963 in reaction to the revisionist policies of Moscow and, *ipso facto*, the CPGB. Ever since the programme, as outlined in *The British Road to Socialism*, was first adopted by the CPGB in 1952, the Party has been split between those who have accepted the programme and the militants who have opposed it. The McCreery Group – 14-members strong at the time – broke with the Party not only because it rejected this programme but also because it never accepted Khrushchev's 1956 denunciation of both Stalin and the 'cult of the individual'. In fact, Khrushchev's speech sparked the McCreery break. Why it took seven

years from the time of Khrushchev's denunciation for the McCreery Group to break away has never been adequately explained. Most of the dissidents will say, however, that it was not apparent until 1963 that Khrushchev actually meant what he said.

When it broke with the CPGB, the Committee published a four-page document, called *An Appeal to all Communists*, in which it accused the CPGB leadership of having 'abandoned revolution, abandoned the struggle for working-class power and socialism, and [having] replaced it with the aim of winning a few crumbs from the table of the monopoly capitalists'. The rebels hoped that their document would appeal to many other smaller rebel factions and so induce them to join in a united struggle to abolish the revisionist policies, to overthrow the Party leadership, and to revert to a policy of 'true Marxism-Leninism'. William Lauchlan, the CPGB National Organizer, told me that McCreery and his few followers were 'unrealistic' and 'opportunists' who were attempting to fractionalize the Party so that they could return to lead it themselves. Other Communists, still loyal to the Party, dismissed the rebellion as the 'work of a few extremist intellectuals'. John Gollan, the Party's General Secretary, referred to the Committee's attempt to unseat him as Party leader as 'a load of nonsense'.⁷

The man who led the revolt is Michael McCreery, a young (mid-thirties) Marxist who joined the CPGB in 1956 after spending two years in the Labour Party. McCreery is an unusual Marxist in that he comes from an upper-class family. His father, General Sir Richard Loudon McCreery, GCB, KCB, CB, KBE, MBE, DSO, MC, was one of Britain's outstanding military leaders during the Second World War. He was Chief of General Staff in the Middle East in 1942, he commanded the Eighth Army in Italy from 1944 to 1945, and after the war he was General Officer C-in-C of British occupation forces in Austria. Michael McCreery himself was educated at Eton and Oxford.

Most of the members of the Committee who surround McCreery, although not of such high caste, consider themselves to be middle-class intellectuals. This is particularly true of his literary companion, Arthur H. Evans, the author of *Against the Enemy!* and *Truth Will Out Against Modern Revisionism*, two of the many documents which outline the Committee's ideological position. Many of his followers – and it is estimated they number no more than fifty – originally came from working-class backgrounds who have elevated themselves to this middle-class status. Few if any of his followers spend their time earning a living on the factory floor.

McCreery spends all his time on Committee activities in a dingy top-floor flat on Anson Street in North London. It is the location

from which their newspaper, *Vanguard* is published. With him live a few other bachelors among the squalor of unwashed milk bottles, piles of dirty clothes, unattended dishes in the sink and rumpled beds. McCreery's office in the flat contains a library of perhaps 2,000 books and pamphlets which line the face of one wall. Piles of loose literature are scattered over the floor. In the centre of the room is his desk on which he answers all his correspondence by hand in a neat, almost classic, script.

McCreery is a tall man, quite handsome, with sad eyes, and a mouth that is pulled back into a nervous grin. He was distinctly ill-at-ease with me and answered my questions as if the articulation of his thoughts were a painful process. For instance, in response to why he became a Communist he would only say that, during his many travels throughout the world, he had seen a great deal of suffering and had decided that it was the fault of the capitalist system. He would not elaborate on the point further.

He said that the history of the CPGB was and still continues to be a struggle not for revolutionary action but a struggle to enter the Labour Party. He claimed that the CPGB failed from the start to grasp the essentials of either dialectical materialism or any of the other basic Marxist-Leninist tenets. He felt that the members of the Party were empirical Marxists who had so deviated from 'true Marxism-Leninism' that they were now attempting to become respectable - 'Left-Social Democrats', he called them. Therefore, he believed that they offered no alternative to Labour Party policies.

He is adamant in his belief, and it is evident in all his writings, that capitalism cannot exist side-by-side with a true Socialist state. The necessity to smash capitalism is uppermost in his mind. He is determined to destroy what he considers the biggest evil in the world today. He is convinced that all true militant Marxists will eventually come over to his side and, like the Chinese Communists, is appealing to the 'true Marxist-Leninist' theories. His appeals run to slogans along Chinese lines, examples of which are:

We say to our Cuban Comrades: NEVER WILL WE FORGET THE INSANE TREACHERY OF KHRUSHCHEV AND HIS GROUP! STAND FIRM AND UNITED! THE FOLLOWERS OF MARXISM-LENINISM WILL ROUT AND DESTROY MODERN REVISIONISM!

Long live the memory of *Comrade Stalin*! Down with modern revisionism. Long live the struggle for World Socialism!

McCreery claims that, as opposed to the CPGB which, he says, is organized on the electoral level, his Committee's workers are

organized on the factory floor. He claims that his followers are in the process of building 'cells' at factory level so that, when the opportunity arises, they will be in a position to strike down, once and for all, the hated capitalist system at its heart.

The notion that McCreery's Committee has any political strength on the factory floor brings horse-laughs from the CPGB and from the militantly anti-Communist sections of the trade union movement.* The CPGB say that McCreery's strength is visionary, adding that few if any of his followers have had any appreciable factory experience. One member of the CPGB told me that McCreery 'probably does not know what the inside of a factory looks like.' The anti-Communists with whom I have talked, in addition to a few ex-Communists, fully agree with these sentiments, saying that they have rarely heard of a McCreery militant at factory level. They claim as well that if he had a growing organization, there certainly would have been a few defectors by now who would have exposed the extent of his influence.

There is some speculation, however, that McCreery might be the beneficiary of the CPGB's long-standing internal split between the

* There are three groups in Great Britain today whose activities are restricted almost exclusively to combating Marxist influence in the trade union movement. They are all independent of the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party.

The oldest organization is the Economic League, founded in 1919 originally as an anti-Socialism group but which switched its emphasis a few years later to anti-Communism. Today, it concentrates primarily on educating trade unionists and the public at large as well, through the mediums of speeches and literature, on the extent to which Marxist influence has penetrated the unions. It claims to hold over 62,000 meetings of one kind or another every year and to distribute at the same time over 29 million pieces of literature. It operates on a budget of approximately £220,000, most of which it claims is supplied by industrial firms.

The second organization is known as Common Cause which was founded in 1951 by a group of militant anti-Communists, some of whom were trade union leaders. Unlike the Economic League, it places its emphasis in providing background material for trade unionists and a few industrial groups who wish to fight Communist influence at the factory level. Recently, the group has been accused of using McCarthy-like tactics because it published a pamphlet in 1964 which listed 180 people who were associated with Marxist groups, but not all of whom were Marxists.

The third organization is Industrial Research and Information Service ('IRIS') which was founded in 1956 as an 'inside' organization made up of anti-Communist workers. The founders felt that, since Common Cause was an 'outside' organization often accused of 'interfering' in trade union activities, another organization was needed to work secretly among the workers themselves. Many of their best men are ex-Communists. One of IRIS's favourite tactics, when attempting to wean a Communist away from his party, is to suggest the man join a Trotskyist organization. If he does, IRIS knows from experience that within two years the man will be in the political wilderness.

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militant trade unionists and the 'revisionist' leadership. Every so often, the CPGB expels a member because its leaders feel the dissident is following a near-Stalinist line. Some of these ex-CPGBers retire from politics while others search around for a new political home. In the past, a few of them have joined the McCreery Group and, undoubtedly, others expelled from the CPGB in the future will continue to do so. Many anti-Communists claim that some members of the CPGB—those with real influence in the trade unions—are ready to bolt to McCreery's Group *en masse*. McCreery believes that Khrushchev's removal from office may speed up the exodus. This feeling is not shared, on the other hand, by many Marxists themselves; they consider the probability of them joining in substantial numbers to be remote because the Committee has no political strength to offer them as bait. If they did join, it is believed that they would elbow McCreery and his few close associates out of the organization and take over the Committee for their own purposes.

McCreery, however, is confident that no such thing will happen and that the true militants will eventually flock to his cause. He claims he is not as powerless as he might seem, pointing as proof to the recognition he says he has received from Albania (but not Communist China). The CPGB claims as well that he is extensively financed from unnamed sources.⁸ With such apparent resources at his fingertips, and secure in the knowledge that he alone treads the 'true Marxist-Leninist' path, McCreery is confident of being successful—so confident, in fact, that he predicted to me that, with the inevitable collapse of capitalism, his Committee alone will lead the Socialist revolution.*

1. *The British Road to Socialism*, Programme of the Communist Party, (1958) p. 10.
2. *An Appeal to all Communists*, The Committee to Defeat Revisionism for Communist Unity, November 11, 1963.
3. *Destroy the Old and Build the New!* Michael McCreery, November, 1963, p. 10.
4. *Vanguard*, Vol. 1, No. 4, May 1964, p. 7.
5. *Comment* supplement, May 16, 1964, pp. III and IV.
6. *Comment* supplement, May 2, 1964, p. IV.
7. *The Times*, November 11, 1963, p. 6.
8. *Comment* supplement, May 16, 1964, p. III.
9. *Labour Review*, July-Aug. 1959, p. 43.