



Say NO to Frogs' milk!

“CAPITALISM WITH A CONSCIENCE”: This is a new type of social system being pioneered by David Cameron, the leader of the British Conservative Party. I’m not sure what he means, apart from meaning well, that is. He’s evidently dismayed by the collapse of markets throughout the world. He’s troubled by the inexorable growth of joblessness, burgeoning alcohol consumption, teenage pregnancies, and widespread burglary. He’s been traumatised into sounding like one of his predecessors, Ted Heath, who famously hated Margaret Thatcher, and was appalled by the “unacceptable face of capitalism”. David Cameron has, likewise, bumbled into promising to restore our broken society with a campaign of moral rearmament focussed upon honest money, respect, social responsibility, and hard work.

“Will this be enough? Will it work?” I can hear you say. My honest answer is: I’m not sure. It’s a tough choice, but we’ve got to do something. So, why not try virtue and good intentions. If this doesn’t do the trick we can always cut public spending and raise taxes can’t we? Alternatively, we could appeal to the baser nature of the electorate by appealing to their xenophobia, this after all, arises spontaneously and has often worked for the Labour left in Parliament and in the trade unions, so why not for the Tories?

Trade union leaders and Parliamentarians like Tony Benn have built careers by promoting a form of radical

national sentiment, groaning under the weight of historical allusions to the Peasants' Revolt, Chartism, the Tolpuddle Martyrs, and "Votes for Women!" where opposition to immigration and foreign imports are given a radical left twist by those who advocate sensible and humane immigration controls. They appeal to our long radical democratic traditions in order to ratify the rightness of their opinions, and to oppose the European Union, and to fight against the single currency. But Tony Benn (and the rather more mercurial Ken Livingstone) can no longer do much. Spent forces, both of them, the best they can hope for is to continue in their distinctive role of ensuring that broader left opinion in the country remains firmly held within the orbit of the Labour Party and the Trade Union Congress.

These reflections remind me of an incident when I was the Chair of a local branch of the National Union of Public Employees. The union became involved in supporting a campaign being waged by doorstep milk deliverymen. Faced with falling sales the milkmen took the view that their livelihood was being snatched away by cheap milk imports. Their outrage led them to accuse the French of dumping surplus milk and attacking the supermarkets for selling it. The milkmen wanted our support. I didn't think we should help – but I was voted down.

The day of the demonstration dawned; seventy or eighty electric milk floats pattered in convoy along to the assembly point. The banners bravely proclaimed the milkmen's message: "We want cows' milk, NOT Frogs' milk". The homemade banners expressed the homemade opinion; both were the logical result of campaigning for import controls. Either the goods produced by foreigners are inferior or a danger to public health, or the foreigners work for peanuts in order to undercut the wages of decent British workpeople. Capitalism would be all right if only the capitalists did not 'export' jobs to low wage areas, import cheap goods from abroad, or hire cheap immigrant labour.

Something of this spirit was in the air last week as several thousand engineering workers in oil refineries and power plants in England, Scotland and Wales, held strikes and demonstrations to protest against the employment of three hundred Italian and Portuguese workers at Total's oil refinery near Immingham in Lincolnshire. Apparently class solidarity, like charity, begins at home. These are "British jobs" the strikers insist and should be given to "British workers". Both government ministers and the Tory frontbench have been taken aback by the strikes, which are illegal after all, and by the demonstrations, which offer fertile ground for the activists of the British National Party to campaign against foreigners in particular and black people in general.

This is why both Gordon Brown and David Cameron, while roundly condemning the wildcat strikes, are full of understanding and sympathy for the workers' feelings if not for their cause. They need to damp down the outrage without doing anything very practical to resolve the dispute. In this they are, probably much to their surprise, shoulder to shoulder with the Socialist Workers Party, which despite being similarly taken off guard has roundly condemned the strikes.

Internationalism is, of course, fundamental to the outlook of many on the far left. They only support nationalists when they are somewhere abroad fighting American or British troops. Home grown nationalists, remain however, always *persona non grata* because they are thought to sow divisions between working people in Britain. This is, of course, a formal if not a pious sentiment. It has little to do with the actual interests or activities of most people working in far left politics today. They have been far too busy in recent years worrying about their parties' internal feuds and honeying up to Islamist opinion in order to shore up their rickety alliances in the peace movement, to give much thought or leadership to workers facing mass unemployment.

There is a strange mood across the entire left. Capitalism is in profound crisis – something that the far left have been tirelessly predicting for decade after decade has come to pass. Yet, evidently they do not know what to do. They might talk airily about the falling rate of profit, they might insist that we all learn the lessons of the 1930s, but any real knowledge about the manner in which capitalism actually functions, any real knowledge about how the mass of people attempt to reconcile their desires with what the system has to offer, eludes these experts in revolutionary thought and mass mobilisation. Their confusion appears to be mirroring that of the capitalists themselves: the capitalists don't seem to know what to do about the crisis, and the revolutionaries don't seem to know what to do about the capitalists.

Indeed the revolutionaries appear to be as ill prepared and bemused as the rest of us, but in their case the confusion has a readily identifiable cause. The historic fascination of the little parties and groupuscule of the far left with foreign affairs on the one hand, and internecine and arcane disputes on the other, has continued to hold them in stasis; their only mass actions are peace demonstrations about foreign wars and their only firm footing is within a dozen universities and a handful of inner city neighbourhoods.

Cut off from the ordinary life of capitalist society they have become prey to chancers and opportunists like Tommy Sheridan and George Galloway, indeed to anybody who appears to have the capacity to attract wider support for *approximations* of their revolutionary rhetoric. But Sheridan and Galloway are loose cannons: their fascination with themselves leads them towards forms of populism that are as embarrassing as they are unreliable. Consequently, the revolutionary groups of the far left find themselves lingering on the edges of a society in profound crisis, unable, now that “the crisis of capitalism” has finally arrived, to do anything but shout advice to people who are neither interested nor listening.