

Social democracy *and the* labour movement

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A paper prepared for a
South African Labour Bulletin
workshop by WINTON
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In spite of the comparatively recent renaissance of the South African Labour movement and the unique historical circumstances in which this renaissance has taken place, certain aspects of the movement's development are strongly reminiscent of earlier social democratic developments in western Europe. These aspects include a move towards industrial (as opposed to craft)

unionism and a related rapid rise in union membership as a percentage of the workforce; strong shop floor organisation and consequent capacity for mass mobilisation on political as well as industrial issues; a preference for democratic norms in its own organisations and in industry; and a readiness to enter into far reaching bilateral and tripartite negotiations with employers' organisations and the state.

A number of questions arise out of this convergence with at least some aspects of social democratic politics elsewhere. The most important questions are: should the South African movement enter more deliberately and fully onto a social democratic development? What would this choice entail? What is distinctive about social democratic politics and how can its elements be applied in a country undergoing a unique political

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transition and a not-so-unique economic crisis (in which manufacturing failure is a key element)?

A detailed account of what a South African social democratic labour movement would look like falls outside the limits of this paper and the competence of its author. What I will attempt, however, is an outline of one coherent tradition of social democracy that may shed some light on South African labour's future political options.

Social democracy began in the 1870s as an international marxist movement in the form of the socialist Second International and its European affiliated parties. Its pantheon of early great leaders included both marxist revolutionaries (like Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg) and marxist reformists (above all, Kautsky and Bernstein). After the revolutionaries left to eventually found the international communist movement in the wake of the first world war, 'social democracy' stood for a tradition that was almost exclusively reformist and northwestern European. The original conceptions of marxist reformism were fatalistic and lacked focus on the specific opportunities that industrial societies presented in the early and mid-twentieth century. Thus social democracy as a whole failed to consolidate a dominant political position even in those countries where it accounted for the bulk of the labour movement, and it made little progress towards socialist transition. These failures were in spite of its success in building the west's organisationally and institutionally most powerful union movements. On the basis of its failures, mainstream social democracy gradually (if also tacitly) abandoned the socialist project for social liberal politics – modest tinkering with ongoing capitalist economy and a preoccupation with distributional politics, that is, welfare state building alone.

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But in Sweden social democracy broke with this pattern. During the 1920s a distinctive new democratic socialism arose within the social democratic labour movement where it deployed the existing resources of that movement more effectively. It abandoned the old reformist model in favour of a more focussed and offensive statecraft, and it resisted the retreat into purely distributional politics. It engineered an upheaval in the balance of class forces in Sweden and in so doing made Swedish social democracy the west's most successful electoral party of any political stripe. When the party leadership began to retreat down the well trodden route into social liberalism from the 1950s, the new democratic socialist tradition found a new headquarters in the Swedish union movement, where it continued to mature.

This renovation of socialist politics was conceived – and was to a large extent put into practice – by Ernst Wigforss (1881-1977), Swedish social democracy's major theoretician and Treasurer of Sweden (1925-6 and 1932-49) (Higgins 1985 and 1988). The radical version of social democracy that follows

builds on his theory and practice, and on the further enrichment of his tradition at the hands of Swedish unionists. But I also hope to show how social democratic politics of this kind would extend to the tasks of socio-economic reconstruction and industrial renewal in crisis-ridden industrialised countries like South Africa.

The aspirations of socialism and the inner logic of social democratic politics

It is said that the Chinese character for 'crisis' also means 'opportunity'. A valuable opportunity that the present global 'crisis of socialism' opens up is to re-examine the fundamental aspirations that underpin the socialist project. What is socialism for? Several generations of socialists before us, we may note with surprise, have been so beguiled by a 'scientific' and fatalistic outlook that they have left the aspirations of socialism unexamined and unexpressed. This neglect has hamstrung socialist politics. First, if we cannot identify our ultimate political goals we have little hope of finding the means to attain them. Second, how can any reform movement mobilise popular support if it does not hold up to its potential constituency a galvanising alternative version of social development, an 'active utopia' (Bauman 1976) – one that is both achievable and overcomes the painful predicaments of the present day?

Socialism is the sole legitimate heir of the eighteenth-century radical democratic thought that erupted in the French Revolution under the battle cry 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity'. In fact, the socialist tradition has been the form that this older and broader democratic revolution has taken for over a century and a half of western politics (Laclau & Mouffé 1985). It is worth our while, then, to delve briefly into what liberty, equality and fraternity mean under industrialised conditions today. In doing so, we need to re-translate the first and third terms. Liberalism hastened to usurp and impoverish 'liberty', and nowadays 'freedom' captures the original sentiment better. 'Fraternity' we would now reject as a gendered concept. Today's democratic spirit overrules gender divisions as implacably as those based on race and ethnicity. In that spirit we would recast fraternity as 'community' and 'social solidarity'.

Industrialism and the modern industrial state have added greatly to the meaning of freedom as a socialist aspiration. For socialists freedom has included, but gone well beyond, the negative notion of liberty enshrined in liberalism – liberty as mere absence of arbitrary official violation of person and property – a notion that still leaves the 'free' but commodified individual subjected to the demands of social conformity (Wolin 1960:343-8) and to the caprice of market outcomes, not least on the labour market. By contrast, socialist freedom requires society to empower individuals to be self-determining initiative

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takers in all aspects of life, including work. In modern society, the precondition to this sort of autonomy is social security. Concretely, only a robust economy capable of delivering full employment and comprehensive welfare entitlements can support the kind of social citizenship that would satisfy socialist criteria for freedom. As we shall see, 'market forces' can never achieve those socio-economic outcomes; only democratic purposive co-operation can do that.

The ideal of equality is really a subset of freedom and community. The freedom of each is the condition for the freedom of all, as Marx put it. Freedom, in the socialist sense, is unachievable while any social group enjoys privileged access to the amenities of modern life – a high standard of housing, nutrition, medical and child care, education and culture. The aspiration of social democracy in the broadest sense is to break down the barriers of privilege and guarantee access for all to these amenities.

The ideal of community honours the fact that a great deal of what we as individuals find meaningful to do would naturally bring us into communion and co-operation with others – at home, at work and in the task of socio-economic reconstruction. A major part of socialism's moral revolt against capitalism has been the mission to overcome its alienated, divisive and competitive notion of individualism that denies the human need for community and subverts co-ordinated, purposive human action in pursuit of socio-economic betterment. But many earlier socialists have distorted the ideal into an imposed collectivism, a drab denial of freedom. As against this, social democracy sees community as voluntary co-operation, a living process that democratic interaction generates.

From this glance at socialist aspirations we can see that democratic norms and practices are fundamental to their achievement. Democratic conviction represents, in Wigforss words (1981, I, 264) "a belief in a universal human worth which should express itself in the human community and how it is ordered. Its purpose is not the mere passive sharing of all in the material and spiritual values which increase and are created, but also participation in creating and preserving them." When Swedish social democrats in the interwar years questioned their earlier assumption that mere nationalisation provided the royal road to socialist society, they reworked the socialist project itself into three successive stages of democratisation – political democracy, social democracy and economic democracy. In other words, the individual's achievement of political, social and economic citizenship marks the transcendence of bourgeois individualism.

Social democratic statecraft

The new democratic socialism in Sweden developed a distinctive approach to political conflict based on a critique of

the 'old' democratic socialism, the essential features of which are still preserved in the conventional labour reformism in countries like Britain and Australia. While the older social democrats were committed to a socialist transition in some distant future, they could neither specify this goal nor relate it to their immediate political practice.

In daily practice socialism was, then, a dead letter. The analytical resources of the socialist tradition were laid aside (except for agitational purposes) and social democrats generated no alternative policy lines, especially in economic policy. They colluded, in fact, with economic liberalism, capital's perennial politics of small government, unregulated markets and contractionary economic policy. At bottom they believed that the time for socialist transition had not yet come, and in the meantime capitalism had to be managed on its own terms, which left precious little room for even ameliorative reforms – that is, reforms that relieved some of the worst abuses of an otherwise unchallenged capitalist system.

The new democratic socialism presents us with the antithesis of this conventional labour-reformist politics. It clearly announces the aspirations of socialism; it brings its alternative analysis to bear on capitalism's inequities and inefficiencies; and it mobilises around a coherent and concrete action programme of its own to implement collective and democratic solutions that can make good the failures of private enterprise and market mechanisms. One prominent observer has summed up its 'road to power' as "politics against markets" (Esping-Andersen 1985).

Historically, this strand of social democracy was quick to identify economic liberalism as the strategic enemy. From Adam Smith to Margaret Thatcher, economic liberalism is the enduring basis on which dominant interests mobilise support for the maintenance and extension of capitalist social relations and economic arrangements. It asserts – in the face of logic and evidence – the 'optimal' efficiency of managerial control and unregulated markets. Any attempt to impose social priorities on business, or equity on market outcomes, would (so the story goes) cripple this wonderful engine of 'welfare' creation. Efficiency and equity (including democracy) are unreconcilable. Capital must rule.

The new democratic socialists flatly deny these myths. The ubiquitous mass unemployment, waste and social misery point to the gross inefficiency of the capitalist system. Moreover, a definition of 'efficiency' like the economic-liberal one that does not require a productive system to meet social need and distribute 'welfare' accordingly, is meaningless. In fact, capitalism is inefficient, they argue because it is unequitable and undemocratic. Purely private forms of calculation in large-scale economic activity, authoritarian labour relations and maldistribution of economic rewards constitute a recipe for

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economic crisis – underconsumption and industrial decline.

Herein lies capital's political vulnerability. In the long term, only economic liberal politics can maintain capitalist social relations. But the price of this defence of capital as a social relation is economic stagnation, including foregone opportunities for individual enterprises to accumulate profit and expand. The new democratic socialism exploits this vulnerability in an "economic growth strategy of class conflict" (Korpi 1983). Agitation around a coherent alternative approach to economic management that links efficiency and equity can not only gain majority electoral support but also – equally importantly – divide capital's political representation by winning over those sections of business more interested in economic recovery than in economic liberal orthodoxy.

In essence, this was the battle plan when Swedish social democrats launched their unique, head-on challenge to the economic liberal orthodoxy from the 1930s on. It was a classic formula for hegemonic political practice, and a stunning success. On this basis, they consolidated their political dominance and presided over the transformation of one of the poorest countries in Europe into a byword for affluence and social justice.

Contesting capitalism's economic rationality

Wigforss bequeathed to his tradition a standard method for forcing its opponents onto the backfoot. It was to constantly make an issue of how far the actual performance of capitalist enterprise fell short of what was technically possible given available labour skills, resources, unmet social needs, and an economy running 'at full bore'. This gap always provided the pretext for public interventions, including the assertion of social interests through industrial and economic democratisation. For instance, when the non-socialist parties demanded in 1934 an end to the interventionism of the social democrats' crisis programme because recovery had set in and the country could not 'afford' continued high public spending to stimulate production, Wigforss (1981, II, 510-11) told them intervention was here to stay:

"Whatever we, by our own efforts, can produce in the country determines the standard of living of the Swedish people. As much food as our agriculture yields, that is how much we can afford to eat. It is not extravagance and not unsound economics. However fine the dwellings we can build with our own materials and our own hands, these are the dwellings we can afford to move into. We can afford to consume that quantity of clothes, footwear, furniture and household items, roads and bridges, railways and telephones and gramophones and radio installations, cinemas and theatres and concert halls, schools and research institutes, meeting halls and sports grounds, as much of whatever belongs to life's

necessities, comforts or luxuries, as we ourselves can produce. And it is madness to suggest otherwise."

Here is the central method of social democratic statecraft: contesting the economic rationality of capitalism. As the institutions of capitalist economy – private investment, managerial control and unregulated markets – fail the test of efficiency and equity, they are to be gradually displaced by forms of social and democratic control. The point is, a capitalist economy cannot go on running 'at full bore' and still remain a capitalist economy.

The notion of what is technically possible also underpins the visionary element in social democratic policy making. Wigforss prescribed the use of 'provisional utopias' in the development of policies which aimed not only to deliver better socio-economic outcomes, but were also to be used as the basis of political mobilisation. 'Provisional utopias' avoid total blueprints of future society in favour of partial, achievable futures that flexibly meet today's acutely felt predicaments. Full employment, meaningful employment, industrial democracy and large, democratically controlled 'social enterprises without owners' were among the provisional utopias that bore Wigforss' own signature.

An explicit aspect of this approach to policymaking and socio-economic reconstruction is its creative and experimental nature. Coherence and consistency over time comes from the enduring aspirations of socialism and underlying method rather than dogmatic adherence to any particular form socialist transition must take according to pre-conceived 'scientific' protocols. Consistency in the values and method that social democracy propagates allows it to establish a resilient tradition in its constituency, something that can give it the upper hand in political conflict. At the same time, its open-ended approach to policy creativity means that it can respond flexibly to changing circumstance and openings.

Two preconceptions of how socialist transition must take place have haunted us since socialism became 'scientific'. The evolutionary school suggests that capitalism must naturally evolve into socialism, and political intervention is rather beside the point. The opposing revolutionary school proposes that there must occur an obvious 'rupture' in capitalist arrangements as a prelude to socialist reconstruction, and until then 'correct' political action is confined to resistance. To a large extent both schools are claiming that politics in any broader sense of positive intervention into socio-economic change 'doesn't matter'. As against this, the new democratic socialism asserts that politics does matter: transition depends on the political and policy-making competence of the labour movement.

How, then, can this tradition account for the transitional process leading to the socialist reconstruction of society? If there is no 'decisive rupture', what are the signs or criteria of

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transition? The answer lies in the two defining characteristics of capitalism itself – capital as a social relation and the commodification of labour.

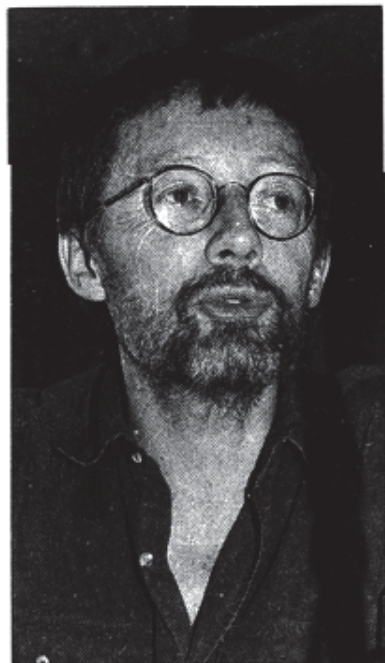
First, capital's prerogatives must be subordinated to emerging social forms of regulation that override private interest and private forms of calculation. This is what Keynes (1936, 378) referred to as the 'comprehensive socialisation of the investment function'. Second, labour has to be progressively decommodified in two senses: in its collective and individual re-empowerment at the workplace through industrial democracy, and in the individual's share of social wealth coming to her or him as a citizen rather than as a commodity. In other words, a combination of full employment and comprehensive welfare guarantees equitable redistribution irrespective of the individual's 'marketability' or even desire to participate in the labour market.

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Social democratic unionism

Whatever the political shortcomings of the original social democratic founders, they left a particularly positive legacy to the union movement. They saw the latter as potentially a central bearer of the socialist project – as important sites of socialist recruitment, agitation and education. They worked hard to bring the movement under the tutelage of the party and to remould it on industrial principles. Pre-existing craft unions were justly criticised for splitting the workforce, pitting worker against worker, and failing to recruit workers comprehensively and to lead co-ordinated campaigns. Industrial unionism and the strongest shopfloor organisations in the world have thus been the hallmarks of Scandinavian unionism throughout this century. Sweden's union density has for some years exceeded 80 per cent, and has been the highest in the world since the late 1920s (Kjellberg 1983).

From the 1920s Swedish manufacturing unions have extended their concerns to 'production policy', on the argument that it would be futile making demands for better pay, working conditions and job security on failing industries. In conjunction with their developing interest in efficient production, Swedish unions were looking for a comprehensive answer to the inequities and irrationality of the market-determined wage structure – they sought to develop a socialist 'solidarity wage policy'. During the thirties and forties the union movement took advantage of the prestige of its affiliated party's political dominance to substantially increase its membership and standing in society. Centralised negotiations between it and the employers' association became routine. Its level of ambition to intervene in social and economic issues rose, which in turn stimulated the expansion of its institutional capacity to conduct research and develop autonomous policy positions as a basis for negotiations with employers and government.



In the early fifties the union movement produced its own model, the Rehn-Meidner model, for institutionalised and stable full employment within the framework of the rapidly developing welfare state. This model carried the characteristic stamp of the new democratic socialism – efficiency issues integrated with equity ones in a form that demanded technically optimal outcomes from employers. At the same time the model – which came to dominate Swedish collective bargaining and economic policy – was an in-house, union product which at first met with the antipathy of the party leadership. In hindsight we can say that at this point the union movement came of age, emerged from the tutelage of the party and became the main bearer of the new democratic socialism. Henceforth, the unions would incubate all major initiatives in public economic management and worklife reform.

In the late fifties and sixties the unions' direct implementation of their model forced the pace of industry rationalisation and expansion and the levelling of wage differentials. The success of the model was palpable in the working and living conditions of Swedish wage and salary earners, and union prestige and membership rose accordingly.

In the 1970s union movements in all western countries had to respond to the economic contraction and instability that marked the end of the postwar long boom. Conventional labour reformist parties gradually retreated from social liberal policies and their affiliated union movements retreated into 'moderation' as mass unemployment returned.

But again the Swedish development – at least in the union movement – was exceptional, as the movement issued what was in effect a second edition of the Rehn-Meidner model, this time with the emphasis on the Wigforssian concerns with industrial and economic democracy.

Both of these reforms were pushed in the traditional manner, as responses to the actual shortcomings of managerial decision-making and investment behaviour. The unions made considerable gains in industrial democracy. They were able to demonstrate organised labour's autonomous capacity, among other things, to formulate alternative corporate plans that could save jobs and industries that would otherwise have fallen victim to capital's new trend towards disinvestment in industry in favour of purely speculative or financial placements.

The union movement met defeat, however, in its economic democracy offensive which pointed much more directly to a transcendence of capitalism. Crucial elements of the earlier formula for hegemonic politics were missing on this occasion: the proposal had technical weaknesses, the social democratic party had by then abandoned the socialist project and tacitly subverted the proposal, and the union movement itself failed to mobilise in time against the united rightwing counterattack (Higgins 1992).

The issues of political unionism

Swedish unionism provides us with a prominent example of political unionism, of a union movement that pursues its own political agenda on questions that go well beyond the ambit of conventional unionism with its concentration on wages and working conditions. This kind of unionism raises three issues for socialists – the danger of incorporation, the possibilities of industry policy as a way into production politics, and the relationship with an affiliated party.

Several left-wing writers (for example Panitch 1981) raise the spectre of ‘corporatism’, understood as a process of recruitment of labour leaderships to a pro-capitalist agenda and the demobilisation of rank and file militancy. Certainly, negotiations with state and employers is a necessary part of political unionism, and this often entails representation on tripartite bodies. But whether this leads to labour losing the plot and being co-opted to capital’s political agenda depends in the first instance on how clear its organisations are about their own fundamental political commitments and how these are to be translated into autonomous, effective policy. Where these political conditions are met, tripartite bodies really offer a form of ‘societal bargaining’ (Korpi 1983), a vital moment in social democratic statecraft. In any event capital itself is now unlikely to have a coherent agenda for industrial progress to which it could co-opt labour.

But there is a more general issue here, to do with a labour movement’s being able to maintain a balance between what the Swedish labour historian Jan Lindhagen (1972) has called ‘movement socialism’ and ‘state socialism’. Movement socialism refers to the movements vitality in its grass roots organisations, above all its shopfloor organisations, and the leadership’s answerability to them. ‘State socialism’ refers to organised labour’s engagement in negotiation, compromise and policymaking at the state level. To preserve this balance between movement and state socialism is to maintain a powerful antidote against co-option.

In its politics of contesting the economic rationality of capitalism, Swedish labour has left largely unexplored the possibilities of industry policy, which presents a major opening for union production politics. Precipitate manufacturing decline in mature industrialised countries, like Britain, the U.S. and Australia, with markedly economic liberal traditions of public economic management, point to the striking inability of private managements and market mechanisms to meet the financial, technical and organisational requirements of modern industry. The industrial ‘winners’ in today’s competition for markets for manufactured exports operate industry policies, whereby social interests and public authorities take responsibility for the effectiveness of the national manufacturing effort and so make good the failures of private enterprise. Industry policy impinges

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crucially on industrial relations, and it must be implemented either by a labour-repressive regime (as, for instance, in Japan and South Korea) or in 'partnership' with organised labour. In the latter case, labour is likely to bring to the task of industrial renewal a more appropriate social and technical rationality than capital is able to (Higgins and Clegg 1988). In imposing its own solutions, labour can begin the displacement of some of the vital institutions of capitalist economy.

The frustration of the Australian union movement's attempt to use industry policy in this way (Higgins 1991) points to the same problem that the Swedish movement succumbed to in its pursuit of economic democracy – breakdown in its relationship with its affiliated party. A social democratic union movement – or a temporarily social democratising one in the Australian case – has far better institutional resources and is closer to the production process than an affiliated party, and it is natural for the unions to take the lead in the formation of production policy. Yet this policy has to be secured at the level of the state, and the support of the affiliated party in this process is essential.

Unfortunately, parties of labour have a propensity to lose their political bearings in the heat and dust of the electoral process, and can be distracted from a reforming agenda by the spoils of office. There is no pat answer to this problem – it has to be left to the political finesse and negotiating skills of those union leaders who have to manage the movement's relationship with the party. They will demonstrate their art, among other things, by withholding unconditional commitments to the party's electoral strategy until they have guarantees that the party, when in government, will honour its obligations under pre-election 'social contracts' with the union movement.

Conclusion

I began the paper by mentioning a number of characteristics and preferences that the renascent labour movement in this country is already exhibiting – industrial unionism, mass recruitment, strong shopfloor organisations, democratic principles and its interventions into social and political affairs that go well beyond the narrow confines of 'industrial relations'. These characteristics and preferences resonate strikingly with those of northwestern European social democracy. The question then arises: what would be gained if the South African movement were to more fully and deliberately embrace the kind of social democracy I have outlined here?

First, the movement would become heir to a notion of the socialist project that is at once more authentic and more useable. Wigforss once noted that there was no paradise at the beginning of human history (the Book of Genesis notwithstanding!) and there will be none at its end; each generation must solve its own problems in its own way. Further, "socialism is neither utopia nor science. It is not utopia in

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the socialist system-builders' sense, nor science as marxism understood the word. What the socialist aims towards is a society where certain human values find better and more complete expression than in bourgeois or capitalist society. But just what this sort of society would look like cannot be displayed in advance or for all time. We start with immediate predicaments and seek ways to overcome them. Socialism thus becomes not the name for a particular form of economic organisation but rather a summary of guidelines for social transformation, and not least, of course, economic reorganisation. It looks simple and natural. We get away from blueprints of a future society. We also get away from a social-philosophical system which makes the posited nature of things and people the basis of a fatalistic development. The socialism that lives today in social democracy builds undoubtedly on the conviction that liberation is possible. It doesn't have to imply that liberation is simple, nor that we forget what utopianism and marxism have taught us." (Wigforss 1981, V:101)

This is the stuff, I suggest of a hegemonic socialist politics that could win allegiance and support alliances well beyond the labour movement itself. The movement will need starting points like these if it is to successfully lead the socio-economic reconstruction of South Africa.

The second advantage of choosing a social democratic road consists in its coherence based on the hard-won lessons of international labour history. The choice would give South African labour access to a wealth of international experiences which, if assimilated critically and with an eye to local conditions, could be a vital resource in effective policymaking.

With coherence comes, thirdly, a consistent and attractive basis for mass mobilisation over time. There will be recurring periods of political polarisation here as elsewhere. It is in these situations above all that organised labour and its allies need to have already initiated a mass constituency into a clear world view and vibrant tradition that will mobilise around familiar values rather than retreat in confusion.

Finally, a labour movement that is so clear about its fundamental political orientations and methods need not fear co-option in its 'societal bargaining' with employers and the state. Rather, it will be able to confidently open up vital new areas of policymaking, such as industry policy, in its creative approach to social reconstruction and economic reorganisation. ☆