

TONY WRIGHT INTERVIEW

In this interview, Tony Wright discusses the history of socialism and social democracy in Britain since the days of the Clement Attlee administration.

Why did you write a book about socialism?

What I wanted to do was to try to understand where this social tradition had come from, because you can only really understand now where it's going. If you see where it's come from, what was it all about -- and of course, it was about different things in different places -- but I want to try to tease out what some of the unifying ideas were. And of course, the British tradition was rather different from many of the continental traditions. We never really became a Marxist/Socialist movement here. We like to say that we were ethical socialists. That is, people who thought that socialism was about a set of values which you then tried to apply to public policy, rather than, as the Marxists tended to believe, kind of the unfolding of historical laws. I think that was a basic dividing line, and it continues to, I think, define the approach of the left in Britain. Of course, that approach now is shared by socialists everywhere.

Define socialism.

If you asked me to define it, I think I would summon up a phrase that is used by a great British Socialist writer. He had a phrase which sounds rather archaic now, but he talked about it involving what he called, "access to the means of civilization," which basically meant everybody in society, wherever they're born, wherever they come from, should have access to the things that that society can offer, and I think that's probably the best core definition I've ever come across.

What is the difference between Socialism and Democratic Socialism?

I think the obvious thing is that one was democratic and one wasn't. Indeed, the very term "democratic socialism" was invented in the course of the Twentieth Century because it had to be distinguished from undemocratic socialism, and if you think for all the Twentieth Century, socialists in the left were tainted with the experience of the Soviet Union. If you were on the left in Britain for much of the Twentieth Century, the attack on you came from those who said, "Really, you would have been in the Soviet Union because that's what you believe in." And therefore, the reason why people have to start talking about democratic socialism was to say, no, that is not our kind of socialism. It's one which builds on the democratic tradition but seeks to take it into social and economic areas. That was the key dividing line. It meant that when you had the post-war labor government in Britain, the Attlee government it was always said to be democratic socialism in action. It was democratically elected with a huge majority labor party seeking to use the state to achieve what I would say is access to the means of civilization. That is, to make life better for most people in that society and to do it through the things that we associate with that government.

What were the differences in socialist parties in Russia and England?

One fundamental distinction was as to whether you believe in democratic process or not. The Bolshevik Revolution was made ideologically out of the Marxist tradition, which talked about his being the unruffling of a historical process in some way, and then you had to square that to make it all right and to justify democratic centralism. We didn't have those problems in Britain. In Britain, we had the question of how could you win a majority through the democratic process, because the left here was absolutely committed to democracy. Indeed, that was their great instrument. It was the claim that through that democratic electoral route, you could win power, use that power to employ the state for socialist purposes, and that's what happened. That's why you had a health service established; that's why you have the welfare state extended; that's why you had a fifth of the economy taking to public ownership because you believed that uncontrolled capitalism had to be brought to heel in some way. It was an extraordinary period, an extraordinary achievement. We set the parameters of the whole post-war world.

What were people's reactions to the election of a Labor Government? Why did the Labor Party rise to power?

It was a surprise at the time. It was a complete revelation at the time. There was some wonderful things that people say. The lady in the Ritz said, "The country will never stand for it, the election of a labor government." It had happened, of course, because the war had been radicalizing, absolutely radicalizing, because it turns a society upside down. It sends people away from their homes. It gets them thinking for the first time about what they're fighting for, and what they're fighting against. You have to define a purpose of a war, and the purpose of the war was, yes, to defeat fascism, but it was to make a better society. As a huge radicalism goes on during the war, there was a total determination to make sure that we did not return to the condition in the 1930s of poverty and unemployment and inequality. Churchill, having won the war, being booted out the moment that he'd won it. And Clement Attlee, this most unassuming little man put in charge because the country said, "Right, we've done one job now. We've won the war. Now we've got to do the social job."

Discuss the Socialist wing of the Labor Party in 1918. How was it organized?

The socialists were the people inside the Labor Party who equipped it with its program, essentially. It wasn't constructed as a doctrinal party. It was constructed as the political wing of the trade-union movement. It was when the trade unions found that their route... to power through existing political parties that they turned to the idea of a new party therein, but it was very much formed as the extension of the trade union movement. It was the socialist people like the Fabians, the Webbs, people like that, who sat around, dropped a program for the new party. And what is often referred to is this great moment in 1918 when the program was put in place -- the famous Clause Four. Actually, the making of Clause Four in 1918, the terms of it was a really minor event, unnoticed at the time. What was noticed was the way in which the Constitution of this party in terms of its structure was being established.

Discuss Clause Four and the establishment of the Labor Party as a socialist party.

In 1918, as it all was told, the Labor Party became a Socialist Party. It had not been a Socialist Party before. It drew up a new program, Clause Four, which said the public should meet a production distribution and exchange. This was a declaration of us being a Socialist Party. In fact, at the time that was hardly noticed. At the time, it was that, here was a party being set up to be the political arm of the Trade Union Movement, and it was the federal structure of the party that was a thing of note. But Hitler, his programmatic basis was a sort of common socialist wisdom of the time. That is you wanted in some sense -- not immediately, not tomorrow -- but in some sense to replace capitalism, which was inefficient, un-egalitarian, with a different system. That's what that basis established.

Was the Labor Party Marxist?

You could say that it was quasi-Marxist in being attached to public ownership, but it was ferociously anti-Marxist in not believing that this was a product of someone forwarding historical law, but would be something that a democratic populist in a democratic population would do. It was ferociously democratic in its conception and its methods.

What were the differences between Clement Attlee and Winston Churchill?

They had contrasting styles. This was the extraordinary thing about it. Clement Attlee was the most under-regarded person in British politics. He was called Major Attlee because of his First World War experience and his being a figure in the domestic war cabinet during the war.

Churchill was this great flamboyant figure -- cigar smoking world statesman, Olympian kind of figure. You could hardly get a word out of Clement Attlee. It was a nightmare for broadcasters because there were some wonderful exchanges where Attlee is asked what the party believes in, and he says, "Well, we haven't decided that yet".

It was a different world but it was an extent of the kind of social choice that people felt they were making. They were prepared to wave goodbye to this great war leader, this

extraordinary historical figure, and to trust the Labor Party, who had played a major role in the domestic side of the war to stop us going back to the 1930s.

Discuss Churchill's attacks on Attlee's patriotism during the campaigns.

This was always said to be one of the moments of the campaigns. It certainly was a huge mistake -- the idea that you would taunt people like Attlee, old soldiers from the First World War, with somehow not being patriotic. A huge mistake to do that, and I think Churchill came to realize it and had it pointed out to him. Whatever else you could charge the Labor Party with, a lack of patriotism wasn't amongst them, and to say that to the people who represented all those millions of people who'd been fighting through the war, was deeply offensive and counterproductive. A deep patriotism has always been an essential part of the left in Britain - in that sense it's been a national party. But the right had been unremitting in their attack on the Labor Party's lack of patriotic credentials.

It's been a key part of the rights armory, certainly right up until the fall of communism, to somehow suggest that you were really in love with another society rather than your own. This is, I think, an interesting point: the falling of communism at the end of the 1980s was celebrated as a great victory for the right and for capitalism, and for a defeat for socialism. Actually, I believe for socialism in the West, it was a huge, liberating moment because from that time you were free of that contamination. You were free of that guilt by association. You had to be taken on your own terms, and that deprived the right of a major chunk of its armory.

By the end of the Attlee government, where was the Labor Party headed?

By the end of the Attlee government - indeed, some time before the end of the Attlee government - there were huge discussions beginning about, "where next? We've done our ancestral program, but what do we do now?" If you look at the time, there were all kinds of things being written by some of the people who became major figures in the Labor Party in the next generation, people like Tony Crossland, Roy Jenkins. There were books like new Fabian essays, where they write about how you reconcile freedom and equality, how you use the state in a way that's not oppressive, how in fact you can decentralize and empower people in different ways. There were the beginnings of those kinds of conversations and how you move away from a socialism defined in terms of the state owning the economy to one which regulates the economy and uses the tax system to redistribute. Now, they did quite innovative things, but they became a stock-in-trade of the social-democratic left in the 1960s.

What reforms did the Attlee government establish? What were their achievements?

What the Attlee government did was to take into public ownership those industries that were said either to be failing or to be central to the nation: basic utilities. The only one that fell outside that list was the steel industry, which was seen as a manufacturing industry, and there was real contention about whether it should be in the public or private sector. But things like the railways or the pits, which were having huge problems in private hands, or the electricity industry. It was almost the common sense of the day to think that they should be in public ownership - the natural monopolies, as we call them. And, of course, that consensus provided for a generation after 1945. That was the great achievement of the government. It wasn't undone, and when the conservatives came back in the 1950s they took that as being the parameters of politics. Indeed, it became known as the post-war settlement. That's what Attlee had done. Mrs. Thatcher, in the 1970s deliberately set about dismantling that settlement; and of course, we're still experiencing the consequences of that.

What caused Attlee and the Left's fall from power?

What pushed Attlee out of office, I think, finally was a sense of being somehow about the past rather than about the future, of having done the thing that had to be done, but then the war had been ended quite some years. The conservative cry of freedom was able to be raised again; issues about state control, regulation, bureaucracy. People moved into a different era, and I think people wanted a little bit of loosening up and the left had begun to lose its way. It had been proud of what it [had] done, which is why 1945 is always seen as the great historical moment for

the British left. But it began to seem as though it was looking back rather than looking forward, and starting in the late 1940s, I think, there were questions being asked about what the left now believes in. Plus then you had divisions starting to open up inside the party, and a number of things came together, I think, to give the conservatives opportunity again.

What was the Attlee government's legacy to the left?

In one decisive sense, the Attlee government was extraordinarily beneficial to the cause of the left because you were always able to point back to that period when socialism wasn't just something you talked about, but you could point to real historical achievement. And if you look at the way in which politics is being conducted in Britain since the Second World War, the fact that we in the Labor Party were the people who invented the National Health Service has been a profoundly important political fact.

That, in every sense, was a defining moment because it showed what a principled and coherent political party of the left could do in terms of improving people's lives. It is a moment that everyone on the left looks back on with pride. But of course, the flip side of that is that you live off the accumulated capital of that longer than you probably should, so you go on repeating the glories of 1945 without thinking about why you're in trouble now.

Discuss the current condition of the Labor Party. How has it changed since the Attlee government of the 1940s?

The Blair Labor Party is a fundamentally different party from the party of Attlee because we live in a fundamentally different kind of world. The question for the left from the 1970s on is what kind of left-of-center-party can you put together that will win support in a country like this. Of course, everyone in the 1980s was saying that the right had finally won, that we just have to roll over, put our feet in the air and say, 'there we are' to the market and to capitalism, "you've won."

So everybody on the left spent many, many years going around trying to explore whether the left even had any kind of future at all. And eventually we had to find an answer to that. It wasn't clear, but we began to find an answer.

If you remember how closely in the early 1980s the Labor Party in Britain came even to falling into third place electorally. It was a torrid time with the party falling apart, not knowing where it could pitch its tent in this kind of world. Through a long process under different leaders, like Tony Smith and then finally Tony Blair, you do have a process of reconstruction and renewal that says we cannot just be the 1945 party, because the 1945 world doesn't exist anymore. That class structure doesn't exist anymore. We've got to put together a center-left position which speaks to this world that we're now in. This culminated, of course during this historical moment where the conservative party started to fall apart at the very moment when the Labor Party had reached the high point of its renewal. And so we came to power in 1997 in a way that would have been wholly unexpected more than a decade before.

Discuss the significance of Clause Four to the Labor Party.

Clause Four is a totemic thing. It's height and icon. It's the shrine that we've been worshipping at for so long: part of our history, part of our being, you know, put together at that formative moment expressing our broad ambition, and people don't like those things being fiddled around with. It's like trying to change the prayer book in the Church of England. It causes all kinds of controversy even though it bears no relationship to what the party now believes in because you'd ceased to believe in nationalizing the economy many, many years ago, even if you had believed at one time. The argument was even if you didn't believe in that, let's not disturb things by seeking to recast what we say we believe because nobody knows anyway.

I suspect if John Smith had remained leader we wouldn't have done it, because his instincts, I think, were not to disturb things that needn't been disturbed. But this is where Tony Blair, amongst other things, is quite distinctive. I mean, I remember him saying to me once that the test of a renewed Labor Party would be whether it could say the same thing to every audience, and that is quite a profound test because normally politicians say different things to different audiences. Part of that meant that you had to be signed up to a form of words which actually did describe what you believed in as a party, so it wasn't enough to go around having this

thing called Clause Four which said that you were committed to one thing when in fact you were committed to something else. He just knew that you had to get that sorted, and all the wise heads in the party were saying don't get anywhere near it. He was quite resolute in thinking that was a bit of unfinished historical business and a clearing away had to be done, and you had to try and describe in a contemporary way what a party the center left now believed in.

Is today's Labor Party a socialist party?

Yeah, the Labor Party is a Socialist Party. The only problem is these days we're not so sure what socialism is. It's a Socialist Party in the sense that it stands for a conception of society and community and people owing obligations to each other, and stands for what I said was that core belief about giving everybody in society access to things that that society can offer. That, I think, is the core idea, and I think if you look at many of the programs that we're engaged in, you can still define them by that core idea.

What is socialism's relevance to today's world?

Well, I think there are a number of answers to the question of the relevance of socialism. One has to do with the essential limitations of a market approach. I mean we know that markets are extremely useful things. Indeed, we can't think of a better way of running the economy in most areas. But the point about markets is they have no values attached to them. They are value-free zones. Whoever approaches the market, they get what they get. If we still think that in some sense society is an area of collective moral choice, I mean, if we still think that a party of the left would always have something to say because it offers a particular answer to that question of moral choice. The market can't. That would be one answer I would give you.

Another one would be to say if you look at societies now, it strikes me, there's a kind of paradox going on in people lives. On the one hand, they have never been so free and so liberated. On the whole, people are richer, they can go to more places, do more things; and you can sit at home and you can have your hundred television channels and you can plan where you're going to go, which European capital you want to go for the weekend on your cheap flight. The whole thing is there for you. But those very same people are terrified of going outside their door, and I think there's a mismatch set in now between a society of self-fulfillment in a very narrow area and what people detect to be a kind of crisis of community, and I just think that's extremely serious. In a sense, it was those kind of conditions which gave birth to socialism in the first place. It was an argument about seeing individuals as being members of a society and thinking how you could make that organization just work better with people sharing mutual obligations and so on. Now I think we actually got a kind of crisis of individualism at the moment which makes it possible I think to construct arguments for a version of community which are entirely relevant to have people see themselves. So, I think this is fertile ground for the left which can talk intelligently about these things.

Did market capitalism ultimately defeat socialism?

If you look at what some of the market ideologues were saying at the time the wall came down at the end of the 1980s, they got so excited dancing on the grave of communism, you know, and their victory dances were so exaggerated, that they very much seemed to me like the Marxists of old who thought they had sort of cracked the secret of history. But, of course, you don't crack the secret of history because you find it throws up new problems for you. The market won, in that sense, insofar as there was no organized alternative to it. But it hadn't won in the sense that the choice had not been removed as to whether you want a market economy or whether you want to extend that into a market society. And I think the truth is that people do understand that you need a market economy because it's generally the most efficient way to run things, but they don't want to leap from that to say, therefore, we have a market society as well. They want those dividing lines to be in place, and it's only an argument from the left really which can make that distinction between a market economy and a market society, so one of those old arguments that we used to have years ago about how you put social justice in the equation, how you socialize the market, how you regulate capitalism, how you make individuals in the community fit together in some way. I think those arguments are as relevant as ever.

There seems to be so many flavors of socialism but people talk about “socialism” as a unified concept. Can there be such a thing as one socialism?

If you look at the history of socialism, it seems to me you can't talk about it almost in the singular, which is why when I wrote a book about it, I made it a plural. I called it *Socialisms* because I think you can go through and you can see on a number of axes just how these movements are different. I mean, do you think it's a scientific thing? Do you think it's non-forwarding of history or do you think it's a value choice? Do you think it's essentially democratic or do you think you may have to use non-democratic methods? You can go through on a number of areas and say, look, these are different kinds of animals we're talking about here and they come out of different kind of experiences, so you can begin to group these arguments around, which is what I try to do. And then I seek to put the British experience in that kind of context.

Are socialism and democracy compatible?

Well, democratic socialists also wanted to call themselves democrats. This is a key point. For the democratic socialist, the development of a socialist society wasn't a radical rupture from a society that existed. As they argue, it was a natural development out of a liberal tradition, a liberal-democratic tradition. Here, were people using the equipment of a liberal democracy to move in a social and economic direction but doing it freely, through elections, through political choice. That was a million miles away from a socialism which somehow believed that people were bound to behave as they behave because of where they sat inside the class structure and then which, in turn, justified the most appalling kinds of political organization and political behavior on the basis that the party necessarily represented the people. All that was completely alien to the democratic left, and that was the big dividing line, and that's why I say, when the wall came down, we could get rid of all those arguments and the democratic left could not be contaminated by them.

Is there a link between Eduard Bernstein and social-democracy?

Well, Bernstein was as always described as the great early revisionist. I mean, he was the one who started quibbling with the with the Marxist account of these things, who's basically said, "You just can't read off from some historical script how people are going to behave. History doesn't work like that." And he talked about it being a process and, of course, that fed directly into people on the left in Britain, like we Fabians who believed in evolution and permeation and so on. That was an argument deducted to a very high level in terms of a philosophical argument within German social democracy. I mean, of course, it was profound moment because it challenged that whole tradition of Marxist worldview, so of course, Bernstein stood outside that, but he was a major transitional figure from the Marxist tradition into a modern socio-democratic tradition.

There was a definite linkage from Bernstein, the great continental revisionist, into some of the people it made the socio-democratic left in Britain. I mean, his thought was directly influential on people like Tony Crossland in the 1950s when they were seeking to revise fundamental doctrines inside the Labor Party, and it looked to a whole new view of socialism being an unfolding process, democratically driven, and it put you a million miles away from the kind of communist states of the East.