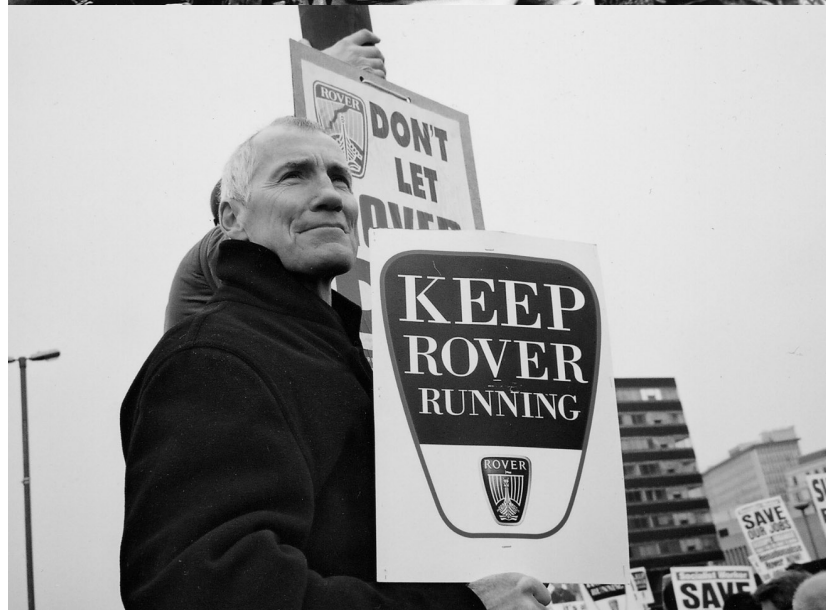


# Class, Country and Control



CPB(ML)  
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# On May Day 1997 the British working class uprooted the political power we had vested in Thatcher. Where have we come since then...and where are we going?

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## Class, country and control

IT HAS OFTEN BEEN SAID, but not much repeated in the lifetime of those under 30, that British workers more than once in modern times brought down a government. In 1970 and 1974 industrial organisation, used in political opposition, made it impossible for a government to govern. We were effective and proud of the fact that we could defend ourselves against governments that threatened us and our unions. But could we create a government and make sure it acted in the interests of the British people?

The fact that we could not is the story of the last quarter of the 20th century; it must not be the story of the next.

In the seventies to remove the class-riddled Tories we elected similarly class-riddled Labour; one career politician for another. A social contract was drawn up to try to pretend the conflict between the interests of capital and those of workers did not exist. This created a political life so suffocating that even the Prime Minister Harold Wilson got bored and packed it in.

In a high-water mark of our control of the parliamentary process, class-conscious British workers saw off 'Sunny' Jim Callaghan, Labour's farming Prime Minister in the late 1970s. It was not weakness, craven self-interest or stupidity, as has been argued since. Spectres of the so-called winter of dis-

content are raised to prove how irresponsible trade unionists can be. The opposite was the case. Trade unionists had to oppose pay restraint and the beginnings of the serious anti-union legislation under Labour, and the start of large-scale deindustrialisation as the effects of Britain's entry into the Common Market in 1975 began to be felt. If it was a winter of discontent it was because workers were being frozen out in a new way.

That element of our class acting for itself in a conscious way — Ford workers, transport and public sector workers, engineers and teachers, often under Communist leadership — advanced by destroying a version of social democracy that said we could live with capitalism. This attitude was not imposed from without, it was invented by British workers, and led to wage and investment freezes, near-hyper inflation and paralytically thin parliamentary majorities. The Labour government had to beg for loans from the International Monetary Fund to keep going.

That element of our class acting in itself, that is timid of our potential and reluctant to take control, became worried: What if we won? Could we govern? The age-old question got an age-old answer: "Better to lose than to win." Better to live with capital than without it, better to civilise capitalism (as if!) than to take capitalism out of civilisation.

From their experience in the post-war period and particularly the 1960s and 1970s the leading sections of our class knew how to defeat employers and governments. But they did not know what to do next. It was all very well winning a pay rise, but then the problem became how to save a whole industry from closure. Many leading trade unionists acted to warn and resist. The rest of our class seemingly didn't care. The result was inevitable — Thatcher.

That Thatcher could be electorally sustained only by the votes of so many British workers is a matter of shame. So many trade unionists voted for someone whose sole aim was to destroy unions. Why did we have to suffer so much before realising that her removal was the number one priority? A crushing man-made blight on industrial workers, their lives, children and towns was masterminded.

The effects of this economic blitzkrieg we will suffer for a generation. We did not join the miners in decisive battle in the 1980s, and allowed printers, teachers and others to fight alone. We let Thatcher make a crime of that class solidarity which would have destroyed her had we used it.

That her removal was so shambolic produced a further six Tory years, with her anointed successor Major fumbling on in a minor key. It also led

to much confusion. Far too many believed it was the Tories who decided to remove her, not seeing that this was forced on them by a people no longer prepared to suffer her. Far better a backstairs back-stabbing than defeat by the hated trade unions which would surely have come with the 1992 final solution pit-closure programme and the great resistance to it that was organised throughout the country.

What had workers been up to in the meantime? Had they been assiduously caring for threatened organisation? Had they been considering what to do with the breathing space a Tory departure would bring? In the main, no.

But while the best in our class had been picked off, sacked, intimidated into seeming passivity, those who had connived at the coming of Thatcher had not been idle. A new generation of social democrats was gaining the confidence to do what their forebears always aspired to. They reinvented in a new form the old idea that social democracy should go from living with capitalism to running capitalism, with little enthusiasm even for social reform in the interests of trade unions and workers. A very Christian group of Labour leaders reformulated the ancient Christian teachings for the modern world — help the poor, but turn the other cheek to the source of their misery.

These ‘communitarians’ led by

Smith, Brown and Blair (in that order) realised they could do a better job of running the country than Major (not saying a great deal!). Result? By 2000 an increasing gulf between those who have a lot and those who have little. Because workers were so desperate, they had a free run. “Suppress all dissent, all desire for fundamental change, and vote for us.” The result was inevitable. A new government became subservient to the latest plans of global capital and the transnational corporations.

What became distinctive of New Labour was its insistence that the democratic structures and traditions that made Britain’s independent democracy would be ignored. Just as Thatcher’s first act had been to remove exchange controls on capital, so Brown’s non-manifesto act was to make the Bank of England independent, to pave the way for Britain’s economy to be run by unelected bankers in Frankfurt. A single currency requires initially independent national banks.

**M**uch of the time since the 1997 General Election has been wasted in deciding irrelevant questions: Are they any good? Have they betrayed us? Do we like Blair? They can hardly have betrayed us when they didn’t say they’d do very much in the first place! You can only be betrayed by those you trust.

The point is that they’re here, like the Tories in power, a product of the British working class. Unlike the Tories, though, they come from the working class. Trade union money funds their victory. So we can seek to impose on this government a line for national survival, to oppose the increasingly loud call for the elimination of the nation state and our democratic structures in the European Union.

The working class which feeds new Labour is now synonymous with the British people, the British nation. Workers’ interests in full employment, fulfilling work, peace, industry, public services and environmental sustainability and better education and healthcare are now indistinguishable from the national interest.

We can impose a policy on Blair. The question is, have we got one? More to the point, what do we need, what’s in our class, national interests?

We cannot impose our own interests without leaving the EU. Coming out of the EU would not mean we could not catch a train to Paris, drink Italian wine or holiday in Greece, as the scaremongers say. But it would mean we could build our own trains, grow our own food, and control, crucially, our own currency. Crucially because what is being planned now will make Thatcher’s anti-British onslaught seem tame by comparison.

The plan for the EU to have a single currency is a plan for the EU to

# An agenda for Britain

## We need to put all our people to work

This can be done with the political will. It may cost £100,000 to create a job, but how much does it cost not to? To keep five million workers unemployed and underemployed? We have the money anyway: if we can auction off mobile phone licences once, we can do it again. Come to that, why auction them off at all? Let's run the thing ourselves, and keep and use all the revenue that would bring!

## We need to invest in the future.

We can show that American, Japanese and German companies are not the only ones who can develop new industries and rebuild old ones. With the same investment in research and development we can match their achievements. We are already the fourth largest economy on the planet with a diverse range of trading arrangements throughout the world and with most of our Gross Domestic Product involved in supplying the domestic or world markets. Our scientists, technicians and engineers remain at the forefront of many of the most leading new industries and technologies whether they be bio-genetics or e-commerce. We have a dearth of opportunities to apply our discoveries and too many unskilled workers living in poverty.

## We need to get our hands on OUR OWN money

And we need to control its investment. Pensions are deferred wages, and pension funds alone are sufficient to rebuild substantial sections of British industry. Add to that our collective savings and ability to generate far more, and dead capital can be brought to life.

## We need to stop them running away with the family silver

Thatcher's first act was to end exchange controls, allow capital to be freely removed from Britain (using the argument that this would allow it freely to flow in too). We can re-impose these controls and ensure that profits made in Britain stay in Britain. Likewise with the monetarist brief given to the Bank of England and the consequent high rate of the pound. Such things can and must be altered. We could even stop the sale of the irresponsible speculation with our gold reserves which Brown has started, and, by refusing to sign up to the euro we could retain our gold reserves rather than give them all away. We could re-impose import controls and stop the undercutting and devastation of our most staple industries.

## And we need to leave the EU

Except of course we couldn't re-impose these controls, or do a lot of other things we need to do, while we remain members of the European Union.

See how close we've come to losing our motor industry because the EU wouldn't let us take over from BMW, and to losing our fishing and farming industries because of the EU.

become a single government, with nations broken down into regions. Three super-regions (Wales, Scotland, England) are to replace Britain. And the rest, the English regions, each with its own 'Development' Agency, are to become the basic governmental units of the EU.

This is why we have regional elections, city mayors and all the related 'constitutional reforms'. All this is to make us cantons — but with far less power than the Swiss originals — in a European federal superstate. One tax system, one common (foreign) security policy, one currency, one interest rate, one exchange rate, one legal system — all controlled by the unelected commissioners and bankers who by virtue of the treaties are unable to respond to pressures from former 'countries'.

Losing control of our currency would mean losing control of our country. As we can never accept the latter, we must not allow the former.

And we'd have a great deal more money if we left the EU: between £6 billion and £8 billion a year at 2000 prices. (These are the subsidies we pay net to the EU, without our consent.) So the next time you hear a communitarian say we cannot afford industrial investment, or to build a hospital, remind them that we could if we left this particular European Community!

Thatcher in her scorched-earth blitzkrieg against manufacture in Britain cost 4,000 jobs a month 20 years ago. Now, to meet the EU's convergence criteria in preparation for a single currency, lightning war is destroying 6,500 manufacturing jobs every month!

They raise interest rates not to keep inflation down but to keep wages and investment down. As a result, Britain has a huge and growing deficit in trade in manufactured goods.

So to stop the decline we must say to Blair, under no circumstances a single currency! We must make Brown's

hesitations permanent. To move forward, we must give notice of our withdrawal from the EU.

Workers must say these things when they go to union meetings, and go they must. There is still no better way to bring workers together to have political impact and create strong organisation than through trade unions.

It is significant, and dangerous, that some of our unions are running ahead of the government in pressing for the euro. Those hit hardest by the EU's deindustrialising policies look to it to save them! The truth is that to undo the damage of the Tory years we need a high degree of national self determination, not more of the monetarism we suffered from 1979 but this time in new EU-stamped bottles.

Thatcher's T.I.N.A. is replaced by Blair's: There Is No Alternative. But just as there was an alternative to Thatcher, so there is an alternative to Blair.

British workers created trade unions where none existed, in conditions of privation that mock our difficulties. These unions created a social democracy, a Labour Party, where none existed. Have we convinced ourselves that this is the limit of our achievement? Living with a capitalism that couldn't care less about us, unless to destroy our power to oppose?

We have wrung from Blair more money than ever before for our Health Service, and we have prevented headlong rush into the euro, both steps forward. But just as workers run the NHS and most other parts of our economy, so we can run the country. The precise organisational forms have not yet been found, nor has the way to wrest power from an evil and treacherous enemy class, daily selling up and moving out.

Many have looked to the experience of other countries in the past or currently in completely different circumstances as if the model of socialism lay somewhere off stage. For us in a country with such a heritage of work-

ing class socialism and organisation and collective action, we have always believed that we must focus on Britain and what its workers can contribute to the international cause of progressing beyond capitalism and imperialism. We've got to sort it without much of a guide book, and in sorting it workers throughout the world would surely be influenced.

**R**ecognition that we can and should end the profit motive is as old as the capitalism itself, but it has always been a minority view in practice in Britain. Computer chips, the Internet and deep-sea oil drilling are not produced by the profit motive, or by the capitalist relations of production of private ownership. They are produced by workers. Workers making these things create the surplus value from which the small class of owners profit. We understand enough to see we can be independent politically and economically of those who currently run the place.

We should stop believing that politics is what happens at General Elections. Politics happens in the workplace, when people consciously advance their own needs and wishes. And also outside the workplace when people come together to further a special social interest, or protect their neighbourhood, or improve their community and their environment.

There has been a centuries-long campaign to turn politics into Parliament, (literally, a 'talking place'). This they call democracy, played by their rules. No parliamentary democrat ever asked the only important democratic question, "Do you want to be exploited?" No true democracy can be based on wage slavery, any more than the USA had a democracy when half the country was based on plantation slavery.

We have our own democracy, based on our overwhelming superiority in numbers and concepts of accountability and representation completely different from theirs.

Democracy after all means rule of the people. All but a few thousand in Britain have to work for a living, or are forced by illness or unemployment to depend on the 'benefits' created by others' work. Democracy would be any action by a government in the interests of those overwhelming millions who make Britain, and whose future is here.

Most of us want to keep the pound and want import controls to protect our economy. Most of us believe that Britain not the EU should decide our policies on taxes, health, welfare and education, culture and the law, the level of immigration, defence, rights at work, and the level of agricultural production. In June 1999, 77% of us abstained in Euro-elections. Most of us want to keep Britain united and oppose separatism and chauvinism.

The Labour Party never was about the people having power. It was about the people living with capitalism. So let's not worry too much on its behalf. Let's remember, though, that the British working class will only destroy its own creation, social democracy, when it has something better to put in its place.

In the run-up to yet more elections, and with a far more important referendum to follow, let working people set their sights higher than the not-very-confident, 'Things can only get better', by adding, 'Only if we make them.'

We will need also to be prepared to follow through the consequences of our own considerable power and our identification with the future of the nation. At the next General Election we will be faced with the choice of New Labour and the Liberal Democrats seeking to give Britain up to the European Union. The Tories will argue that we should keep the pound but sign up to the North Atlantic Free Trade Area to give the US a great stranglehold over us. The real choice for workers is whether they are prepared to dictate the future of an independent Britain.



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