

Chartist Editor's Report 2014

40 years at the helm – reflections 1974-2014

Chartist was a very different political animal when I took over editing in Spring 1974. The banner headline on the tabloid talked of building a 'Joint Command of Revolutionary Organisations' and preparing for dual power. Bravely, if bonkers, a Soldier's Charter had been produced to sell amongst troops in Aldershot and Colchester. Miners were striking and hundreds of thousands of workers were protesting against the Industrial Relations Bill. Edward Heath called an election on 'Who Rules Britain' and lost to Harold Wilson. Labour formed a close alliance with the trade unions.

This was the high tide period of the post-war workers' revolt. The 'Social Contract' with the unions, crafted by Hugh Scanlon, Jack Jones and Labour Ministers, though full of promise ended in tears. In Eric Hobsbawm's inimitable words 'the forward march of labour' was halted. When Tony Crosland announced 'the party's over' in 1976 he meant the growth of public sector services, but inadvertently predicted the plight of his party. This was capped by Denis Healey's IMF loan with its adverse social consequences. Eighteen years of Thatcherite Toryism were to follow in 1979.

It is worth reflecting briefly on the changes. There were almost 12 million trade unionists in the early 1970s, now a little more than six million. Manufacturing industry was still relatively strong: mining, steel-making, shipbuilding, car making, aeronautical engineering. Tory deindustrialisation changed all that. We had a change in the nature of British capitalism from traditional manufacturing to services and finance.

Change in the working class—the social formation Marxists have generally seen as the agency for revolution—was significant. White collar, public and private service employees replaced blue collar proletarians. The modern 'precariat' was being born. The long hours, low paid, zero contracts, poorly organised, semi skilled workforce of today was taking shape.

Rise of new movements—as the traditional working class declined feminism, black liberation, gay & lesbian liberation and ecological groups (prefiguring the Green movement) were emerging. We were part of the left that sought to develop a fresh approach, a rainbow alliance, towards social change. Many on the Trotskyist and Labour left stood against this realignment of social forces.

Rise of new technology—still in its infancy in the 1970s, today a huge factor in social and political life. The advent of personal computers, mobile phones, Ipods, Ipads and ebooks has transformed how we communicate and learn. It has provided new powers to the state to watch and monitor but it has also democratised information and trading. The pace of change, in this second industrial/technological revolution, is accelerating.

Internationally the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland were still the dominant political question in the UK and continued to be so until the end of the century when Iraq and Afghanistan became the new imperial conflict zones. In Vietnam the Vietcong had defeated US imperialism and the Paris peace accords were signed in 1975. That same

year Spain had seen the death of Franco and a new republic while in Portugal a revolution against Salazar ushered in a period of democratic reform. Similar developments saw Greece entering a new era. The Cold War continued until the end of the 1980s.

Globalisation became the name of the capitalist game. In 1973 Nixon had ended gold to dollar convertability. The era of Bretton Woods and stable exchange rates was over. Unemployment and hyper inflation, fuelled by currency speculation and Middle East oil price hikes created huge instability. This drove the project of the European Union. While much of the left had been against the Common Market—‘the bosses club’, and campaigned against a yes vote in the referendum, British people voted yes with the urging of all three main parties. By the late 1970s we recognised the need to work for a more democratic political, social and economic union by a reform process within the EU. A nationalist siege economy was never going to have leverage in the face of global foot-loose multi-national corporations. Further, the capacity to develop a modern, cosmopolitan multi-cultural society would have been severely weakened if we had taken a ‘Britain alone’ stance. With the Delors’ social Europe initiative, progressive social and environmental changes were emerging. Free movement of capital also meant free movement of labour which had huge positive cultural political implications.

Finally, in the Labour party we were witnessing the development of a new left. Some called it Bennism. In London it also coalesced around Ken Livingstone and a metropolitan cosmopolitanism that embodied a more modern democratic socialist polity.

Throughout the period, most Chartist supporters have continued to work for change in and through the Labour Party, recognising it as the main party through which trade union and progressive aspirations are likely to be met, at local, national and European levels. New Labour with Blair’s wars and neo-liberal economic policies severely tested this approach for many. Whilst the majority of activists continue to view Chartist as a ginger group in the Labour Party some supporters prefer working independently through their trade union or political campaigns whilst a handful adhere to other radical parties (the Greens, and Plaid).

Throughout this period Chartist has striven to review and reappraise. What theoretical tools can serve the left? What aspects of Marxism are still relevant? What can we learn from anarchist, libertarian ideas? What modern thinkers can help explain and tackle the nature of capitalism today? At root we knew the left needed to modernise, to develop new ideas and new ways of working. With varying degrees of success we have provided a platform for the development of new democratic socialist politics. Socialism, yes, but with an added emphasis on democracy. Democracy in the workplace, in the community/civil society, in the home and above all in the state were our *leit motives*. Thus we connected up with our 19th century namesakes and that unfinished business, the British democratic revolution. We aimed for a socialism not reducible to a command economy. From the early days in challenging Militant’s ‘nationalisation of the commanding heights of the economy’ to recognising a role for a regulated private sector, the role of co-operatives, the importance of workers’ control and workplace democracy, we have sought to expand on the democratic end of the twinned concept. Active citizenship, promoting work within civil society as

well as through parliaments and local town halls remains central to our conception of socialist change. We pioneered a 'third road' between revolutionary, Leninist/Trotskyist insurrectionism and parliamentary Fabianism. The concept was high-jacked by the Blairites but the need for a humanist, internationalist, democratic route to socialism, one that combines extra-parliamentary action and engagement with intervention in local, national and supra-national democratic bodies, seems more important than ever.

Socialism has to be an act of self-emancipation. As modern capitalist society has fragmented old working class communities and disrupted extended family life, it has created more home working, atomised the collective drives of earlier capitalism. New technology overlaid with a culture of possessive individualism has produced new kinds of alienation. In the face of this and the decline of ties of trade union, family, and Church Blue, Labour has posited a return to old style family values, an emphasis on personal morality and traditional community ties (with dangerous talk of tougher immigration controls). As David Marquand has argued, this is a problem for the left and one directly addressed by the new right populist parties of the UKIP ilk.

The poet Milton coined the term 'strenuous liberty' to convey the idea that people must make an effort, take risks to both sustain and enhance their freedoms and wellbeing. The alternative of 'bondage with ease' is not an option. Occupy, UK Uncut, London Citizens fighting for a living wage, green activists challenging fracking or ecocide, women's rights campaigners against FGM and rape, migrant rights activists challenging deportations and discrimination, trade unions striking to defend and extend living conditions, jobs and pensions (be it transport workers, teachers, local government staff or civil servants) reveal a potential for this strenuous liberty. But how might we combine it with electoral success, securing government and facilitating progressive change? This is the challenge facing the Labour Party and the wider left.

And so to 2014

As we have argued the 2008 financial collapse should have been the left's opportunity. Socialists have long argued capitalism could not work for the people, that it is inherently unstable, generates inequality and conflict and is prone to crisis—despite Gordon Brown's 'no more boom and bust'. 30 years of neo liberalism had taken its toll on the social democratic/Labour left leaving it mired in compromise and unable to argue a convincing alternative to austerity. Across Europe the parties of the centre right pursued an agenda of welfare/social spending cuts, privatisation, wage restraint and high unemployment. The weaker economies of the Mediterranean were forced to swallow the bitter medicine of huge cuts in living standards in exchange for bank loans, little of which went into infrastructure development or to the people.

Meanwhile, as Thomas Piketty in *Capital for the 21st century*, Wilkinson & Pickett (*The Spirit Level*) and others have shown, inequality between the rich and poor continues to grow, both within developed capitalist states and between them and the less developed world, creating ongoing instability, conflict and ill-health. A recent conference in London on Inclusive Capitalism heard Christine Lagarde, the IMF boss quote Oxfam research that the richest 85 people, who could fit on a double decker bus, are wealthier than 3.5 billion, yes billion, people. Governor of Bank of England

Mark Carney talked of ‘market fundamentalism’, lessons not learned by the banks over the past six years. No departure from neo-liberalism, but indications of splits amongst ruling elites. It is reminiscent of Ted Heath’s ‘capitalism with a human face’. Behind the blather and motivating this kind of talk is an explosive mix of insecurity, atomisation and rage in the UK and across Europe.

So the European elections see the emergence of nationalist populist and fascist right wing parties. In Britain and France they topped the poll with UKIP getting 27% and the French Front National with 25%. As some wit remarked if you adopt the policies of the 1930s you get 1930s politics. Yes, it was a protest vote. Yes, it was a low poll – 44% across Europe—only 34% in the UK, so actually UKIP only received 10% of the vote...but it is still 10% too much. Hollande’s Socialist Party triumph on an anti-austerity programme seemed to evaporate in the face of the centre right majority across Europe. There were successes for the left. The victory of the radical left Syriza alliance in Greece with 27% of the poll, the unexpected success of the centre left in Italy with 40% of the poll, small groups in Germany (Die Linke) and Spain (Podamos) scoring successes along with swings to the Green parties, Sinn Fein and the Labour Party in Britain all indicate that it is not one way traffic.

With the Lib Dems support imploding and the context of continuing cost of living squeeze with huge cuts in welfare spending Labour should score higher in the polls. But there has been no clear alternative.

So where does this actually leave the left in Britain? Many question Miliband’s leadership capacity and credentials. He has challenged predatory capitalism, stood up to Murdoch, proposed an energy price freeze, local government powers & greater devolution (but being vague on cash), a higher minimum wage, an end to the bedroom tax, & reform of zero hours contracts. But there is way to go because the leadership appears to accept the Tory/Lib Dem agenda of deficit reduction as the number one priority rather than progressive taxation, ending tax evasion and avoidance, and sustainable investment and growth in jobs and training.

The rise of UKIP is a threat to Labour but a greater threat to the Tories. UKIPs flat tax, anti immigrant rhetoric and anti-European ‘little Englandism’, are the limited policies that currently define them. Deputy leader Nuttall is in favour of privatisation of the NHS, Farage claims to be the heir of Thatcher. At root they stand for a light touch unregulated market capitalism. Miliband’s tactic of soft peddling on UKIP was a mistake. John Cruddas seemed more on the ball on this issue.

Chartist has produced some clear analysis and reform proposals on developments in the European Union. We need to sustain and develop the detail of an agenda for a more democratic federal and social Europe to counter the Tory campaign.

More broadly this next year will inevitably be dominated by the run-up to the general election, and in September the referendum in Scotland on independence, with massive implications for the ‘Break up Britain’. It is vital we use the pages of Chartist to debate out key policy areas, analyse & critique Labour’s key ideas and weaknesses whilst continuing to comment on and analyse international political and economic developments.

Tasks and achievements

1. Chartist

We have sustained bi-monthly 32 page production with the heroic production efforts of Andy Morton in Huddersfield and Editor and team based in London. Our range of contributors has grown and in one edition (no 267) we had more than 50% women contributors as feature writers. We still have much work to do to achieve better gender balance in contributors and on the EB. Andy guest edited a European issue bringing in yet more new writers. We still have around 30 hand-sellers and go into 8 bookshops.

Content wise we have sought to promote an anti-austerity alternative economic strategy with Frank Lee and Prem Sikka doing much of the driving here. Last year saw the emergence of the People's Assembly Against Austerity. An affiliate of this broad based trade union and left movement has been the **Labour Assembly Against Austerity**. Last November we were joint organisers of a successful 240 strong conference where two EB members Duncan Bowie and Don Flynn were lead workshop speakers and several of us played key organisational roles. A follow up meeting was held in House of Commons in March, round 50 attended. LAAA also submitted proposals into Labour Policy Review process and Chartist published several thematic policy pieces in the last two issues.

International coverage has been strong with Europe and Africa being regularly covered by respected left analysts.

Duncan Bowie has maintained a regular six to seven pages of book reviews with a wide range and depth while Patrick Mulcahy continues as a reliable film critic. We have sustained three regular columns: Points and Crossings by Paul Salveson and Marginal Notes by Keith Savage. Youth View columnist Dermot Nelligan has proved an able successor to Jenny Bowie and Tosin Omilaju. Thanks to Amy Williams we ran three RightsWatch columns and aim to continue with various authors in future issues. Greenwatch has been more sporadic. Our History passed its 50th issue with an ebook (see later pamphlets) and thanks again to Duncan, goes from strength to strength.

Martin Rowson continues to provide inspirational, perspicacious and laugh out loud lampoons.

Proposal: one issue at least to be guest edited by another EB member.

2. Subscriptions and promotion

We have been working to implement the business plan.

We continue to have swap adverts with Tribune, both Briefings & Peace News and a media partner with Venezuela Solidarity Campaign. We also sponsor the LAAA.

Subscriptions running at around 230 of which over 100 are supporters.

We sold over 50 copies of the magazine at Labour Party conference in Brighton and about 40 at Labour Special & Local Government conference in March. Several sellers still take more than 10 copies to sell. Always need more sellers and hand sales remain an important way for the magazine to reach new readers.

The website is obviously one of the most important vehicles we have for promotion and we need to develop more links with other groups and journals. After Ukraine and Europe postings we had good spikes in number of visits, but traffic is uneven. Andrew Coates as press officer has promoted key articles on his website and social media but we need to put more collective thought into boosting our media profile. Press releases of key articles should be an element of media strategy.

Twitter & Facebook

We have a Twitter account and several EB members are regular contributors in the Twittersphere and on Facebook. Again more action needed on these new forms of communication.

Proposal: develop a social media strategy. Invite supporters and volunteers to a half day meeting in the Autumn to focus on this.

3. Production—we need to spread production expertise and relieve Andy. He has indicated that we need to have someone to take over production editor by end of year. Remote production works but sharing production with a second Quark computer would help immensely. A small team of proof readers work either on one day at John Sunderland's office and/or remotely to improve the quality of copy. This team always needs enhancing.

We need to think about production and what other options we have as Andy will be unable to continue to cover both website and production editor and has indicated a preference for former.

Some options:

1. Find an extra person to do some of the work in London to relieve pressure
2. Andy to find someone to train over 6 months
3. We pay someone to do it / offer expenses
4. We talk to the printer about a price for design as well as printing
5. Talk to Spokesman about design and print
6. Use different software – something easier to use / easier to collaborate

4. Website

One of the huge achievements of 2014 has been the revamping and re-launching of the Chartist website. With the Rowson cartoon and covers plus Andy's inventive images the site looks alive and vibrant. Big thanks to Andy for his Herculean efforts to modernise the site. Also thanks to Fran for her earlier work. We now have a regular, if not daily presence, but it is up to all of us to submit articles, ideas and responses on the blog. Only with regular visits will the site begin to enter into the wider political dialogue. Frank Lee's three part analysis of the crisis in Ukraine, produced as an ebook, is a model of how we can develop hot political issues on the site.

As Andy argues the website should be seen as a parallel forum for the development of Chartist ideas and support. What this 'dual platform' approach allows us to do is to produce more regular comment/analysis on global and domestic events, to develop debate on articles started on website or magazine and generally to reach a vastly

expanded number of people. See Andy's report 'Long Term Plan-Strategy and Direction' for more detail on plans for the website.

5. Pamphlets

Although '*Socialising Transport*' by Paul Salveson was produced early last year we had the launch meeting early this year. Held in the House of Commons we attracted over 30 people including Labour Shadow spokesperson Linda Greenwood MP, Manuel Cortez general secretary of transport union TSSA and Paul himself. Other speakers included Christian Wolmar, the head of Rail franchising and several prominent rail campaigners.

Our History 50 was also produced as an ebook and is available on the website. We have plans to produce a hard copy with the Socialist History Group. A further ebook Work and Social Security by Rory O'Kelly is also now available on the website as a download.

We have plans to produce two further pamphlets over the next year, with women and equalities issues and immigration being the two favoured topics.

6. Relations with other groups

We have a regular invitation to the Independent Labour Publications to attend EB meetings. Although ILP has few supporters in London it is important to maintain dialogue. We also arranged two discussions with Labour Briefing (Original) to explore common ground. A further step in developing this dialogue could be to have reciprocal EB members. Reading Michael Barrett Brown's review of *EP Thompson and English Radicalism* (Spokesman 124) he reminds readers that when Thompson, John Saville and others left the Communist Party in 1956 they formed the *Reasoner*, later *New Reasoner*. Simultaneously, two other ex CPers, Ralph Samuel and Charles Taylor launched *The University and Left Review*. Several EB members, including Ralph Miliband and Barrett Brown were on both boards and over a period of a year or so following several meetings the two journals were merged to form *New Left Review*. Wherever possible it is important that we too find common ground and pool resources to strengthen our impact and collective 'voice'. **Proposal: invite LBO to take a reciprocal place on EB.**

We have worked closely with Next Generation Labour activists in LAAA. It is important that we keep a focus on trying to develop a younger generation willing to be involved in Chartist. Cat Smith was successful in winning the Lancaster Labour candidacy and obviously has to spend much more time working in the constituency and thus less on Chartist. We must refresh relations with NGL and independent youth contacts and aim for greater representation on EB.

Proposal: two seats for young people on the EB.

A handful of us continue work in the Republican Socialist Alliance to develop a politics of democratic republicanism. RSA held a useful day school in March (see my report on Benn, Labour & Republicanism on Chartist website).

Elsewhere on the left all sorts of realignments are occurring. Following the sexual assault and rape scandal in the SWP the organisation has haemorrhaged members, particularly students and youth. New groups Counterfire and International Socialists have emerged. Some of the refugees have been involved in launching Left Unity as a

new party. We have argued that this is a party too far, a party that has not learnt the lessons of Respect, Socialist Alliance, Socialist Unity and other attempts at party building to the left of the Labour Party. Whilst not all Chartist supporters see the Labour Party as the best vehicle to promote socialist politics and develop a movement for real social change it remains the only viable alternative to the Tories and retains the bulk of the trade union movement, the forces that largely formed the party 100 years ago. This makes it different to many continental socialist parties. The People's Assembly Against Austerity is an important united front type organisation in which many supporters participate. Some of us are involved in promoting the Greece Solidarity Campaign and working on developing links amongst other Europeans working against austerity across Europe in the UK.

7. Editorial Board

Thanks to new members Sheila Osmanovic, Andrew Coates and Patrick Mulcahy who joined longer terms stalwarts. Bi-monthly meetings continue at LSE with an average attendance of seven members. In alphabetical order the current EB is:

Duncan Bowie, Pete Chalk, Mike Davis, Patricia d'Ardenne, Don Flynn, David Floyd, Roger Gillham, James Grayson, Peter Kenyon, David Lister, Frank Lee, Andy Morton, Mary Southcott, Cat Smith, & John Sunderland. Matthew Brown (ILP) had a standing invitation but was unable to attend.

8. Management Board

Comprises Mike Davis (editor), Peter Kenyon (treasurer), Andy Morton (Production/Web editor), Roger Gillham (subs), John Sunderland, Jim Grayson and Pete Chalk. Meets bi-monthly alternating with EB.

Mike Davis, Editor, June 2014