WELL-PREPARED GROUND
The British Left on the Eve of the Russian Revolution

The Main Constituents of the British Left

Prior to the events of 1917, the shape and contours of the British Left were significantly different from the pattern that was subsequently to emerge. The Labour Party had existed since 1900, until 1906 under the official title of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC). But there was no individual membership until the introduction of the new constitution in 1918, the effects of which took some time to work through. Prior to this, one joined the party either by being a member of one of the affiliated unions (which, essentially, provided the cash) and paying the political levy or by becoming a member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which saw itself with some justification as its parent: the Labour Party was Keir Hardie’s “Labour Alliance” idea of the 1890s made flesh. The ILP aspired to provide the Labour Party’s socialist ethos and policies.
As a Bristol ILP leaflet seeking to explain the difference between the two parties put it: “The I.L.P supplies the driving force.”¹ This was in 1919, when Labour’s new constitution seemed to put in question the role — even the existence — of the ILP.

Membership statistics for political organizations are notoriously unreliable — and even if they were accurate there would still be questions about how large a proportion of the membership was in some sense “active” and how many were simply “book members.” But certainly, by British standards at least, the ILP was large for a socialist organization. It was by far the largest of the parties and groupings we shall be focusing on in this study. Gidon Cohen begins his book on the ILP, The Failure of a Dream, by pointing out that, though its membership had declined from a peak in the mid-1920s, at the time of its ill-fated disaffiliation from Labour in 1932 it “was over five times the size of the Communist Party.”² In the years immediately following World War I, the ILP had about thirty thousand members.³ The ILP’s radical appeal was at this time largely based on its opposition to the war.

The next largest socialist organization was the British Socialist Party. Its origins went back to the 1881 foundation, by Henry Hyndman and others, of the Democratic Federation, which changed its name to the Social-Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1884. Renamed the Social-Democratic Party in 1907, it became the core of the British Socialist Party (BSP) in 1911. Although the leadership of the ILP discouraged the idea, there had long been a desire among at least some British socialists to form a single, united socialist party. In the 1890s and 1900s, this effort could count on the support of Robert Blatchford’s popular (for a left-wing publication) weekly, The Clarion. The Unity Conference of 1911 failed to bring about the unity sought by many British socialists, but it did bring over to the new BSP a small number of ILP branches and some other, largely local, socialist organizations. The war tore the BSP apart, however, with the party as a whole refusing to support the war and a minority of “Hyndmanites,” who saw themselves as the “Old Guard of the S.D.F.” and who regarded the war as legitimate “national defence,” walking out of the party’s 1916 conference.
The SDF had participated in the setting up of the LRC in 1900 but had left the following year. A substantial section of the membership continued to favour returning to the Labour fold, and, during the war, the BSP affiliated to the Labour Party. In 1920, the party affiliated on the basis of a membership of ten thousand. The SDF-BSP is normally regarded as Marxist, which is accurate enough provided that later, more assertive and dogmatic, forms of Marxist thought are not read back into the party’s early years. Or at least not as far as the mainstream of the pre-1917 organization was concerned.

The failure of the SDF to adopt a sufficiently “rigorous” Marxist identity had led to the “impossibilist” split in the early years of the twentieth century. The main result of this ideological schism was the formation of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP), composed predominantly, to begin with, of former SDF branches in Scotland that espoused the variety of uncompromisingly purist Marxism advocated by the American socialist Daniel De Leon. One of the SLP’s founders and an early editor of its paper, *The Socialist*, was James Connolly, later to be executed for his part in the 1916 Easter Rising of the Irish republican movement in Dublin. The SLP’s membership was always small, which SLPers tended to see as a sign of revolutionary vigour and rectitude. Walter Kendall notes that the party’s 1920 conference report listed 1,258 members and estimates that by 1924 this had fallen to not more than a hundred. But for a few years either side of the war, the SLP exercised a disproportionate influence on British socialism generally, largely through its press’s provision of otherwise unavailable Marxist “classics.”

The complicated provenance of Sylvia Pankhurst’s organizations has already been summarized. Their stronghold — if that is the right word — was in the East End of London. We can assume that, whatever the name at the time, Pankhurst’s groups were always even smaller than the SLP. Kendall gives the membership of the CP (BSTI) as six hundred when it merged with the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) early in 1921, although this is based on the party’s own report and is probably on the generous side. Pankhurst’s “Left Communist”
organization, the Communist Workers’ Party, subsequent to her expulsion from the CPGB must have been tiny. But, as with the SLP, the small size of these bodies did not prevent them — and, above all, Pankhurst herself — from playing a prominent role in the years following 1917.

The shop stewards’ movement flourished in the exceptional wartime circumstances and its main organ, Solidarity, will feature quite frequently in this exploration of left-wing reactions to the notion of soviet democracy. The early ideas and attitudes of the shop stewards’ movement can be traced most immediately to the wave of strikes and union amalgamation campaigns that preceded the war and to the Industrial Syndicalist Educational League and other broadly syndicalist or “industrial unionist” initiatives and influences. In wartime, the crucial importance, on the one hand, of industry, especially such industries as engineering, and, on the other, the government’s desperate need to conscript more and more men despite the exemption promised to skilled workers, led to intense industrial conflict, including major strikes, and, from November 1916 onwards, to attempts to create a co-ordinated national shop stewards’ movement.

The origins of guild socialism, which was also to play its part in the story of soviet democracy in Britain, also went back to the years before the war. It is usual to begin an account of its origins with A.J. Penty’s 1906 book, The Restoration of the Guild System, and the writings of A.R. Orage, editor of The New Age. But much more decisive in attracting people from the Left seems to have been S.G. Hobson’s National Guilds: An Inquiry into the Wage System and the Way Out, published in 1914, and the adhesion of younger Fabian intellectuals — most notably G.D.H. Cole — in the last couple of years of peace. The National Guilds League was created in 1915, after a policy document advocating guild socialism, written by Cole and William Mellor, a former secretary of the Fabian Research Department, was rejected at the Fabians’ annual meeting.

There were of course other socialist organizations such as the Daily Herald League and the Plebs League, which will be mentioned from time to time but have not been investigated in depth. Between
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them, the ILP, the BSP, the SLP, and the Pankhurst groups, plus the shop stewards who gathered around Solidarity and the guild socialists, provide a sufficiently wide and varied spectrum of opinion for the purposes of this enquiry. Members of these organizations would not usually have regarded the Fabian Society as part of the “real” Left. Much criticized for being a small, London-based group of intellectuals, the Fabian Society was more like what today would be called a “think tank” than a political faction. Its most prominent members were Sidney and Beatrice Webb and George Bernard Shaw, who in 1913 had taken the lead in founding the New Statesman. This journal’s changing views on soviet democracy will also feature in later chapters, to give an indication of just how far beyond the Left as generally conceived the influence of the idea of soviet democracy had penetrated.

**Radical Plebeian Democracy in British Socialism**

From as early as the 1880s, versions of what the Fabians dismissed as “primitive democracy” had flourished in some parts of the British socialist movement. As the New Statesman reviewer of the Webbs’ Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain noted in 1920, the authors’ “central thesis” concerned the “proved inadequacy of the present machinery of democracy . . . to express and enforce the will of the people.” The reviewer went on to comment: “Years before the Bolsheviks came forward with their demand for a ‘dictatorship’ of the proletariat, the ‘extreme left’ in this country, as well as in America and France, had learned to speak of ‘Parliamentary’ institutions with open scorn.”

Such attitudes went beyond what would normally be understood as the “extreme left.” In 1917, the masthead of George Lansbury’s Herald proclaimed the paper to be “The National Labour Weekly.” After the war, when it was able to resume daily publication, the paper expressed the hope that “what the Manchester Guardian is to the Liberal Party, so will be the Daily Herald to the Parliamentary Labour Party.” It is worth noting in relation to this declaration that Lansbury was to
become leader of the Labour Party between 1932 and 1935, albeit in unique circumstances following Ramsay MacDonald’s formation of a “National” government. In July 1917, The Herald attributed to the effects of the war “the degradation of the House of Commons to a mere submissive tool of the Executive, its preoccupation with trivial matters, its deviation by catchwords and empty phrases, its control by vested interests, its indifference to human freedom and human life.” The paper called for fundamental reform of the parliamentary system, including demands that had frequently featured in the advocacy of what Fabians had termed “primitive democracy.”

The Fabian Society had come close to defining itself in opposition to “primitive democracy” on more than one occasion. “Anti-leadership” attitudes and support for direct democracy in the form of the referendum and initiative were sufficiently widespread on the British Left in 1896 for the Fabians to insist, in a report aimed at that year’s Socialist International congress, that “democracy, as understood by the Fabian Society, means simply the control of administration by the freely elected representatives of the people” and to reject any notion that “the technical work of government administration” or the appointment of officials should “be carried out by referendum or any other form of popular decision.” And ten years later, in a Special Committee report, the Fabians were even more explicit: “Democracy is a word with a double meaning. To the bulk of Trade Unionists and labourers it means an intense jealousy and mistrust of all authority, and a resolute reduction of both representatives and officials to the position of mere delegates and agents of the majority.” Between this and the Fabians’ conception of democracy as “government by consent of the people” was a “gulf” that, the report said, “unfortunately cuts the Labour movement right down the middle.”

On the far side of this “gulf” was the Social-Democratic Federation (SDF), whose program from 1884 demanded, in its first three points, the election of all “officers and administrators” by “Equal Adult Suffrage” and ratification of all legislation or decisions on “Peace or War” by referendum. In the 1890s, the SDF and its paper, Justice,
continued to support “a system of pure democracy by means of the ‘Initiative’ and ‘Referendum,’” as did Blatchford’s influential socialist weekly, *The Clarion*. Blatchford’s colleague, Alex Thompson, also advocated these methods in three *Clarion* pamphlets.

This was accompanied by attacks on “leadership,” whether in mainstream politics, in the *ILP*, or, as the episode of the ill-fated *Clarion* federation in the late 1890s demonstrated, in the trade unions. The essence of this approach to democracy was the implementation of all means whereby real power would be put into the hands of the citizen — or member, in the case of the unions — rather than an elected representative. The referendum and initiative was the key demand. Enthusiasm for the referendum and initiative tended to be episodic in early twentieth-century Britain, but it was nearly always to be found in the most “anti-establishment” sections of the Left. This version of “real democracy” by no means disappeared in what we may call the “early soviet” era — even among some of the most fervent advocates of the soviet system.

Soon to become a fervent supporter of soviet democracy and the Bolsheviks, in September 1916 J.B. Askew, a prominent member of the *BSP*, contributed an article to its paper, *The Call*, titled “Socialists and the Referendum.” “One reform to which, it seems to me, Socialists have paid far too little attention,” he wrote, “is that all measures passed by Parliament should be submitted, on demand of a certain percentage of the voters, to the verdict of a popular vote, and similarly, that the electorate should have the right in the same way to initiate legislation.” Although the system was not a panacea, Askew concluded, the referendum and initiative could provide a way by which class-conscious workers could “make their influence felt in a most effective manner.”

This was not an issue that divided Askew from his former comrades in the “pro-war” faction that had left the *BSP* and whose weekly organ was *Justice*. “Robert Arch” — the pen name of a regular contributor, Archibald Robertson — believed that avoiding future wars presupposed “that peace or war is to be decided by referendum, or by the vote of an
Assembly so accurately reflecting the opinions of the people that its votes are the virtual equivalent of referenda.” Achievement of “perfect political democracy” was the key to peace. This meant “the referendum, or at least proportional representation reinforced by the power of recall. But it admits of degrees of approximation.” Similarly, a few weeks later, Hyndman demanded that “the initiative, referendum and proportional representation be constituted [as] the bases of political legislation and confirmation of social action.” 17

While “Arch”/Robertson and Hyndman were ferociously anti-Bolshevik, this was hardly a charge that could be levelled at Sylvia Pankhurst. And as we shall see in later chapters, no one was to embrace the idea of soviets with greater fervour. Before the February Revolution, she had advocated the referendum, and she was to continue to do so long after her adhesion to the soviet cause. For Pankhurst, both the referendum and a system of soviets could be part of a drive towards democracy that would truly produce government by the people.

In February 1917, when the report of the Speaker’s Electoral Reform Conference was published, Pankhurst argued that Britain should “take rank with the new democracies,” Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and many of the American states, by adopting “such innovations as the Initiative, Referendum and Recall.” 18 A little later that month, at a conference called by the London Council for Adult Suffrage, whose agenda included adult suffrage, rules for the conduct of elections, proportional representation, and the initiative, referendum and recall, Pankhurst seconded a motion by Liberal Party member J.A. Hobson, the well-known economist and journalist who was to abandon radical liberalism and join the ILP in 1919. The motion demanded the insertion, in the forthcoming Reform Bill, of the referendum, initiative, and recall. 19

At the beginning of June 1917, the day before the Leeds “Soviet Convention” (to be examined in the next chapter) opened, the Woman’s Dreadnought reported on the annual conference of the Workers’ Suffrage Federation (wsf). The referendum had been adopted for use
within the organization, and the conference “urged” the enactment of referendum, initiative, and recall, as well as “the election of Ministers and Judges by referendum vote” for national government. Meanwhile, the WSF was busy in its stronghold of Bow, conducting a “straw ballot on Adult Suffrage for women, Adult Suffrage for men, Proportional Representation and the Referendum.”

In July, with the conferences of the British Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council called for at Leeds due to meet, the Dreadnought announced that the WSF hoped to move a number of amendments to what it called the “official resolutions.” To the demand for an end to the war without annexations or indemnities, it wished to add the proviso that the right of self-determination should be exercised by means of “an adult suffrage referendum vote.” This was to apply to “the British Empire as elsewhere.” A second amendment, proposed to the “charter of liberties establishing complete political and social rights for all men and women,” specified the inclusion of six “Political Reforms,” including “the Initiative and Referendum and Recall.” “On the industrial side,” the paper also called for the “creation of an industrial Parliament.” These demands may seem to belong to different radical democratic traditions, but such a mixture was not peculiar to Pankhurst and the Dreadnought. In August 1917, in an article titled “The Next Step in Political Reform,” The Herald argued for “proportional representation and the alternative vote” and “short term parliaments.” But, among other radical changes, the paper also called for the referendum, initiative, and recall, along with the replacement of the House of Lords by “an Industrial Chamber.”

In September 1917, Pankhurst’s editorial, “The Franchise Situation,” ended by urging adult suffragists to campaign for “a genuine Reform Bill which will make Parliament obedient to the people’s will” and listed among its demands “the Initiative and Referendum and Recall.” A few weeks later the Bolsheviks seized power in the name of the soviets. In her editorial welcoming “the Lenin Revolution,” Pankhurst included the following:
In the political field we believe we are right in saying that neither a Labour Party, Trade Union or ILP Conference has discussed, at any rate within recent years, such essential democratic institutions as the Initiative, Referendum and Recall, institutions which are all actually in being in the Western States of the USA, and which are partially established elsewhere. A Russian socialist woman said to us: “People here are actually discussing whether the Referendum is democratic; why, I realised the democratic importance of the Referendum when I was fifteen years of age.” The following evening we heard Mr Bernard Shaw assuming, in addressing a Fabian audience, that our populace is too ignorant to be trusted to use the Referendum and declaring if it were established in this Country, legislation would be held up altogether.”

After the October Revolution and even after the — retrospectively proclaimed — break with “bourgeois democracy” following the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly at the beginning of 1918, advocacy of the referendum continued in the pages of the Dreadnought (recently renamed the Workers’ Dreadnought). But soviet democracy was very much centre stage. Thus, in January 1918, we find Pankhurst demanding a referendum in Britain on the question of ending the war on a no annexations, no indemnity basis. In the same issue it was reported that, in Lithuania and other areas of the old Russian Empire, “the Russians insisted on the decision of the matter by a referendum vote of the peoples concerned to be taken under conditions ensuring that there should be no domination or restraint.” The issue contained yet a third appearance of the referendum, this time in the context of the forthcoming Labour Party conference. Here, Pankhurst noted: “The proposition to establish the Initiative, Referendum and Recall is new to the Labour Party Agenda, and therefore, in spite of its importance, may not be taken seriously as yet.” The very next week brought her apologia for the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly as well as claims for the democratic superiority of the soviet system — which itself contained a passing reference to the “still unswerving demand” of the Bolsheviks for territorial referendums in the German-occupied areas.
And in the spring of 1918, while the last great German offensive seriously threatened the Allies across the Channel, a motion demanding a referendum calling for “an immediate general armistice on all fronts,” which had been passed at the National Workers’ Committee conference in Manchester, was reported in the *Dreadnought* by W.F. Watson, a pre-war syndicalist in the engineering industry. Pankhurst was meanwhile criticizing the new Labour Party program, “Labour and the New Social Order.” There was no shortage of criticisms to make about all its aspects, including its constitutional timorousness. “And why not the Initiative, Referendum and Recall?” she asked.\(^{27}\)

This was followed in May 1918, in an editorial on House of Lords reform, by further support for the referendum as at least an interim measure, pending the advent of soviet-style democracy:

> As long as the House of Commons exists (it will give place at last no doubt to an Industrial Parliament) the only check upon the decisions which we could countenance would be one furnished by the rank and file of the people from whom the elected Chamber is supposed to derive its powers. The Referendum is, of course, the most direct and democratic means of popular expression and we desire to see the Referendum established without delay.\(^{28}\)

The same week, writing in the “May Day — Marx Centenary Number” of *The Call*, Pankhurst attributed both the Reform Act and the parliamentary committee on House of Lords Reform to the “wave of fear” that had swept through the “ruling classes” following the Russian Revolution. “Representative Government” was inadequate, she argued, but continued: “Nevertheless, every effort should be made to remove all obstacles that stand in the way of the direct expression of the people’s will. The House of Lords is a very serious obstacle and should long ago have been totally abolished.” The only argument in its favour “with a shadow of reason” was that it acted as a check on the House of Commons. But that could be accomplished democratically “by the Referendum, accompanied by the Initiative and the Right of Recall.”\(^{29}\)
Pankhurst even took that tireless advocate of guild socialism, G.D.H. Cole, to task for (among many other things) making no mention “of the Initiative, Referendum and Recall, without which no system of representative Government can be genuinely Democratic.” Guild organization should include a delegate body, “of which the authority should be second only to that to the Referendum.” 30 It is clear — and significant — that some of those who, like Pankhurst, were to become deeply committed to soviet democracy, believing it to be the most genuinely participatory form of democracy, also supported the referendum, initiative, and recall for very similar, if not identical, reasons and continued to do so for at least some time after 1917.

Though Pankhurst’s *Dreadnought* featured more advocacy of these methods than any other socialist organ during the early years of the Russian Revolution, it was not alone in combining support for this form of direct democracy and for the soviet system. For example, as late as the beginning of 1920, Joseph Southall, a Birmingham Quaker who would continue to play a prominent role in the ILP for many years, joined the *Labour Leader* debates on parliamentary democracy versus “sovietism,” urging that “there must be a change of some sort if the people are to be masters in their own house.” “I am inclined to favour the Referendum,” he added, “but whether it be this or a Soviet or Syndicalist institution, some modification is necessary.” 31

Also in January 1920, J.B. Askew, now well established as a supporter of soviet democracy and the Bolsheviks and a fairly regular contributor to *The Call*, was still persistently advocating the referendum and initiative. By that time there had been, as we shall see, considerable debate in the BSP paper about the soviet system, the “dictatorship of the proletariat,” and their presumed role in replacing parliamentary rule when the revolution finally reached Britain. Askew concluded: “I would like further to point out that both the two most important champions of Democracy, against the Soviet system, J.R. MacDonald and Karl Kautsky, have written against the referendum and initiative, which, together with the right to withdraw or recall mandates, are surely indispensable to a complete democracy.” 32
**Shop Stewards, Syndicalism, and Guild Socialism**

A crucial new element in left-wing thinking had appeared in the years immediately preceding the First World War. For many, there was a shift to the workplace as the “real” locus of both class struggle and — potentially — democracy. Syndicalism proposed to dispense entirely with political parties and “politics.” There was no need for politicians — not even revolutionary ones. Many on the British Left, not prepared to go all the way with the syndicalists, were attracted to guild socialism, which seemed to reconcile the claims of “politics” and workplace democracy. The De Leonists of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP) were dismissive of syndicalism per se but shared the belief that the industrial battle was what counted most. Politics, though still important, merely reflected that battle.

None of this was especially new, but the emphasis on the industrial struggle and the belief in the superior reality of the role of “worker” to that of “citizen” was experienced as new, even liberating, by many at the time. Several of the early leaders of the CPGB — Tom Bell, Willie Gallacher, Arthur MacManus, and J.T. Murphy — came from the syndicalist-influenced shop stewards’ movement, which had reached its height during the war. As James Hinton says at the beginning of his chapter “The Soviet Idea” in *The First Shop Stewards’ Movement*: “The wartime practice of the shop-stewards’ movement was an important source of that ideological development in the British revolutionary movement that made possible the formation of a united Communist Party.” But its influence was much wider than that. And, as Kendall notes: “A quite disproportionate number of intellectuals who joined the Communist Party at its foundation came from the ranks of the Guild Socialist movement.”

*The Guildsman*, the guild movement’s monthly journal, may have been overstating the case in February 1917 when it began an article titled “Workshop Control” by claiming: “The proposal that workmen shall be given a share in the government of workshops is being discussed at the present time by men of all parties and all classes. Schools of thought from the most Capitalist to the most Socialist have
recommended it in one form or another.”

But that the article should make such a claim is indicative of how widespread ideas of workplace democracy were at this time.

The February 1917 edition of Solidarity (“A Journal of Modern Trade Unionism”) carried an “Open Letter” from Murphy addressed to the forthcoming “Rank and File Conference” of the shop stewards’ movement, urging that workshop committees be set up and linked together. The same issue also included his letter “The Illusion of Leaders,” which attacked the tendency to depend on such figures. The Guildsman, self-consciously an organ of left-wing middle-class intellectuals, was impressed with Murphy’s pamphlet The Workers’ Committee: “Every active trade unionist,” wrote its reviewer, “should make it his business to see it obtains a wide circulation.”

Published in late 1917, Murphy’s pamphlet had sold 25,000 copies by the following March. Solidarity, now designating itself as the “Rank and File Fighting Paper,” greeted its publication with enthusiasm: “At last! A Pamphlet explanatory of the Shop Stewards’ Movement.” Strangely, for the modern reader, the pamphlet makes only passing references to the war and — even more surprisingly for something published in late 1917 — no mention at all of soviets or the Russian Revolution. This may, in part at least, explain its sympathetic review in the pro-war, and anti-Bolshevik, Justice, which described The Workers’ Committee as “one of the best and cleverest little things that has been written on this subject,” while stressing that “political action is absolutely necessary.”

Murphy argued for “the Great Industrial Union,” which he believed the social nature of modern methods of production and the undermining of the monopoly position of the skilled were together promoting. Unity was to be achieved first at the level of the individual workplace, or workshop: “The procedure to adopt is to form in every workshop a workshop committee, composed of shop stewards, elected by the workers in the workshops. Skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers should have their shop stewards, and due regard be given also to the particular union to which each worker belongs.”

Shop
stewards should then form local industrial committees for “educating and co-ordinating the efforts of the rank and file.” These committees should put maximum power into the workers’ hands. They should “not have any governing power, but should exist to render service to the rank and file, by providing means for them to arrive at decisions and to unite their forces.” Works or plant committees,” elected from among the shop stewards in order to link up the shop committees, and local workers’ committees were to be “similar in form to a trades council, with this essential difference — the trades council is only indirectly related to the workshops, whereas the workers’ committee is directly related.”

Murphy made light of the tricky question of setting up a national organization: “In the initial stages of the movement it will be apparent that a ballot for the election of the first national committee would be impossible, and as we, the workers, are not investing these committees with executive power there is little to worry about.” Therefore, rather than wait until it was possible to hold an election in which all members would participate, to get things underway the national industrial committee should be composed of those elected from a conference of delegates from local industrial committees. The committees would be “working with the true spirit of democracy,” and the structure was to be topped by a national workers’ committee, a sort of counterpart of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), with, Murphy suggested, two delegates from each national industrial committee. He concluded by re-emphasizing the need for “working always from the bottom upwards.”

The similarity of Murphy’s proposals to the accounts of the structure and functioning of Russian soviets published over the next few years in the socialist press is very clear. Indeed, it is not unreasonable to suspect that the notions prevalent on the British Left about the processes of soviet democracy owed much to this widely read pamphlet. The ostensible purpose of Murphy’s committees was not — or at least not immediately — to take over state power. Even so, The Workers’ Committee and other syndicalist-inspired material — such as the literature of the pre-war Industrial Syndicalist Educational League, the

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publications of the *Daily Herald* League, *The Miners’ Next Step*, and the study classes of the Plebs League — ensured that when power was nominally transferred to the soviets in Russia, the ground for their enthusiastic acceptance had been well prepared.\(^4^9\)

During these years guild socialism also exerted a considerable influence on many on the British Left. “It will be agreed that more and more, for a variety of reasons, Socialists and Trade Unionists are coming round to a position which is largely that of the National Guilds,” wrote G.D.H. Cole at the beginning of 1917, in an article for the I.L.P’s *Labour Leader*. More and more they were “coming to realise the need for self-government in industry, or rather for the direct government by those who work in it in conjunction with the State.”\(^4^3\)

Around the same time — between February and May 1917 — *The Herald* carried a series of articles by S.G. Hobson titled “Labour’s Industrial Policy,” which culminated in several instalments devoted to explaining the national guilds.\(^4^4\) By that August, the paper was calling for the “reorganisation of industry upon the basis of State Ownership and Trade Union, or Guild, control.” Arguing that “only by the division of function and a balance of power can we guard ourselves against the ‘never-ending audacity of elected persons,’” it proposed a “twin democratic structure” comprising a radically reformed House of Commons and an “Industrial Chamber” elected on the basis of occupation. Though a joint assembly might be necessary on some occasions, it was vital that ultimate power remained divided so that the danger of “recreating that very sovereignty we have set about to destroy” and of such an assembly becoming “heir to the Leviathan that we have slain” could be averted.\(^4^5\)

For Bertrand Russell, in a March 1917 interview in *Labour Leader*, a compromise was needed between state action designed to control “the material distribution of goods” and “the greatest possible liberty in regard to mental and spiritual things” for individuals. “The best compromise I know is Guild Socialism,” concluded Russell.\(^4^6\) Quite how far the influence of guild socialism had penetrated is evident in Ramsay MacDonald’s book *Parliament and Revolution* (1919), which,
in the words of J. Bruce Glasier, who reviewed it in *Labour Leader*, proposed “a sort of Soviet Second Chamber of Parliament.”

Another example of the wider influence that guild socialist and similar ideas had in these years is the Webbs’ *Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain*, which was published in 1920. The Webbs proposed the creation of a separate “Social Parliament” — still to be elected on a geographical basis — in addition to the “Political Parliament,” which would continue to deal with such matters as foreign policy and defence. An anonymous reviewer in the *Daily Herald* thought it “not easy to explain the prejudice that exists against the Webbs” but was far from ready to endorse their proposals. The authors seemed preoccupied with “efficiency,” but was this the real problem?

To dispense with the National Parliaments altogether and begin construction from the bottom with the workshop committees in the producers’ world and functional municipal authorities elected for the performance of special jobs in the consumers’, [with] both committees and authorities sending delegates to National Guilds and National Consumers’ Councils, might diminish efficiency by multiplying committees, but would at least provide the common man with a chance of political and industrial expression giving him the feeling that he mattered and that his will counted which would, one fears, still be denied under the Webbs’ reorganisation.

Decades later, G.D.H. Cole was to characterize the book as “an attempt to meet the attacks of Syndicalists and Guild Socialists on orthodox Fabian Collectivism without sacrificing the ultimate supremacy of the consumers in economic affairs.”

Yet at work in the Webbs’ vision was certainly some notion of “functional democracy”— the idea that industries, along with areas of policy such as education and the provision of health services, should be democratically controlled as separate social functions, rather than being subject to centralized state control. And Lisanne Radice is surely right to conclude that “the Socialist Commonwealth is far
more optimistic about the possibilities of wider participation than *Industrial Democracy* written twenty years earlier.” 50 When Philip Snowden published *Labour and the New World* in 1921, the new order he proposed similarly retained Parliament, this time with a national economic council based on workshop and district committees subordinated to it. Sylvia Pankhurst basically saw Snowden’s proposal as a halfway house between “Parliamentary Social Democracy and a Communist industrial organisation of society.” 51 These examples demonstrate that even people like MacDonald and Snowden, and even the Webbs, felt it important to make some kind of response to the problems perceived by the guild socialists. It is clear that guild socialism and the syndicalism of the shop stewards’ movement, which were so prominent in the years immediately before 1917, were crucial in lending credibility on the Left to the idea of soviet democracy.

*De Leonism and the Socialist Labour Party*

An important role in preparing the way for soviet democracy was also played — in spite of its tiny membership even by the standards of the British Left — by the Socialist Labour Party. The SLP platform, as published in January 1915 issue of *The Socialist*, centred on “belief in Industrial Unionism as opposed to Trade Unionism.” Inspired by the American socialist theorist Daniel De Leon — who, until his death just before the war, led the SLP’s American namesake and the “Detroit” Industrial Workers of the World — the SLP platform differed from that of “pure” syndicalists in allowing political parties a definite, though subordinate, role. Centred on its headquarters in Glasgow, where its paper, *The Socialist*, was published, the SLP had originated in a split from the SDF in 1903. 52

The SLP was, and usually still is, seen as dogmatic, intolerant of dissent, and “biblically” Marxist. It was certainly more adamant and unyielding than most in its claim to “correctness” and doctrinal purity. “The strength and vigour of the S.L.P. in this country,” *The Socialist* confidently asserted in its issue of February 1918, “is due to its being the only party that has assimilated the theories of Marx and
sought to apply them to the problems confronting us.” The usual verdict therefore seems amply justified. But this judgment is misleading if overemphasized. SLPers certainly saw themselves — and in their early days were seen by Lenin, among others — as the “British Bolsheviks.” But how far was this identification predicated on assumptions about the vanguard role of the Bolsheviks in Russia? These suppositions were to become increasingly questionable as time went on — particularly those regarding the Russian commitment to a form of genuine, industrially based working-class democracy. That, however, would become apparent only later and will be examined in detail in chapter 10. Certainly, the Communist Unity Group, which broke with the SLP when the latter refused to continue with the negotiations that led to the formation of the CPGB, as well as subsequent defectors to the British Communist Party, had little trouble in translating their belief in a “vanguard” role into faithful support for the Third International, with its stringent “21 conditions” that would-be affiliates were required to accept. But, as we shall see in chapter 10, for those who remained with the SLP, criticism of the orthodox Communist approach — especially as far as Britain was concerned — became increasingly adamant and at times extraordinarily hostile and shrill. But none of this was apparent in 1917, when the SLP’s early support was important in promoting “soviet democracy.”

For a few years, the SLP exercised an influence on the Left in Britain that went far beyond its own membership. Indeed, in March 1918, one letter to The Socialist — whose author explicitly signed himself “A non-S.L.Per” — claimed: “Generally speaking the Socialist Labour Press is not looked upon as a party concern at all, but as a valuable asset of the Working Class movement.” Kendall has stressed the role of the SLP’s press as “the most important distributor of Marxist literature in Great Britain.” There could, he concluded, “have been scarcely a single person involved in the foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain who was not, at some time, influenced by the SLP and its literature.” Although as an organization it refused to dissolve itself into the CPGB, the SLP did provide a quite

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disproportionate number of the CP’s earliest leaders, including its first chairman, Arthur MacManus.

As the one authentic revolutionary party — as the SLP saw itself — it was to put “correctness” of doctrine before membership numbers and to police this doctrinal purity rigorously. The party’s function was to be available as a vanguard when the working class turned to it for guidance. As Kendall observes:

The party, by achieving victory at the ballot box, would legitimise the conquest of power by the working class. The industrial union, which included the whole of the working class within its ranks . . . would back up the party’s victory at the polls by the threat of a general strike or the “General Lockout of the Capitalist Class.”

On election to office in all the supreme positions of state and municipality, the representatives would “adjourn themselves on the spot sine die.” Their work would be done by disbanding, for “the political organisation of Labour intended to capture a Congressional District is wholly unfit to ‘take and hold’ the plants of industry.” 55

The SLP saw the path to socialism via the creation of industrial unionism by the working class, which would palpitate with the daily and hourly pulsations of the class struggle as it manifests itself in the workshop. And when it forms its own political party and moves into the political field as it surely will, in that act superseding or absorbing the Socialist Labour Party and all other socialist or labour parties, its campaign will indeed be the expression of the needs, the hopes, the aspirations, and the will of the working classes, and not the dreams and theories of a few unselfish enthusiasts or the ambitions of political schemers. . . . Finally, having overthrown the class state, the united Industrial Unions will furnish the administrative machinery for directing industry in the Socialist Commonwealth. 56

Seen through the prism of these ideas, Russia in the later part of 1917 seemed to be pursuing a course very like what the SLP was striving
for at home. The soviets — at least those of the workers, if not of the peasants and soldiers — were industrially based, or so they seemed, while the Bolsheviks, with their demand for “All Power to the Soviets,” seemed to epitomize the “correct” role for the party as perceived by the SLP. As Kendall says: “In the Soviet system of government, the SLP saw before their eyes the living incarnation of the ‘Industrial Republic of Labour’ advocated by Connolly and De Leon. The Russian Revolution appeared a triumphant vindication of the whole SLP system of ideas. At Easter 1918, Tom Bell, in the chair at the SLP conference, claimed Bolshevism to be the ‘Russian wing of the S.L.P.’” 57

Many parts of the Left — the SLP, the syndicalist shop stewards, the guild socialists, and more general currents in favour of “functional democracy” — helped prepare the ground for soviet democracy, as, in other ways, did the older radical commitment to “real democracy” that looked for ways to make the people “masters in their own house.” The referendum and initiative and soviet democracy were both seen as more “direct” approaches to empowering the majority than representative, parliamentary-style democracy ever could be.

This may seem extremely odd. The soviet system, after all, involved a pyramid of councils before it arrived at the All-Russia level. Those operating at that level were only very indirectly elected by the people at the base. This was a structure very similar to that of most British trade unions and of the “workers’ committees” advocated by Murphy and others. Supporters of soviet democracy assumed an ideal delegate system, with issues decided and policies formulated by the membership at the base. Unlike the representative, who presented his or her policies — or, more likely, those of the party — as a general basis for attracting the suffrage of the voter and then had a free hand to proceed, with no further reference to constituents until the term of office had elapsed and re-election had to be sought, delegation allowed policy to be continually initiated and determined at the base level. A system of mandates ensured that delegates took forward the decisions of their constituents. In this respect, delegation could be seen to resemble the initiative and referendum. 58
The major difference among those who supported these “direct” forms of democracy concerned the basis on which democratic participation was to take place. Supporters of “soviet democracy” saw soviets as fundamentally “industrial” or “occupational” and therefore more “real” than the “geographical” systems of representative government. This meant in turn that, in the eyes of a large part of the Left, the soviets had the merit of representing workers (perceived as “concrete”) in contrast to citizens (perceived as “abstract”). Given that workers were seen as the oppressed and exploited and, potentially, as the class destined to play the major role in the overthrow of capitalism and the construction of socialism, this industrial or occupation-based approach had a powerful “class” appeal. All those influenced by syndicalism, and even guild socialists to a very large degree, shared the belief that the real struggle was the industrial one. All also shared, to varying extents, the belief that established leaderships, whether trade union or political, were highly suspect, if not totally counterproductive, and needed to be countered by “bottom-up” democracy founded on the “rank and file.” In this respect, the new “syndicalist” radicalism was the heir to the older traditions. The National and International General Federation of Trade and Labour Unions (NIGFTLU), launched in the late 1890s — which embraced the use of the initiative and referendum for its policy making — is only one example of the anti-leadership tendency among the Left in Britain. The perceived connection between direct democracy and distrust of leadership is evident for example, in a comment of P.J. King, the originator and promoter of NIGFTLU: “The initiative and referendum will do much to check the abuses of irresponsible persons. We shall no longer see a few well-paid and well-groomed officials thwarting the wishes of the overwhelming majority of men who give them their salaries and look after their interests.”

Many individual unions did make use of membership referendums. A suspicion of trade union officials — worthy of P.J. King — and a concern with grassroots control through the use of the referendum, among other means, are apparent in J.T. Murphy’s *The Workers’ Committee*. In addition to the comments about “real democratic practice” quoted
in the introduction, Murphy’s pamphlet contains the following observation on the lack of democracy in British trade unions:

The constitutions invest elected officials with certain powers of decision which involve the members of the organisations in obedience to their rulings. It is true to say that certain questions have been referred to the ballot box ere decisions have been arrived at; but it is unquestionably true also that important matters have not been so referred, and increasingly insistent has been the progress towards government by officials.

The need of the hour is a drastic revision of this constitutional procedure which demands that the function of the rank and file shall be simply that of obedience.61

Presumably, then, according to Murphy, at least at this point on his political trajectory, all important issues should be put to a referendum vote (“the ballot box”) of the members of the union.

The British Left in 1917 had been well prepared for being enthused by the idea of soviet democracy. There had been the preparation afforded by the very long tradition of radical ideas of democracy. Its critiques of parliamentary politics and of established leaderships and its demands for “direct democracy” helped predispose many on the Left to look kindly — not to say optimistically — at any mechanism or procedure that claimed to make democracy more real by increasing the accountability of the elected, transferring real power to “the people,” and, in Murphy’s words, “working always from the bottom upwards.”

Industrial unionist and syndicalist ideas privileged the occupational basis of democracy over the territorial and put forward ideas of structure and process that could be seen as foreshadowing the working (or supposed working) of the Russian soviets. Finally, as a sort of top dressing of preparation — very thin but potent — was the De Leonist ideology of the SLP, which helped not only to legitimize the soviets but also to provide a rationale for the role of the party. In the context of Russia, that meant the Bolshevik Party.