INITIAL RESPONSES TO THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION
The British Left in 1917 and the Leeds “Soviet” Convention

The “Marvellous Revolution”

It is difficult now to appreciate fully the initial impact of the Russian Revolution — that is, of the “February Revolution” (which, in the Western calendar, took place at the start of March). In the midst of an increasingly bleak and horrific war, the events in Russia appeared to many as a ray of hope — the promise of an eventual bright dawn. Well beyond the socialist movement, the revolution was in fact welcomed by all who found the alliance with autocratic tsarist Russia embarrassing, viewing it as something that undermined the political and moral standing of the Allied cause.

“The revolution in Russia is the biggest event of the war. If it succeeds in establishing a Social Democratic Republic it will be the most momentous event in the history of our time,” George Lansbury declared in The Herald. And the following week, in a Dreadnought...
editorial on adult suffrage, Sylvia Pankhurst wrote that “the marvelous revolution in Russia fills the minds of all men and women.”¹ But expectations about what would follow diverged wildly. In its April issue, The Socialist began by noting skeptically the general welcome of the mainstream press and the cheers in the House of Commons when “the news arrived that the Russian middle class revolution had at last been accomplished.” It did conclude, however, that “the Russian Revolution may be the first step to bring us nearer to the end of this war.”

For many others on the Left, the revolution was inseparable from the hope of a speedy and just ending to the terrible war. It inspired Ethel Snowden, for example, to launch the Women’s Peace Crusade in the summer of 1917, which built on local initiatives by the Women’s International League and the Women’s Labour League and brought thousands onto the streets of Glasgow, Nelson, and Leicester in demonstrations in July and August.² Even the pro-war Justice regarded the revolution as an inspiration for radical change in Britain, where “we too have been thwarted by corruption and treachery.” “Is it not high time we followed the Russian example?” it asked. Soon after, a front-page article by Hyndman, titled “The Need for a British Republic,” spelled out what the answer to this question might mean. He was “bitterly opposed” to “State Socialism,” but the war had made it possible to “transform this Bureaucratic Collectivism, detestable as it is, into the Democratic Socialism of an educated, free and self-disciplined people.”³

In the BSP, Hyndman’s former comrades, now opponents, were among the first to rally enthusiastically to the support of Russia. Under the banner “Long Live the Revolution!” The Call proclaimed on the front page of its issue of 8 March: “A political earthquake has shaken the foundations of the material and moral order of things created by the war.” An air of disbelief was also evident in some of the earliest comments in the socialist press. On 22 March, for example, Philip Snowden wrote in Labour Leader that it was “hardly credible that such a great and powerful autocracy as Czarism, with its organisation of every department of Russian life, administration, and religion, can be completely overthrown by a coup d’état.”³
Meanwhile, meetings were being hastily organized. Seven thousand people reportedly celebrated revolutionary Russia at the Great Assembly Hall, Mile End Road, while “A Great Mass Meeting” for the same purpose was advertised in Labour Leader for Saturday, 31 March, at the Albert Hall. The paper subsequently reported that more than 25,000 people applied for tickets and “over 5,000 sorrowful men and women were turned away by the police.” The Herald, whose editor, George Lansbury, had chaired the Albert Hall meeting, added that people had been standing “three deep in the gallery.” It used its whole front page to celebrate the “REVOLT AT THE ALBERT HALL” and gave a six-page report of the proceedings. The following month, The Herald reported that Russia Free! — the report in booklet form — had already sold out the 6,000 copies of its first printing and that a new edition was being prepared. It was a meeting that would long be remembered. In 1941, Maurice Reckitt recalled what a thrilling, and utterly unrepeatable, experience it had been to participate in the gathering, while Lansbury would remember the warmth and intensity of the atmosphere.

By early May, demonstrations and rallies were taking place in Glasgow, Belfast, Manchester, Huddersfield, Leicester, and other towns, and there were more in London as well. A Brighton meeting of 17 May was billed as a “Mass Meeting” to “celebrate Russian Freedom.” Held in the Congress Hall of the Salvation Army — whose band provided music — the meeting was chaired by a local councilor and addressed by a variety of local and national speakers mainly from labour and socialist movement organizations, including Brighton’s trades and labour council and the local co-operative society. Slightly incongruously, a collection was to be made for the “Polish Refugees fund.” The organizers claimed that sixteen hundred people attended, and the local press reported “some very outspoken speeches.” The greatest stir was caused by the fiercely anti-war speech of Sylvia Pankhurst, who was listed first among the main speakers. Correspondents wrote in to the local papers to protest against this “Anti-Patriotic Meeting.”
The role in the revolution of the soviets, or the “Council of Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Delegates,” in the words of The Call, was soon noted and was generally supported on the British Left. Workplace-based (in principle, at least), the soviets were well placed to assert the dominant role of the direct producer that socialism sought in the economy. In relative terms, compared to the self-appointed governments of the Duma parties, whose elected representatives had pre-war mandates based on a restrictive franchise, the soviets had a credible claim to being the most democratically legitimate source of authority.

As Victor Chernov, prominent in the Russian Social Revolutionary Party, put it in Labour Leader (in an article originally published in the Italian socialist paper Avanti!), the Duma was “the product of one of the most monstrous electoral systems that existed in Europe — the product of reactionary State legislation.” The fear among “revolutionary Socialists” at this time, he argued, was that they would be “outmanoeuvred by the bourgeoisie,” who were determined to prevent an early election of a constituent assembly.9

Labour Leader welcomed what it called “the Workmen’s Council” and reported that in the Russian Army “the soldiers have taken complete control through management committees elected by themselves of... everything not connected with the actual fighting.”10 A few days later, Philip Snowden, who was to be elected chairman at the end of the proceedings, told delegates to the ILP’s annual conference in Leeds that “the epoch-making event in Russia had revived their faith in internationalism.” MacDonald and Glasier moved and seconded a motion congratulating “fellow workers in Russia,” but the conference remitted to the ILP’s National Administrative Council the demand of the Burton-on-Trent branch that “the workers in each and every industry secure complete control over the conditions and management of their industry in order to establish freedom and democracy.”11 Much more forthright was the SLP’s The Socialist, which explained in its April issue that the “Council of Workman’s Delegates” was “a revolutionary body” that resembled the Clyde Workers’ Committee rather than the “stable organisations” of French or British trade unionism.
Meanwhile, the “dual power” situation in Russia was identified. Asking “Whose Russian Revolution?” an editorial in the *Woman’s Dreadnought* explained that “at present there are virtually two Governments in Russia — the Provisional Government appointed by the Duma and the Council of Labour Deputies which is responsible to the elected representatives of the workers and soldiers.” Kerensky was described as “the Socialist Minister of Justice,” and the “Council of Workers’ and Soldiers’ delegates” was commended for its commitment to freedom of the press: “In their desire not to imitate the tyrants they have overthrown, the workers decided to allow even the reactionary newspapers to appear as of old.” By May, *The Herald* was sure that the “Council of Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Delegates leave no one in any doubt who are the real rulers in Russia.”

This was at a time when the very existence of the Bolsheviks was only just beginning to register. Among the vast majority of British socialists, enthusiasm for the soviets preceded any real knowledge of Lenin and his associates. The best indication of the breadth and depth of left-wing support in Britain for the revolution in general and the soviets in particular, prior to the Bolshevik takeover, is what took place at Leeds at the beginning of June 1917.

*The Origins of the Leeds Convention: Anticipations and Preparations*

The “Leeds Soviet Convention” was quickly to become mythologized. By 1921, even the dour John Maclean — the formidable Clydeside socialist theoretician, revolutionary, and teacher — was referring to the “great Leeds Convention of 1917.” The convention introduced the idea that soviets were something that might, and indeed should, be introduced into Britain. And this happened at a time when Lenin and the Bolsheviks were barely known to British socialists, still less particularly associated with soviet democracy. So it is worth retracing the sequence of events that brought the convention about.

On 10 May 1917, *Labour Leader* announced that the British socialist movement had to respond to the revolution in Russia and “to
endeavour to secure a response to the declaration of the Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Council in favour of a peace without annexations and indemnities.” The “informal committee” that had organized the Albert Hall meeting was, the paper said, co-operating with the United Socialist Council to arrange “a Conference-Demonstration of a national character at an early date.” It invited trades councils, trade unions, branches of the ILP and BSP, the Women’s Labour League, the Women’s Co-operative Guild, and the Women’s International League to send delegates to Leeds on Sunday, 3 June. A similar statement appeared in The Call the same day. Little had previously been heard of the United Socialist Council, a body formed by the ILP and the BSP the previous year under pressure from the International Socialist Bureau. The Herald found it necessary to explain that it was “not a new body . . . but the outcome of a resolution passed by the last International Congress.” The following week, The Call predicted that what it still called the “Leeds Conference” would “consolidate the forces of Internationalism.”

The Herald declared that the main purpose of the Leeds conference was to bring “Great Britain into line with our Russian comrades. We must secure in this country control of the Government by the people.” It attacked “the incompetent muddlers,” the “grasping, selfish monopolists,” and the “Government of business men” that had failed to “control either supplies or prices.” There was emphasis on securing better treatment for discharged soldiers, their dependents, and the wives and children of servicemen still on active duty. “The Bureaucracy modelled on Prussia” had “robbed the workers of every vestige of independence and power of organisation.” All this, The Herald declared, “must be won back, and can only be won back by organised effort.” At the end of May, The Call anticipated that “the Conference at Leeds on Sunday next . . . will be the most truly representative working class assembly ever held in this country. The overwhelming mass of the delegates will come straight from the factories, mills and mines.”

To the initial emphasis on demonstrating in favour of peace
been added a further element. “A call is to go forth from Leeds on Sunday next the like of which has not been heard in this country since the glorious days of Chartism,” proclaimed The Call. “At Leeds the workers’ Magna Charta [sic] will be formulated and decided on.” Workers, it went on, would “gladly co-operate in forming Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Councils, but the initiating work, the organising and leading, must be done by Social-Democrats.” Broad-based councils could “soon become strong enough to dominate the towns and districts and determine their political future. Then the cause will be won.” 18 Readers of Labour Leader were told to contact Albert Inkpin or Francis Johnson, the United Socialist Council’s joint secretaries, to obtain delegate credentials, on the basis of one delegate for every five hundred, at a cost of two shillings and sixpence per delegate. Major stress was placed on the significance of trade union participation. 19

Just over a week before the conference, Robert Williams — a member of the organizing committee, secretary of the Workers’ Transport Federation, and a member of the BSP — announced in Labour Leader that “Leeds is to mark an epoch. Leeds is to reconstitute the International. Leeds is to do for Britain what the Council of Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Delegates is doing for Russia.” He went on to declare: “The conference will certainly mark a turning point in the holocaust of war. We shall send representatives to Russia. These representatives require a mandate from the working class.” 20

By the end of May, the conference had become “The Great Convention,” replete with Chartist overtones, a theme made explicit by the BSP’s E.C. Fairchild at Leeds when he proclaimed the convention to be “the very greatest we have had in this country since the days of Chartism.” 21 Meanwhile, on the eve of the meeting, Philip Snowden, writing on behalf of the United Socialist Council, which he chaired, was presenting the convention as a “call to the democracy of this and all the other belligerent countries to take matters into their own hands as the people of Russia have already done. That is the only way the war can be brought to an end.” But the war would leave immense industrial and social problems that could only be dealt with “by organised
democratic forces.” Labour and “British Democracy” were “without a policy and without direction,” Snowden argued. But the convention would provide this: “We must follow Russia and enthrone Democracy in this country. The Leeds Convention will devise the plan of campaign. All Labour, Socialist and Democratic bodies must get ready to play their part.” These sentiments were echoed in a letter signed by all the members of the council.22

The Herald spread “How Britain Must Answer Russia” across its middle pages, with articles by Lansbury and Williams as well as an introduction to the conference, including the texts of the motions that were to be debated. The “primary object” was to achieve “a peace based on equity and justice,” without annexations. Lansbury’s contribution was almost entirely about the war and its consequences and about the restoration to the British people of “the rights and liberties which they have been robbed of by Lord Milner and his colleagues in the War Cabinet.” Williams’s article, rather strangely in light of the speech he was to make at the conference, included no mention of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” or even of the soviets. The nearest it came was in posing the question, “Are you content with an effete Parliament and a self-elected Cabinet?”23 For its part, the Woman’s Dreadnought stressed the demand for peace, the priority of which was emphasized by an anti-war cartoon on that week’s front page.24

Predictably, the pro-war Justice was hostile, referring to “The Leeds ‘Convention’” and only rarely using the final word without quotation marks. It criticized the lack of real representativeness and warned of the misleading impression that would be given abroad, where the event might be judged “by the number of delegates present without any idea as to the influence those delegates carry.”25

On the eve of the conference, The Herald reviewed the motions to be debated, concluding that the “most important” was the resolution to set up Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils. It envisaged that these would form a national body and advocated that “such a Council should meet daily in London to deal with industrial, political and social matters, and to work for a speedy people’s peace.”26
The Convention Meets

The convention took place in the Leeds Coliseum Picture Palace, in spite of great practical difficulties. If Sylvia Pankhurst’s speech in Brighton had been deemed “anti-patriotic,” the appearance in Leeds just a few weeks later of hundreds of vociferous opponents of the war was bound to generate alarm. Hostility from the authorities compelled a last-minute change of venue from the city’s Albert Hall (now the Civic Theatre) and the banning of the intended open-air demonstration.

Ken Coates quotes Dora Montefiore and Lady Constance Malleson to illustrate the hostile atmosphere. “This Leeds demonstration was so boycotted by the possessing class,” Montefiore remembered in her autobiography, “that we delegates on arrival at Leeds station found that all hotels had refused to receive us. In consequence our own Leeds comrades had rapidly organised a reception committee who were on the platform of the station, and directed us to the houses of the various comrades who were offering hospitality.” Malleson, who travelled with Bertrand Russell from Peterborough in a third-class compartment with “about ten others,” including Ramsay MacDonald, managed to stay in a hotel — but may have regretted that before the weekend was over. A decade later, she recalled that “the hotels did their best to refuse us accommodation. The waiters slapped our food in front of us anyhow. The crowds hissed as we went through the streets to the conference. Some children threw stones. There were a lot of police about.” And these two were women whom one might expect to have been treated with at least some residual social deference.

In spite of such difficulties, some 1,200 people attended — 1,300 including late arrivals, according to The Call. Of these, 209 came from trades councils and local Labour parties and 371 from trade unions. The largest “political group” consisted of 294 members of the ILP, while the BSP had 88 people in attendance, and there were 16 representing other socialist organizations. Women’s organizations contributed 54 participants, and there were a further 118 from a variety of bodies such as the Union of Democratic Control, peace societies, and co-operatives.
How representative the convention was is difficult to determine. Intent on pouring every variety of cold water on the proceedings, the hostile Justice complained that, although the circular summoning the convention had stated that organizations should send one delegate for each five hundred members, some trades councils and local parties with much smaller memberships had sent three, four, or five delegates. It seems likely that there was some substance to this complaint, given the one-off nature of the event, the organizers’ desire to maximize attendance, and the enthusiasm that had been generated among the more active members of the participating organizations.

For some, however, the convention was to become in later years something that needed explaining — even explaining away. In his autobiography, Snowden devotes nearly half his chapter on the Russian Revolution to the Leeds convention, and he gives the full text of “the much criticised circular calling the Conference,” plus all four resolutions passed at the convention. It is true, as he insisted, that the circular quite explicitly emphasized the need to respond to the Provisional Government’s declaration concerning peace, urging emulation of “their most magnificent example.” But it is also true that the circular included language that could be interpreted as calling for revolution when it noted: “In Russia, where the people have assumed control over their political circumstances . . . they have called on the common people of all the belligerent countries to throw over their reactionary Governments.”

Snowden rejected any such interpretation, however. The convention was “the most democratically constituted Labour Convention ever held in this country,” he declared, and the slogan “Follow Russia” had subsequently been misrepresented “as a demand for revolution in Britain which would overthrow the monarch and the constitution and establish a Communist State.” He stressed that “the Bolshevik Revolution that overthrew the Democratic Government did not occur until the November following, five months after the date of this Convention.”

At the time, the emphasis was entirely on the amazing success of
the event, with Labour Leader headlining its report “Britain’s Greatest Labour Meeting.” For its part, The Call’s front-page report, by Fairchild, announced that “friends and foes are staggered by the success of the Leeds Convention” and went on to call for “local Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Councils” to be established “in every town, urban or rural district.”

Four resolutions were passed. The first, moved by MacDonald and seconded by Dora Montefiore, hailed the revolution in Russia. The second demanded that the British government announce its agreement “with the declared foreign policy and war aims of the Russian democracy and government” by rejecting “annexations and indemnities.” Snowden moved the third, with the BSP’s Fairchild seconding. This attacked current restrictions and called for a “Charter of Liberties,” including freedom of speech, of the press, and of industrial organization. But attention would quickly come to focus on the fourth resolution.

The “Soviet” Resolution

The most radical motion at Leeds called for the setting up of local Councils of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Delegates “for initiating and coordinating working-class activity in support of the policy set out in the foregoing resolutions”—that is, the ones “hailing” the Russian Revolution and calling for peace—“and to work strenuously for a peace made by the peoples of the various countries, and for the complete political and economic emancipation of international labour.” The councils were to “resist every encroachment upon civil liberty,” to give “special attention” to the position of women employed in industry, and to “support the work of trade unions.” The most specific aims concerned “the pensions of wounded and disabled soldiers and the maintenance grants payable to the dependents of men serving in the army and navy and the making of adequate provision for the training of disabled soldiers and for suitable and remunerative work for the men on their return to civil life.” The resolution concluded by appointing the conference convenors as a provisional
committee to “assist the formation of Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Councils.”

This fourth resolution was, according to Pankhurst in the Dreadnought, “the only one which meant action,” though she complained that it was “not too clearly drafted,” possibly, she speculated, for fear of DORA — the notorious Defence of the Realm Act, which placed unprecedented restrictions on the freedom of speech and the press. She went on to say that it “foreshadows revolution, yet it concerns itself with matters of detail which are obviously part of the present system,” which suggests that she already saw the soviets as the core of a new revolutionary “system.” She had other criticisms. Amendments had not been allowed at the conference because there had been no time for these to be circulated to the participating bodies for decision. Otherwise, her WSF would have moved “to add to the phrase ‘complete political and economic emancipation of international Labour’ the words ‘on the basis of a Socialist Commonwealth’ in order that there be no doubt as to the intention of the Conference.” Robert Williams had, Pankhurst said, emphasized this interpretation.

The “soviet” resolution was moved by the ILP’s W.C. Anderson, who claimed for it “special solicitation and support” on the grounds that he had gathered from press reports that it “was regarded as the ugly duckling among the resolutions.” His speech mocked the “dear old mid-Victorian journal, The Morning Post” because it saw the motion as being directed to the subversion of military authority and discipline and “clearly a violation of the law.” On the contrary, Anderson insisted, “they were setting up an organisation not subversive, not unconstitutional — unless the authorities cared to make it so.” Not that Anderson’s speech was entirely free of revolutionary rhetoric, of a sort: “If revolution be the conquest of power by a hitherto disinherited class, if revolution be that we are not going to put up with in future what they had put up with in the past, then the sooner we had revolution the better.”

According to The Herald, “the Convention was given the lead it was waiting for by Robert Williams.” As reported by Tom Quelch in
The Call, in seconding the motion Williams had said that “if it meant anything at all,” it meant “that which was contained in the oft-used phrase from Socialist platforms ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat.”’ And like The Call and The Herald, the Dreadnought had Williams urging any who had “‘cold feet’ about the need for revolutionary reforms and a dictatorship of the proletariat in this country to slip out before the resolution was carried.” Since the concept of a dictatorship of the proletariat was to become one of the touchstones for Communists, along with the soviet system and affiliation to the Third International, it is bound to seem both surprising and significant that it was being advocated in Britain at such an early stage, five months before the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia.

Whatever may have been the case with “Socialist platforms,” the phrase “the dictatorship of the proletariat” was, as yet, anything but “oft-used” in the British socialist press. It is perhaps ironic that Williams was to become not only one of the founders of the British Communist Party but also its first member to be expelled — for his decidedly unrevolutionary activities on “Black Friday,” when the National Transport Workers’ Federation, of which Williams was secretary, failed to come to the aid of its “Triple Alliance” partners, the miners, who were striking against wage reductions. Between Williams’s speech at Leeds and his expulsion from the CPGB in 1921, talk of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” figured prominently in debates on the British Left — but, as we shall see in a later chapter, the meaning of the phrase was anything but clear or agreed upon. So what might Williams have meant in June 1917? Or what might his audience have interpreted him to mean?

Perhaps, rather strangely, it is the — very supportive — account of his speech by Snowden in Labour Leader that gives us the best clue. For Snowden, the “dictatorship of the proletariat” seems to have suggested the ability of workers to force the resolution of an issue, immediately that of the war, by means of strike action. Reporting on Anderson’s contribution as mover of the “soviet” resolution, Snowden wrote:

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Robert Williams followed with a penetrating and daring analysis of the position of the workers all over Europe in the present crisis. He appealed to delegates present to get to work, each in their own district, to make the resolutions of that afternoon, and especially the last, effective. They must be prepared as a last resort, if all else failed, to make ready as workers for the “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

This was followed by a heading “The Power of the Workers,” under which Snowden continued: “Running through his speech, as through the whole proceedings of the Convention, was the underlying realisation that all over Europe there was power in the hands of the workers — the weapon of withdrawn labour — which can end the war when it will. Labour will not toil interminably for a war in which it does not believe.”

Snowden may have placed greater emphasis than Williams had intended on the qualification about the “last resort, if all else failed.” Yet it must be remembered that the explicit purpose of the proposed workers’ councils was to continue to pursue the policies of peace agreed upon in the previous three resolutions and that (as The Herald reported at the time) Williams had said in his speech: “If the governing class of this country are convinced that you are going to give full and adequate effect to this resolution they will give effect to one, two and three in order to defeat you.” There were only two votes against the “soviet” motion.

But certainly Williams and others intended more than simply an end to the war, crucial though that was, as would be evident from, among other things, the concerted effort The Herald made to continue a much wider campaign (about which more below). After Ethel Snowden had spoken briefly in support of the motion — which might seem as ironic as Williams’s fate, given her marked hostility to Bolshevism later on and the attacks on her this generated from its British sympathizers — Pankhurst “welcomed the resolution as a straight cut to the Socialist Commonwealth.” She believed that “the Provisional Committee would some day be the Provisional Government like the
Russian Socialist Government.” She then turned to particular concerns of the WSF — the limited representation of women and what she claimed was mistranslation from the Russian: her organization had wished to amend the masculine noun “Workmen” to “Workers.” It had been agreed there would be no amendments, but “Mr Snowden put the point and received an ovation in doing so, especially from a band of working women waving red flags.”

Reactions to Leeds

The Leeds Convention has been presented in a variety of ways by those writing decades later. James Hinton sees it as “abortive” from the standpoint of the development of a revolutionary “rank-and-file movement” but as the “preface to the reconstruction of the Labour Party, on a non-revolutionary basis.” For Ralph Miliband, it was “perhaps the most remarkable gathering of the period.” Similarly, Fenner Brockway records that, to the end of his life, Fred Jowett, the veteran ILP er and MP, “used to refer to the Leeds Congress as the highest point of revolutionary fervour he had seen in this country.” Laurence Thompson, in his biography of the Glasiers, describes it as “a Great Peace Convention.” He quotes J. Bruce Glasier as writing of this “huge triumph,” one that marked the “beginning of a popular tide against the War, and industrial repression.” But of the “soviet resolution” Thompson says: “Coming as it did in the wake of the Russian upheaval and coinciding with mass mutinies in the French Army, this threat of British Soviets caused some concern to the Government. But the movement remained safely under the control of the ILP, among whom was no Lenin, and the Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Councils, when they met at all did nothing more alarming than pass resolutions.” Nevertheless, Bill Jones is surely right to say that Leeds “marked the catalytic effect which events in Russia were having upon Labour’s thinking,” especially if we interpret Labour in the broadest sense.

Snowden’s biographers had, of course (like Snowden himself), to give some account of their subject’s central role. Thus, Keith Laybourn comments that “the Leeds Conference was generally distanced from
organized labour and it never captured the public imagination,” while Colin Cross writes of the “giddy moment the fantasy could be played out of a British revolution on the Russian model.” MacDonald’s role was also central. David Marquand notes that “the convention was held without the endorsement of the Labour Party Executive, and in defiance of the disapproval of many of its members.” And L.J. Macfarlane remarks in his history of the early British Communist Party that these ILP representatives “quickly lost their heady enthusiasm for extra-parliamentary action.”

In his introduction to the reprint of the June 1917 report of the conference, Ken Coates concludes:

The fate of the Convention, its lapse from the status of central importance, accorded to it by so many socialists in the years after 1917, to a mere episode among the footnotes of Labour history, is part of a whole succession of defeats which the Labour Movement encountered from 1920 onwards. But the episode occurred, and it is instructive to remember it.

There was, however, a great deal more enthusiasm on the Left in the immediate aftermath of the conference. The Herald’s editorial “Leeds Leads: Who Follows?” was entirely devoted to the convention in relation to the war, and much of the rest of the paper was given over to a report on the events, “What Happened at Leeds.” The conference would, the paper said, “give a moral impetus to the movement for a people’s peace without conquest. It has hailed the Russian Revolution with frankness and has achieved its objective — the establishment of a Follow Russia Movement.”

As we have seen, Labour Leader headlined its report of the convention “Britain’s Greatest Labour Meeting.” The report ended: “It is certain that the Convention will mark an epoch in history as great as any, perhaps greater than any, our country has yet known.” In the same issue, Snowden himself characterized “The Great Convention” as “a success beyond the most sanguine expectations”:
It was not only the largest Democratic Congress held in Great Britain since the days of the Chartist agitation, but it differed from other Labour conferences in the fact that it was not a caucus-ridden gathering, manipulated by officials and “leaders,” but was a spontaneous expression of the spirit and enthusiasm of the Labour and Democratic movement.

As for the fourth resolution, Snowden said, the convention had “accepted the suggestion by combining some of the local activities of the various Labour and Democratic bodies in a Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Council.” Even *The Guildsman*, often seen as remote from such concerns, apologized in its June 1917 issue for not devoting more space to “the great convention of Labour organisations.”

*Justice* remained hostile. The conference had been dominated by pacifists, it complained. It also scornfully contested the alarmist *Daily Mail’s* assumption that five million people had been represented. As mentioned earlier, the paper pointed out that some trades councils and local parties had sent many more delegates than their membership could justify on the basis of the stipulated principle of representation. In addition, it reported on a letter sent by a trade unionist, George Penn, to his branch, in which he objected to sending a delegate, partly because of the cost but also because “the idea of the promoters of the Conference is to get as many individuals present as possible,” whether they represented anyone or not. *Justice* concluded (with its customary quotation marks) that “the ‘Convention’ was organized ‘not for home, but for foreign consumption, and for that purpose was well-planned, carefully managed, provided with Quaker money for ‘peace-at-any-price’ purposes and may therefore positively produce in Russia the effect intended — the further paralysis of Russian military effort on behalf of the Allies.’ ”

A week later, a correspondent identified only as “T.D.H.” was “more than ever convinced” that “the formation of ‘Workmen’s and Soldiers’ Committees’ in this country is not . . . seriously intended. It was put forward with the sole object of influencing the Russians to look favourably on the mandate which Ramsay MacDonald, Jowett
The three named were the delegates the convention wished — vainly, as it turned out — to send to Russia. In the meanwhile, the SLP’s monthly, \textit{The Socialist}, seems to have ignored the convention entirely, although, as Kendall notes, Willie Gallacher, Tom Bell, and Arthur MacManus attended as SLP delegates.\textsuperscript{55}

\textbf{Trying to Make British Soviets Work}

During the weeks that followed, there was some attempt to turn the “soviet resolution” into reality. In \textit{The Call}, Tom Quelch was unrelenting in urging BSP members to follow up on the “magnificent and inspiring” meeting in Leeds. It should not be left to those elected by the convention: “The Provisional Committee can only make suggestions, the \textit{real work must be carried out by the workers}.”\textsuperscript{56} Although eager to see the workers themselves take the lead, he also argued that “after every means to secure complete local working-class solidarity, the Socialists in the Councils should aim them in as clear and definite a Socialist direction as possible.”\textsuperscript{57}

Lansbury, in hospital for an operation, missed the Leeds meeting, but \textit{The Herald} made a sustained effort to continue the movement begun there. As “the logical interpretation of the resolutions adopted at Leeds,” it put forward, with “no dogmatic finality,” its “Plan for the People’s Party.” It demanded “Conscription of Wealth and Equality of Income,” which would include “Ownership by the State: Management by the Unions” and a “Minimum Real Income of One Pound a Day.” There must be “economic independence of all men and women” and “a complete democracy,” which would entail replacing the House of Lords with a “chamber based on the representation not of geographical areas, but of occupations, industrial, professional and domestic.” Along with the abolition of titles and “state-granted” honours, the paper called for the “democratisation of the Army and Navy (as long as they exist).” The plan concluded with a call for “the opportunity to enjoy life” and for “the workers organised against war,” which ended with a plea to “Unite in your Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council and use
This was followed up by weekly “Charter Articles,” each dealing in greater detail with one aspect of the demands.

By the end of June, The Call could report that the Provisional Committee was circulating a statement asking sympathetic trades councils “to convene local workers’ councils.” The statement stressed that the new bodies should not encroach on existing organizations and must encourage “broad toleration.” With all the workers “gathered together under the banners of the local councils there is no limit to their potentialities if with clear purpose and courageous leading they deliberately aim at the rule of the proletariat.” If “complete local solidarity” could be achieved, “then the next Parliamentary Election should witness the return to the House of Commons of an overwhelming mass of direct representatives of the working-class.”

Britain in 1917, as critics of the country’s “Bolsheviks” were to reiterate constantly during the next few years, was not revolutionary Russia. The government and parliament might not be at the height of their popularity, but they were not discredited and hated, even among those prepared to demand an immediate end to the war, anywhere near as much as the tsarist regime. If the councils tried to bring about revolution, they would find little support and would be suppressed; if they simply attempted to be the voice of the organized working class and its socialist allies, what could they do that existing organizations could not? This point had been made by a delegate named Toole, of the Clerks’ Union, at the Leeds conference itself, in what Labour Leader called “a quietly reasoned speech” arguing for linking up existing organizations to form a central executive “that could do the necessary work.”

But the attempt to cover the country with workers’ and soldiers’ councils was made. In July, in spite of obstruction from the authorities, district conferences were reported as planned in Scotland, the North East, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Cheshire and North Wales, the North and East Midlands, the South and West Midlands, East Anglia, London, the South, Bristol, and Wales. Three quarters of a million copies of “The Workers’ Charter” had been mailed out, and more were available, said The Herald.
But in *The Call*, Quelch was already warning of “dark forces” hindering the formation of local councils. By the beginning of August, the paper reported that although local conferences in Norwich, Bristol, and Leicester had been “complete successes,” the meetings in London, Swansea, and Newcastle had been “broken up by groups of ruffians organised by disreputable reactionary political bodies, with the tacit approval of the Government.” There had been “scenes of sheer brutality and hooliganism without parallel in the public life of this country. The rulers of this country are copying the methods of the tsar. In their efforts to stifle free expression they are relying upon the Black Hundreds.” The “wrecking of the Brotherhood Church” in Southgate Road, London, had been particularly shocking. The *Herald* reported that £800 worth of damage had been done there.

More was to follow. The following week, Quelch reported that the Glasgow meeting had been banned under DORA regulations, while in Manchester there had been trouble from “organised hooligans.” On the brighter side, a Southern Counties conference had been switched from Southampton to Portsmouth and had gone ahead successfully. But the problems continued. The organizers of the proposed London council had been unable to hire a large enough meeting place and had been reduced to appointing their national representative by means of “a letter ballot of the delegates.” It was a similar picture in Newcastle. The government was sufficiently worried that it did what it could to hamper the formation of workers’ and soldiers’ councils, not least by conscripting Quelch.

By the following month, September, Lansbury was responding to enquiries from *Herald* readers asking what they could do to support the councils:

We especially point out to our friends that it is not intended to get together a personal membership. What is intended is that Labour, Socialist, and other progressive organisations should unite through the Trades Councils and local Labour Parties, and by this means form local Councils. There is and never has been any question of advocating or suggesting a physical force revolution.
The same month saw *The Guildsman* observing that the Secretary for Scotland had prohibited a conference of soldiers’ and workers’ councils and by doing so had “converted what would have been a small and semi-private meeting into a large open air demonstration and provided Mr Ramsay MacDonald with the occasion for a stirring oration on the right of free speech.” The paper also gave an endorsement, of sorts, to the “soviet” enterprise, if hardly in the terms that its most earnest proponents would have favoured. The councils were no “negligible force”:

Indeed, we number them amongst the most portentous phenomena of these prophetic times. It is true that the military allusion in their title is so far at least, little more than a graceful compliment to the Russian Revolution, but on the industrial side they command the support of the whole force of militant trade unionism. Constitutional minds are prone to regard the movement as purely pacifist and of little account in the industrial struggle, but we are inclined to attribute to it a deeper significance. May it not possibly represent the first instinctive gropings of the workers towards an independent industrial constitution?

The “dark forces” had not — or had not yet at least — deterred the supporters of the workers’ and soldiers’ councils. At the beginning of October, Albert Inkpin reported that ten districts had now elected delegates, including Sylvia Pankhurst for London and the Home Counties. There would be a meeting of the national council at which policy would be formulated “and a vigorous campaign inaugurated.” Reports of the election of John Maclean and David Kirkwood as the delegates for Scotland soon followed. At its first meeting, the national council agreed that it had been formed “as a propagandist body, not as a rival to, or to supplant,” existing organizations. It was “striving to create public opinion” in favour of “a people’s peace along the lines of the Russian declaration of no annexations, no indemnities, and the rights of people to decide their own destiny.” The regional and national councils would defend rights, including those of servicemen, for whom they would demand increased pay. More broadly, the national council aimed “at the consolidation of the efforts of working class organisations to attain
an ever-increasing share of wealth produced by workers by hand and brain, together with control over industry.” A subcommittee was preparing a manifesto, “A Plea for a People’s Peace.”

Meanwhile, what J.T. Murphy was later to describe as the “first truly representative shop stewards’ national conference” had convened on 18–19 August. He noted “the influence of the great Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council Convention which had been held in Leeds only a few weeks previously.” According to Labour Leader, another member of the shop stewards’ national committee, William Gallacher, had been one of only two speakers to express dissatisfaction with the “soviet” motion at Leeds. In contrast to the other, however — the cautious Toole — he had “mourned because the idea of the Councils was not nearly revolutionary enough and did not outline a method by which the workers could take control of the economic power of the country, the sources of distribution and supply etc.”

Concluding an article in The Call at the end of 1917, Gallacher wrote:

Unfortunately, this very promising organisation has apparently expended all its vitality in the issuing of a few political manifestoes. If it is possible, let us have it raised into new life, not to resurrect a dead House of Commons, but aided by the Workers’ Committees that are now so active in every industrial centre, carry through the revolution by taking control and direction of all that goes to make up the life of the nation.

Gallacher was not alone. A few weeks later, at the end of January 1918, Robert Williams, of Leeds “soviet resolution” fame, asked in The Herald, “Why Not a British Soviet?” What was needed, he argued, was “some vehicle of working-class thought and aspiration, authoritative and truly representative. Some of us projected this idea at Leeds.” Efforts should be made to “fashion some instruments to create political power to reflect Labour’s economic influence.” And rather surprisingly, given what had just occurred in Russia, he wrote: “We may be satisfied with a Constituent Assembly. We should prefer an Association of Soviets: Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils.” Williams held views similar to Gallacher’s about the agency of transformation,
asking, “Have the Shop Stewards’ Movement and the rank and file in general enough courage and determination to give us a Soviet for Great Britain?”

But it was soon clear that such revolutionary hopes were not going to be fulfilled — at least not in the near future. By February 1918, Pankhurst was wondering what had become of all the good intentions at Leeds:

How strange it is that the political strike, which is a weapon so greatly admired when used in other people’s countries, is held to be so discreditable here. Even Mr W.C. Anderson, M.P., one of the promoters of the Leeds Convention, and an original member of the Workers’ and Soldiers’ Council which emerged from it (where is that body now?) is reported in a speech at the Nottingham Conference as having issued a warning to the workers that any upheaval in the country will prejudice the chances of securing a democratic peace.

“Securing a democratic peace” had been the major aim of the organizers of the Leeds Convention. But expectations went beyond this. Even in the ranks of the pro-war Hyndmanites, the overthrow of tsarism was seen as indicating the possibility of more widespread democratic and socialist change. If the reactionary autocracy of Nicholas II could be brought down in the midst of a desperate war, what was not possible? Certainly democracy was the aim, but, for socialists, democracy meant also that the power of capital should not control the economy. The soviets in Russia seemed to promise the latter’s democratization. Could not something like soviets be replicated in Britain to achieve the same end?

Yet Britain was very different. No “marvellous revolution” had swept away the old regime. The House of Commons, although still not elected by universal suffrage, had a better claim to be representative, and was infinitely longer and better established in the public mind, than the Duma. The army, while under great strain, was not on the verge of general mutiny or collapse. The inclusion of soldiers in the proposed “Workers’ and Soldiers’ Councils” would remain notional,
though the idea helped to spread outrage and even perhaps a degree of panic among those who regarded themselves as patriots. And, in Britain, the representation of the workers in the workplace was a tradition long established, with the institutions of the trade union movement and, much more radically, the new shop stewards’ movement already engaged in trying to build structures not unlike workers’ soviets. In such circumstances, what could soviets be expected to achieve that could not be accomplished through one combination or another of already existing homegrown institutions and movements? One feature of the “soviet resolution” episode worth noting is that it was the first instance of a Russian institution and its terminology being advocated for adoption in Britain on the Left. It would not be the last.

Much of the hostility encountered by the delegates to Leeds can be attributed to the unpopularity, among the still conventionally patriotic, of the anti-war sentiments of the participants. But, against the background of the unprecedented industrial revolt that had swept the country in April and May, the fear of working-class power was also present — and because disillusion and war-weariness had much to do with the way relatively minor issues had triggered the strikes of 1917, the two factors were not so easy to separate from each other.

The Leeds Convention does reveal the attraction, for the most militant of British Left activists, of the idea of soviet democracy months before the Bolsheviks seized power, ostensibly in support of that democracy. For most of the British Left, at the time the convention took place the Bolsheviks were yet to emerge clearly as a leading force in revolutionary Russia. The Leeds initiative did not succeed in setting up British soviets, but it did come closer to producing that result, and in the midst of a war, than would any of the subsequent advocates of soviet democracy.

The notion of “following Russia” by somehow mobilizing popular support to transform the British state was seriously entertained in at least some minds. The demands for constitutional change outlined in The Herald’s “Charter” were extremely radical (and would still be deemed to be so in the twenty-first century), but they fell within the
long tradition of campaigning for root-and-branch parliamentary reform — strong, radical democracy rather than soviet democracy. In August 1917, “Charter Article, No. 13” expanded on the “Next Steps in Political Reform.” The people must be able to effectively control their representatives, and their representatives likewise able to control the executive. In addition to the demands mentioned earlier, The Herald advocated the “transferable vote,” payment of election expenses, shorter parliamentary terms, the referendum and initiative, the right of recall, the control of all parliamentary appointments by the House of Commons itself, restrictions on MPs holding “permanent” or judicial appointments, transfer to the Commons of control over its own business, and the abolition of the government’s power of dissolution. There is no doubt that the mood among many British socialists was not only to assert the specific interests of the working class but also, as The Herald’s own “Charter” demands illustrate, to somehow secure, if not the total dominance of workers qua workers, then at least strong industrial or occupational representation in the state, as well as in the workplace, and to connect the two.