POLARIZED SOCIAL-DEMOCRATS
Denunciation and Debate

The National Socialist Party, Justice, and the “Anti-Bolshevik Campaign”

Until 1916, the successor organization to the Social-Democratic Party — the second largest of British socialist parties after the ILP, apart from the Labour Party, which was made up of affiliated union and socialist societies — had remained united despite some internal conflicts. Now, erstwhile Social-Democrats found themselves in hostile confrontation. On the one, and larger, side stood a group that would soon become the prime constituent of the British Communist Party; arrayed on the other were its most vociferous opponents on the Left.

For the first two years or so following October and November 1917, outright opposition to the Bolsheviks remained rare on the British Left, even among those who, like the editor of and contributors to the New Statesman, would scarcely be regarded as “real” socialists by
those committed to the Bolshevik cause. The clearest exception was the National Socialist Party and its weekly paper, *Justice,* whose unequivocal denunciations of the Bolsheviks have already been noted.

The “Hyndmanites,” who had left the BSP over the issue of the war, are easily regarded as an irrelevant remnant, predominantly composed of the ageing “Old Guard of the S.D.F.,” who, to their support of an appalling war, added an unreasonable hostility towards the Bolsheviks. The fact that they initially adopted the name National Socialist Party — with the awful associations it was later to acquire — has not exactly enhanced their image for posterity, insofar as they have one. This is understandable. As the historian of its later years, E. Archbold, put it in 1935, with considerable understatement: “The selection of a name considered from post-war points of view does not appear to be a happy one.” Granted, the Hyndmanites later reverted to calling themselves the Social-Democratic Federation. The fact nonetheless remains that the most stridently anti-Bolshevik section of the British Left has been largely ignored, even though its ideas and activities clearly formed part — albeit a very small part — of the overall picture of the British Left’s response to the Bolshevik Revolution.

Members of the NSP saw themselves as orthodox Social-Democrats — Marxists — whose stance on the war was based on the doctrine of “national defence.” Support for the Allies did not imply an uncritical view of either their conduct of the war or of capitalism. The relatively democratic systems of the French republic and the United Kingdom were, however, deemed worthy of support against the onslaught of “Prussian militarism.” As the long-time secretary of the SDF and now the editor of *Justice,* H.W. Lee, argued in June 1918: “A peace based on the success of triumphant militarism will mean a disastrous defeat for what is free and democratic, so far as there is freedom and democracy under capitalism.” This was at a time when the German offensive still seemed to be in danger of sweeping all before it — when the “Prussian” triumph that Lee feared still seemed possible.

Hyndman himself had his own version of a revolutionary response to the danger of losing the war: “It is for Socialists and Labour men
throughout Great Britain to recognise this [danger] and prepare for
decisive action by formulating a definite policy and making an appeal,
in the shape of a Referendum on a clear issue, to every man and woman
on this island.” This was to lead to the setting up of “a Committee of
Public Safety.” Two months later, as the military tide began to turn,
he declared: “The people will win the war in spite of our politicians.”

Some would later call the Second World War a “people’s war.” This
was how the NSP regarded the 1914–18 conflict.

The firm belief that “Prussian militarism” was responsible for the
war meant that in no way did NSP members see any equivalence be-
tween the German Social-Democrats — whom they regarded as having
betrayed socialism in supporting the conflict — and their own pro-Ally
position. Indeed, as the war came to an end, Justice cautioned against
being too enthusiastic about the German revolution. In words that read
a little strangely in the light of the party’s anti-Bolshevism, it insisted
that to win the confidence of Western socialists, that revolution “must
go still further to the Left. Only when the Independent Socialists un-
der, say, Karl Liebknecht, take over the Government can we believe
that the Germans have really changed their minds.”

NSP members were scathing about the socialist and labour move-
ment credentials and general integrity of some of the BSP “Bolsheviks.”
This was especially so in the case of Louis Shammes, who had been ap-
pointed as secretary to the “Russian Revolutionary Consulate” under
John Maclean. According to J. Burden, the secretary of the Glasgow
NSP, Shammes, a Russian, had been his workmate:

He was an enthusiastic supporter of Kerensky, and when Kerensky and
his followers overturned the Russian autocracy his enthusiasm was
unbounded. Later he ordered one dozen Socialist Almanacks from
me, published by the Twentieth Century Press, which had a portrait
of Kerensky. By the time they were in my hands for sale developments
had taken place in Russia, Kerensky had been thrown out of the saddle,
and Lenin and Trotzky were in, so my fellow-worker Shammes refused
to take up his order. . . . He was now a supporter of Lenin.
But such disdain for his assistant had not prevented Hyndman sending in a letter protesting against the five-year sentence for sedition imposed on John Maclean in June 1918. He described it as “a preposterous sentence for purely political hallucination” and demanded action from Labour MPs to secure his release.6

Anticipation of victory in the war was replacing fear of defeat when the first annual NSP conference met in August 1918, shortly after the “Black Day of the German Army.” According to Justice’s report on the conference, as regards the Labour Party delegates were told that “our presence there is necessary to uphold the pro-Allied point of view as far as we can against the strange mixture of Pacifism and Bolshevism that seems in a fair way to dominate the Labour Party unless the pro-Allied men and women who constitute a majority among the rank and file as among the leaders pay more attention than they are doing at the moment to what is going on.” An attempt by H.W. Lee to change the party’s name back to the “Social-Democratic Federation” was resoundingly rejected — apparently largely because “Social-Democratic” sounded German, in spite of Hyndman’s reassurance (one that he had been giving since the 1880s) that the term had first been used in Britain in Chartist times by Bronterre O’Brien. Following this, the conference carried with acclamation Hyndman’s motion supporting the Russian SrSs against both “Bolshevik tyranny” and “monarchist intrigues.”

Hyndman also moved the executive committee’s motion on “Reconstruction,” which urged all labour and socialist organizations to combine to prevent “the railways, shipping, mines and factories now controlled and managed by government” from being restored to private ownership and to ensure that they were “rapidly socialised.” The remaining points of the program outlined in the motion called for “a minimum wage based on a high standard of life” to be provided “until the abolition of the wages system”; encouragement of co-operative distribution and production; a “good living wage” for redundant munitions workers and demobilized service personnel; state ownership of underdeveloped land; free transport for agricultural and industrial
goods by rail or canal; the building of several million “good homes”; secular education for all from ages 5 to 19; public ownership of hospitals “with the profession of medicine to be a Department of State”; and maternity benefits. The motion concluded that these were all “mere palliatives and stepping stones towards the Co-operative Commonwealth of the world.”

Outright and comprehensive rejection of the Bolshevik revolution in its entirety meant that any notion that there might be a case for, or any reality to, soviet democracy was doomed from the outset. The war had yet to finish when *Justice* reproduced the NSP’s poster for the coming general election. It proclaimed:

Our Candidates are out to kill

**BOLSHEVISM**

**CAPITALISM**

**MILITARISM**

Singled out for particular support were “Comrades J. O’Grady, Ben Tillett and Will Thorne,” all said to be certain of re-election, and Dan Irving (Burnley), Jack Jones (West Ham), L.E. Quelch (Reading), and Arthur Whiting, all with memberships dating back “into the days of the old S.D.F.” They would, said the paper, need to reiterate from time to time that they were “pro-Ally . . . because we believe the Allied armies have in the main been fighting a democratic fight.” There was a difference between a war of defence and one of aggression. Four more NSP parliamentary candidates were identified on the eve of the election, making eleven in all, two fewer than the number of Labour candidates claimed by the BSP.

But at the start of the new year, *Justice* was able to claim 6 of the 60 Labour MPs returned, including O’Grady at Leeds South-East, who had been returned unopposed. “The Labour Party has not only increased its numbers,” the paper concluded, “but also its influence by the defeat of Ramsay MacDonald, Philip Snowden, F.W. (Fred)
Jowett, and W.C. Anderson; and in the rout of the I.L.P. members known to be or suspected of being pacifist in the war.” The problem with the Labour party, according to a letter from L.E. Quelch, was that “people who have publicly avowed themselves to be Bolshevists, and have been advocating the Soviet form of government here and excusing the excesses of the Bolshevist Government in Russia, have been and still are in official positions in the Labour Party both nationally and locally.” In fact, Quelch’s own family was polarized on the issue.

The masthead of Justice proclaimed: “The oldest Socialist Journal in the British Isles. Established January 19 1884.” All the same, the paper’s credibility on the Left, already greatly weakened by its wholehearted support for the Allied cause, must have been further undermined by the vehemence of its attacks on the Bolsheviks. In March 1918, F.H. Gorle insisted that former Okhrana agents had joined the Petrograd Soviet. “Some are even on its executive,” he wrote, and others on the staff of Pravda. Later that year, Gorle was attacking “the Bolshevik Scum.” He cited a Swiss source that claimed that “Lenin’s proletariat dictatorship” comprised — in part, if not in whole — a variety of disreputable characters, which it named. These included “an ardent anti-semite,” a former “chief official of the Tsar’s secret police,” another former secret policeman, a general involved in a corruption case twenty years earlier, a former agent-provocateuer and fraudster, two former associates of Rasputin, various people in the pay of the Germans, and an academic from Riga who used to spy on his colleagues and students in the tsarist interest. Quite independently of their truth or falsehood, such accusations were certain, in the atmosphere of the British Left at the time, to be dismissed as hysterical nonsense, on a par with the anti-Bolshevik scare stories in the “capitalist press.”

This is evident from a letter from J. Connell published in response to Gorle’s accusations. Something of the anger felt by the NSP’s opponents on the Left is almost tangible in the letter’s threatening prediction:
When the war is over we International Socialists (the only “real Socialists”) will take care to remember when the maintenance of Socialism in Russia was in the balance, Hyndman, Bax, Hunter Watts, Gorle, Lee, Woodroffe and the rest of the National Socialist tribe, sided with the capitalist governments who would, if they could, re-establish the rule of the Tsars. We will bear in mind that at the critical hour, all they had to offer to Russian Socialists was vilification, and if they attempt to take part in our gathering we will pelt them as F.H.G. would get pelted if he opened his mouth in Billingsgate.\(^\text{15}\)

“Fraternally yours,” Connell concluded, having in mind perhaps the Cain and Abel version of brotherhood.

Gorle, predictably, was unabashed and returned the following week with “The Ugly Truth About Bolshevism,” giving more examples of alleged Bolshevik corruption and atrocities, including a quotation from *Indépendance Belge* that had the “former President of the Council of Workmen and Peasants” in Rostov pleading: “Shoot us in place of shooting children without trial or enquiry.”\(^\text{16}\) *Justice* quoted — while the war the NSP supported was still raging — part of a letter from Hans Vorst that had appeared in the *Berliner Tagblatt*:

> The Soviet organisations such as that at Bezhetsk where the Bolshevists have not got a majority, are dissolved, and the Peasant Councils in which the voices of opposition make themselves heard are broken up. The entire non-Bolshevist Press is suppressed and the Law Courts have been abolished. The Extraordinary Commission has withdrawn the most important questions from the administration of justice, and passes the most terrible sentences and carries out innumerable executions without court or verdict. The system of violence and arbitrary rule is worse than it ever was during the Tsarian regime.\(^\text{17}\)

Exasperated with critics who failed to believe such claims, “because we have not taken the Bolsheviks to our bosom,” Gorle quoted from *Izvestiya* on executions, suppression of SRs and Mensheviks, and dissident soviets. Wasn’t this surely “enough to satisfy any sane

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**Polarized Social-Democrats**
man that Bolshevism is the antithesis of socialism and a scandal to humanity?"  

The year 1919 saw a series of public meetings organised by the NSP as part of its “Anti-Bolshevik Campaign.” Targeted by supporters of the Bolsheviks, the small hall in which the first meeting took place was packed. Hyndman presided but “had spoken only a few words when interruptions began and they continued practically all through the meeting.” A motion by Will Thorne and Dan Irving declared: “This meeting, recognising that the wage-earners constitute the majority of the nation, hereby declares that they have it in their power to establish the Co-operative Commonwealth by ordinary political and democratic action . . . a desire for the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ is an absurdity, in that there is no necessity for the majority of the nation to constitute themselves as a dictatorship.” A week later, Thomas Kennedy hit at the ILP. Formerly, he claimed, it had reacted “with horror to any reference to class war, or to the use of physical force.” But now “Lenin is their god and guide, disturbance of the right of public meeting their most important work.” He had been told that the “Left Wing of the I.L.P.” had been prominent in the “attempt to break up our Edinburgh meeting.”

*Justice* was critical of the Berne Conference of the Socialist International in February 1919, which had “dealt with Bolshevism by inference and not directly” instead of condemning it unequivocally. But it would be wrong to imagine the NSP simply defended parliamentary democracy against the Bolshevik/soviet challenge. Continuing commitment to older forms of radical popular democracy is evident in the wartime call for a referendum and a committee of public safety. And, in a rather different context, the same commitment was apparent in the series of articles, titled “From Hun to Human,” by “Robert Arch” (Archibald Robertson) that appeared in *Justice* in the weeks following the end of the war. The articles were in line with veteran SDFER Belfort Bax’s earlier plea in *Justice* to “spare us diatribes of hate against the German people as such.” In the first, “Arch”/Robertson insisted that “when we said we were fighting ‘the Huns’ we meant (or should
have meant) that we were fighting that old tribal morality, that narrow spirit of race, whatever its embodiment or whoever might uphold it.” As he subsequently argued, it was vital that future wars should be avoided, and this presupposed “a great development of democracy.”

That “Arch”/Robertson did not simply mean the spread of electoral politics based on universal suffrage is clear from the remainder of the article. As we saw earlier, he reiterated the old SDF demand, “The People to Decide on Peace or War,” which had figured prominently in the party’s program since 1884 — as, for example, in 1899, when Justice had challenged “Mr Chamberlain and his fellow conspirators” to hold a referendum on the eve of the South African War. The NSP had certainly not surrendered to an uncritical support of parliamentary government as practised at Westminster.

Nor was the “industrial democracy” or “worker democracy,” which played such a great part in the appeal of the “soviet system” elsewhere on the Left, entirely ruled out. Hyndman’s early post-war seven-point proposal, “The Only Way to Avert Anarchy,” declared both that the initiative, referendum, and proportional representation should be the basis of legislation and for confirming “social action” and “that all monopolies, including the land and the great companies of every kind, shall forthwith be owned, and democratically controlled by the State and democratically socialised.” There was no indication of quite how this process of democratic socialization might work, but Hyndman did insist that “the workers could not possibly manage the mines more carelessly, more wastefully, or more against the interests of the country than the mine owners do to-day.”

Though the “Old Guard” had always been very hostile to syndicalism, equating it with violent anarchism, this clearly did not preclude some form of “workers’ democracy” as long as the rights of citizens qua citizens were also adequately recognized. This is evident from the positive view taken of guild socialism, where the criticism is virtually confined to the argument that, contrary to its continual proclamation of its own originality, guild socialism represented little that was new and mostly what SDFers had long been advocating. Towards the end
of 1918, reviewing *The Meaning of National Guilds*, by Maurice B. Reckitt and C.E. Bechhofer, F.J. Gould told readers of *Justice*: “The two authors really cut ice. . . . They leave poor Sidney Webb and his Fabian baggage far behind.” There was no “Bolshevik foolery” about the book, and “its scheme of progress is a development of an existing order.” Although the authors sensibly insisted that “the Guild idea is an idea rather than a creed,” Gould noted, what was missing was any acknowledgement of the long decades of campaigning against “wagedom” on the part of Hyndman and the Social-Democrats. Nevertheless, there were thanks from the book’s authors for the “generous” review in a long letter published a few weeks later.

The lack of novelty — but general worthiness — of guild socialism was asserted, again by “Robert Arch,” in reviewing Bertrand Russell’s *Roads to Freedom: Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism* at the beginning of 1919:

> All that is good however, in Guild Socialism (the control of industry democratically from below, rather than bureaucratically from above) was advocated by Social-Democrats long before Mr Orage and Mr Cole had written a line, as Mr. Russell would see, for example, if he referred to Laurence Gronlund’s “Co-operative Commonwealth” — one of the best works of the older Socialists.


> Guild Socialism, as described by Mr Cole, is very much like what we Social-Democrats have always advocated. But some of the younger Fabians, who have revolted against the bureaucratic methods of Sidney Webb, still seem unable to realise that all they are saying has been said by the Social-Democrats years ago. That does not make their contributions to the solution of the industrial problem any the less valuable; only they are not quite as new and original as they appear at times to imagine themselves to be.
Trying to convince guild socialists that their ideas had been anticipated was not the main difficulty for the NSP, however. Its real problem was that, no matter how often it repeated its attacks on “Russian Despots and British Dupes,” as Archibald Lee described them, this failed to achieve the desired effect. It had to be accepted, Lee concluded, that “a larger number of British workers than some of us care to admit, though not so large as its leaders would have us believe, has been taught to pray for the preservation of that tyranny.” But not quite all of his former comrades in the BSP were accepting the claims made for soviet democracy as uncritically as Lee might have supposed.

Parliamentarism and Trade Unionism: The 1919 Debate in The Call

For members of the BSP during the summer of 1919, their weekly paper became the arena for the conflict between, on the one side, an uncritical acceptance of the reality of “soviet democracy” in Russia and a positive view of its short-term prospects in Britain and, on the other, a more skeptical view of both. The debate was triggered by Theodore Rothstein, who was born, and was to die, in Russia, but lived most of his life in Britain. He had been a member of the BSP and its predecessor, the SDF, from 1895 until 1914, when his opposition to support of the war by the then-BSP, and possibly also his work with the Foreign and War Offices as a Russian translator, led him to leave the party. Prior to leaving, he was active enough in the BSP to have served several years on its executive in the first decade of the twentieth century. He was to be a key player in the creation of the British Communist Party.

At the beginning of June 1919, an article titled “Parliamentarism and Trade Unionism,” by “John Bryan,” the nom de guerre of Rothstein, appeared in The Call. It was followed by an announcement that this was the first of two articles and that other contributions regarding the crucial issues would be welcomed. Rothstein made the usual criticisms of “bourgeois democracy.” Parliament was, he declared, “a mere veil disguising the dictatorship of the capitalist classes.” The true failure of parliamentarism had been shown “in the light of the
new institution, the Soviets.” The division between legislative and executive functions meant that Parliament was a mere “talking shop.” Not so the soviets:

Under this system the class-sense of the workers is constantly kept alive and maintained in active operation by (1) the corporate (as distinguished from individual) voting in workshops and various Labour organisations, in which the individual is no longer a detached atom, but feels himself to be part of the working class, inaccessible to any influences or allurements; (2) by the right of instantaneous recall of inefficient or disloyal delegates; (3) by the natural and quite inevitable obligation of the delegates to report their doings on the Soviet to their electors in the same way that any delegate to a trades council or any shop steward does at present; (4) by the concentration of legislative and executive functions in one and the same body which prevents that body, the Soviet, from degenerating into an empty talking shop or of abdicating its functions — and (5) by the body sitting in permanence. Above all, under the Soviet system there is not one institution only to legislate and to execute the law leaving the people outside in the role of passive onlookers, but the Soviets, in every area . . . are the State authorities for that area.

In other words, the people itself, in its actual collectivity, and not merely a chosen handful, carries on the government of the country, legislating, imposing taxes, appointing and controlling officials, electing judges and dismissing them, and so forth.

The result was that in Russia, in contrast to the delusions of parliamentarism in Britain, there was “real, and not merely nominal government by the people and through the people.” This was precisely the picture of soviet democracy in practice that so many on the Left found so convincing and seductive.

The following week, in the second of his articles, Rothstein turned to the trade unions. “In Russia there were no trade unions worth speaking of under the Tsarist regime,” he claimed, but they sprang up in large numbers after the February Revolution of 1917. It might
have been expected that, being of revolutionary origin, they would have “played a revolutionary part in the subsequent developments.” But instead trade unions were “conspicuously unimportant” in later stages of the revolution, and “what little part they played was rather conservative in character.” This was because trade unions were, in their very nature, organizations dedicated to improving workers’ conditions “on the basis of the existing class-relationship” in their particular branch of production. Their structures and procedures were also to blame, with their machinery of committees and permanent officials, “ranged more or less in hierarchical order.” Given this structure, “any impulse coming from below must necessarily lose both in strength and freshness, and take a long time before it reaches the apex of the hierarchy where the final decision is taken. It then often has to travel back to the base before it is translated into action.” In addition, trade unions were “led for the most part by men who possess the highest bureaucratic capacities, and for that very reason lack any others.” (Why this was not also likely to be true of the soviets, with their similar structure of “hierarchical” bodies, was a question Rothstein did not address.)

Trade unions were inadequate, Rothstein concluded. But they should not be attacked: as the potential seedbeds of shop stewards and workers’ councils, they held promise. These councils would play “an important role in the task of Socialist reconstruction after the Revolution,” which would come not through parliament and trade unions but “by direct action, political and economic, of the rank and file through their politico-economical organisations of the Soviet type.”

Rothstein’s articles triggered a critical response from two of the most prominent members of the BSP, H. Alexander and E.C. Fairchild. The former was the national treasurer of the party and the latter the recent editor of The Call — “recent” because he had resigned at the end of May, a move clearly related to the controversy that was to follow very quickly. The first to respond, however, was Alexander, who maintained that what was needed was “a considered statement wherein is proven the possibility of establishing in this country the
Soviet system *here* and *now.* Alexander’s central objection to Rothstein’s approach was that Britain was very different from Russia. There were 18 million people in Britain who had investments — in war savings certificates, post office savings, friendly societies, building societies, insurance companies — so revolution in Britain would “not be the result of despair.” Rather, it would be “an outcome of prosperity, leisure, education and the people’s instinctive feeling that they want more.”

Rothstein, said Alexander, underestimated Parliament. It was “in its dotage,” he said, “but that is not death.” Simply because “the control of industry requires something radically different to Parliament,” a Labour government “would be compelled to put into operation a scheme along the lines of decentralisation.” It was possible that powers would be delegated to existing local authorities “to carry on industries co-opting for that purpose direct representatives from the workshop.” It was possible that “the Russian model” would be more closely followed. But for the present it was not a practical proposition. Alexander ended with a warning: “If we want the transition period to be still-born, let us go to the people with a premature policy which the people shows no signs of accepting. That is just what the enemy wants.” Meanwhile, in the correspondence column, a reader maintained that “Bryan” (that is, Rothstein) had contradicted himself by saying that Parliament was “not effective” yet insisting that he did not want to “abandon parliamentary warfare.”

The following week, Fairchild likewise picked up on Rothstein’s apparent self-contradiction:

At the end of an attack running into six columns in which Parliament is discussed as the “specific form of the political side of Capitalism” ... and trade unionism rejected on the grounds that it “tends merely to consolidate the privileged position of trade unionists,” John Bryan arrives at the conclusion that we must not abandon parliamentary methods nor leave our trade unions. He will run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.
Fairchild accepted the “ultimate superiority of the soviet or workers’ committees,” but their day would come “after ownership of the means of production is in the hands of the people.” He contrasted the Russian scenario of 1917, in which the Duma “could not resist the growing strength of the Petrograd Soviet,” with the situation in Britain: “Were the London Trades Council to propose the abolition of Parliament it would find its task rather more difficult than that of the soviet.” Rothstein and his supporters were, he said, being totally unrealistic about the prospects of soviet rule in Britain. Moreover, Rothstein’s “dainty idyll of a workman voting in the workshop” was naïve. “It would be hard to find a proposition having less touch with actuality,” Fairchild insisted, “than the suggestion that in the workshop there is an ever present sense of common identity. Every clever foreman divides his men, and every discerning workman knows how it is done.” Fairchild was therefore skeptical about the ability of the soviet system to ensure that “the people itself” would govern with “unfettered democracy” and about the assumption that “a village committee thousands of miles from the Congress of Soviets, remote and isolated, not only preserves its autonomy, but is part of a system inherently incapable of bureaucracy.” He ended by questioning why “an innocuous proposition to revive the moribund shop stewards’ movement and establish highly unstable workers’ committees needs so elaborate a political philosophy.”

But Rothstein had plenty of backing in the BSP. Or so it would seem from the contents of The Call during the weeks that followed. One reader, Robert Lowe, contributed a long letter in his support at the beginning of July, while J.F. Hodgson, a member of the BSP executive, thought “the crux of the whole controversy between ourselves and those who agree with Fairchild” was “whether the war is to be followed quickly by world-revolution,” adding: “We believe strongly that it is.” Fairchild was, according to Hodgson, “a little too previous” with his characterization of the shop stewards’ movement and was equally misguided in his view of Parliament:
The dispossession of the capitalist class by consent is the most childish illusion. That happy confirmation can only be reached by the dictatorship of the working-class. The instrument of that dictatorship will be developed in due course. Parliamentary “democracy” is not such an instrument. The instrument must be such as will enable power to be used where it really resides, that is, at the point of production. It must be able to be quickly responsible to the popular will and be formed on the axiom that, differently from the false “democracy” of our masters, true democracy demands that all power must originate and remain with the working masses. The Soviet Republic of Russia has developed such an instrument.36

Another supporter of Rothstein’s view was the veteran socialist and suffrage campaigner Dora Montefiore. Others included W. McLaine, who failed to see the logic of Fairchild’s position — “Fairchild appears to believe that soviets will be required after the revolution so why not prepare before?” — and Jack Carney, editor of The Truth in Duluth, Minnesota.37 Meanwhile, in another contribution, A.E. Adshead — the author of the letter calling attention to what he saw as Rothstein’s inconsistency — took what was becoming the position of the Communist “Left Wing,” criticizing both “the equivocation of Comrade Bryan” on parliamentarism and Fairchild and Alexander. A week later, yet another correspondent, H. Steward Ryde, defended Rothstein’s rejection of Workers’ Socialist Federation–style anti-parliamentarism.38

Fairchild was allowed a rejoinder at the end of August. He began by remarking: “It is worth comment that seven comrades all with more than common skills in argument deem it necessary to enter the lists and support each other against Alexander and myself.” Fairchild’s critics had, he observed, a variety of opinions:

[It] would appear that John Bryan has yet to spend a deal of effort before there is intellectual unity between the conflicting pleas that Parliament is a grand propagandist platform, that a Parliamentary majority is impossible, that such a majority could hurry on the “demise and interment” of representative institutions, as W. McLaine puts it, and that Parliament cannot be of any use at all as Adshead would have us believe.
Fairchild went on to explain his own beliefs. “Parliamentary action is the readiest way, with all its difficulty and danger, when supported by the industrial power of the unions, to gain the central, national, use of political power,” he wrote, “which marks off the Socialist method from preferences for violence and aimless revolt.” It was the “fevered imaginations” of those such as the members of the Workers’ Socialist Federation that cherished the illusion that “the workers here move rapidly towards an immediate Soviet administration.”

As Fairchild’s article progressed, it became evident that his doubts about the “soviet system” were not confined to its short-term prospects in Britain but extended to how the system actually operated in Russia:

How far the People’s Commissaries act under the control of the Russian workers is an interesting point in contemporary history, and if the truth were more widely known, many uncritical supporters of a Soviet for this country would have some rude shocks. Lenin knows his people and knows how far towards Communism technically backward Russia can advance at this stage. Our concern is with the people we meet face to face in daily life. They are more the means of Socialism than ourselves. If the workers are silly when voting and stupid in trade unionism, it is at least inconsequent to assume their sudden change into grand Socialist citizens when confronted with the magnificent problems of supply to meet the artistic and material demands engendered by an ordered commonwealth.

This was very dangerous ground for Fairchild, challenging not just the immediate prospects of creating soviets in Britain but casting doubt on the reality of soviet democracy in its homeland — a belief in which so many had invested their hopes. His critics, he claimed, had only “the haziest ideas when the Soviets are to be formed” in Britain. What had led to the whole debate, he maintained, was “the wordy, ambiguous, windy, ‘Sovietist’ resolution sprung on the B.S.P. Annual Conference at the last minute with the consent of a too complaisant and wholly invertebrate Executive Committee.” And he added: “Doubtless they will all soon be assisting Alexander and I to bury it fathoms deep.”

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spite of this confident assertion, one cannot help wondering whether by this time Fairchild really believed this or whether he was at least beginning to suspect that the bulk of the BSP membership was now firmly behind Rothstein.

Either way, Fairchild was undeterred. Previously, he continued, he had been of the opinion that the executive, having consented to the mysterious appearance of the “Sovietist” resolution at the conference, “should at least say what they understand it to mean, since they denied my interpretation was correct. But the wily men know the dangers of definition: or was it weakness?” These charges were rejected in an editorial note at the end of the article, which asserted that “the resolution to which Fairchild takes exception was no more ‘sprung on the Annual Conference at the last minute’ than were three other resolutions. All three of which were drafted by Comrade Fairchild and one of which he himself moved.”

But Fairchild was not going to concede. In a letter published “with regret” the following week, he claimed that there was a “vital difference” between the first three resolutions and the fourth. The ones he had drafted were the outcome of prolonged discussion and were approved by the executive committee. The “Sovietist resolution” was “quite otherwise.” It was “never discussed by any committee. At an Organisation Committee meeting the Secretary reported he had arranged for a resolution on the international situation to be prepared. I am of the opinion that the Party’s officials exceed their duties when they make arrangements of that character and come to a committee with a fait accompli.”

Furthermore, the “authenticity” of the resolution was questionable since it did not originate “from any member of the Party’s responsible committees.” “Its author is not even a member of the B.S.P.,” he wrote, although, he added, he was known to the executive committee. An editorial note followed denying Fairchild’s assertions, which were all in “comrade Fairchild’s imagination” and “quite untrue.” Walter Kendall has speculated that the “author” referred to was Rothstein himself who, though a pre-war member of the BSP,
had resigned from the party in 1914. This seems very likely — a racing certainty, in fact — particularly when the final sentences of Fairchild’s letter are taken into account: “If the policy of the B.S.P. does not spring from its own ranks, the Party ceases to have any title to existence. It becomes a mere appendage of another.” Presumably, the “another” of which the BSP had become an appendage was the Russian Communist Party, of which Rothstein was, in effect, the British representative.

Rothstein was now allowed to sum up the debate. Fairchild’s “uncharacteristic acerbity” was due to the fact that he and Alexander were “in a hopeless minority in the party.” Rothstein maintained that recent events had made it even clearer that Parliament was “a wonderful invention of the bourgeoisie and is utterly incompatible with the requirements either of a socialist revolution or a socialist, i.e., really popular, regime.” Anyone wishing to “abolish the dictatorship of the capitalist class and to establish the rule of the working class must repudiate the parliamentary form of government both as a permanent system and as a means of bringing about the socialist revolution.” The revolution would, he argued, be brought nearer by “making it clear to the masses that the present is a dictatorship of the capitalist class and must be replaced by the dictatorship — or call it undivided rule — of the workers and that the specific form under which the rule of the workers can be realised is the Soviet form.” A further letter from Fairchild, in the same issue, provoked a note from the editor stating that the paper was “unable to concede to him, any more than anyone else, the unrestricted right deliberately to mislead the members of the B.S.P.”

The defeat of Fairchild and Alexander is mainly attributable to the widespread enthusiasm for soviet democracy in the BSP as elsewhere on the Left. But there was another factor at work. “John Bryan” — that is, Rothstein — had become the representative of the Bolshevik government in Britain following the arrest and subsequent deportation of Litvinov in September 1918. If, as Kendall suggests of Rothstein’s influence in the BSP, “an inner core of party members...
were aware that Bryan was speaking in Litvinov’s place, with the full authority of Moscow,” this could only help to secure the acceptance of his views.43

Certainly, by now it must have been clear to readers that Fairchild’s membership in the party was unlikely to continue for much longer. He faded away quite quickly, though not abruptly, from the pages of the paper he had edited, still appearing towards the end of September on its front page with “Lloyd George: The Political Tramp.”44 He was the author of a number of pamphlets, such as The Economics of War and Socialism and the League of Nations, advertisements for which had hitherto appeared in The Call, along with the rest of the BSP literature. By mid-October there was still an ad for his Ten Lectures for Students of History, 1760–1832, and Political Economy, which included one called “Strikes and the British Constitution.” But there was now nothing by him advertised in the pamphlets and books section.

The debate that had gone on over the summer of 1919 in the pages of The Call was continued at public meetings. The same October issue of the paper reported on a packed meeting concerning the question “Socialism Through Parliament or Soviet?” where “all the fire and grimness” had come “from the champion of established order, comrade Fairchild.” The BSP Hall, Willesden Green, had also hosted a debate titled “Soviet or Parliament: Is the Dictatorship of the Proletariat Necessary in England to Realise the Social Revolution?” between Fred Willis, who had taken over the editorship of The Call following Fairchild’s resignation, and H. Alexander.45 Fairchild and Alexander seem to have resigned from the BSP soon afterwards, however, following its overwhelming decision in favour of affiliation to the Third International.46

The debate in The Call reminds us that the BSP’s 1916 “split,” which had led to the withdrawal of the Hyndmanites and the inception of the NSP, had specifically turned on the issue of the war. The division in the party had never been about the correct interpretation of Marxism with respect to democracy and dictatorship or about the attitude that should be taken toward Parliament or the trade union
movement. By the summer of 1919, it was clear that two prominent BSP members, at least, were rather closer on these issues to the reviled NSP, a charge they would no doubt have indignantly rejected. But very few in the BSP were to follow the lead of Fairchild and Alexander.