A “Distinctive Program”
Variations on the Way Forward

At the ILP’s 1920 conference, not long before he and Richard Wallhead travelled to Russia, Clifford Allen had complained of the similarity between “our program and the program of the Labour Party,” which “makes it exceedingly difficult to keep the party alive in the districts.” The more Labour gained new members who had no prior experience with the socialist movement, the more imperative it became that there be, within the larger organization, “a nucleus with a program that is distinctive.” Allen’s complaint did not go unheeded. A resolution passed at the conference had instructed the NAC to set up a committee to consider “the program of the Party, relations with the Labour Party, and the Soviet system of government.” This was, of course, the Program and Policy Committee, which was chaired by Ramsay MacDonald.

Over the summer of 1920, the subcommittee charged with drafting a new program held a series of meetings, and the resulting draft was revised and approved by a meeting of the full committee in September. In November, commenting on the draft of the new program, MacDonald would write in Labour Leader: “I believe that, in spite of the growth of local Labour Parties and of Communist sections, the I.L.P., in spirit and in policy, remains a companionship which is worth maintaining because it gives one inspiration and faith to go on fighting against Capitalism, and because it is required as a socialist nucleus in the working-class movement.” Whether MacDonald’s use of the word nucleus was a conscious or unconscious borrowing from Allen, or merely coincidental, the ILP was clearly moving towards establishing itself as a party with a “distinctive” program, one that differed from that of the Labour Party overall. Unsurprisingly, precisely what this distinctive program should be was a topic of no small debate.

Guild Socialism and the Question of Industrial Democracy

Allen had argued, at the 1920 conference, that the NAC needed to respond to “the Socialist thought that is coming from Russia” and give more attention
Allen, who was initially very enthusiastic about the concept of soviets, had wanted to promote some form of industrial democracy since before the end of the war. “To Clifford Allen,” his biographer, Arthur Marwick, concludes, “the essential purpose of the I.L.P. was to adopt a thorough-going programme with strong Guild Socialist overtones, completely distinctive from that of the Labour Party.” He quotes an entry from Allen’s diary for 29 January 1918: “The more I read and think about this new way of getting all the good things of socialism with a minimum of interference by a bureaucratic state, the keener I become about it.”

There had long been some support for guild socialism in the I.L.P. As early as January 1917, a motion asserting that “the principle of Guild Socialism is essential to a democratic state” appeared on the agenda of the No. 9 (Lancashire) Division’s conference. In late 1918, the Socialist Review published a review of Self-Government in Industry, by G. D. H. Cole, the leading guild socialist at the time. This was followed, in the next issue, by an article by Cole himself, and, in 1919, Cole’s Workers’ Control in Industry was published as an I.L.P. pamphlet. Early in 1920, an interview with Cole by Fenner Brockway appeared in the Labour Leader under the title “Evolution of Socialist Thought.” Robert Dowse is right to stress the influence of Cole at this time: “G. D. H. Cole was practically given the freedom of the I.L.P. press.”

In 1919, Cole and his wife, Margaret, became editors of The Guildsman, the organ of the National Guilds League (NGL). The life of the NGL was brief, lasting only from 1915 until 1923. But it was productive, generating numerous ideas and initiatives, as well as a certain amount of internal conflict. Essentially, guild socialism—and not all NGL members liked the word socialism—was a response to the syndicalist movement, with its rejection of centralized political structures in favour of industrial, or workplace, democracy. It was equally a reaction against the state socialism epitomized by the Fabian Society’s traditional approach, which was seen by many younger Fabians, like the Coles, as elitist and bureaucratic.

In the ideal guild socialist society all people would be involved in democratic participation as workers, citizens, and—in some versions, at least—consumers. Although advocates of guild socialism varied in matters of emphasis, in essence they all envisioned a “functional democracy,” with workplaces and industries under the direct control of those who worked in them and with a democratic national assembly elected by all citizens that would coexist with a second chamber elected on the basis of occupational group. With that goal in mind, in the early postwar years the NGL encouraged experiments with the formation of workers’ guilds—essentially producer cooperatives.
There were those in the ILP whose endorsement of the idea of workers' guilds was more cautious. John Scurr, for example was an influential voice in Poplar, where he was a local councillor. He would be elected as a Labour MP for Mile End, another area of London's East End, in 1923. Scurr declared himself to be in favour of industrial democracy. “Yet I must confess,” he wrote in the Socialist Review, “that I cannot see any way of a brush maker in the East End of London working at home for a paltry pittance controlling her industry, until I have put her in the position whereby she will be able to buy sufficient food to live and have a little leisure to think about something else than mere existence.”

How could someone in such dire straits, Scurr argued, exercise the sort of control over her industry required by any kind of industrial democracy or be expected to take part in a movement to secure it, he implied. But there was no shortage of enthusiasts for at least some variety of guild socialism in the ILP, particularly among the younger members. As Kevin Morgan aptly puts it, “guild socialist sensibilities were de rigueur for the coming generation.”

Nor was a commitment to some form of industrial democracy out of line with what the leading members of the ILP—who, within a few years, would be the leaders of the first Labour government—were advocating at this time. In his 1920 pamphlet Socialism Made Plain, Philip Snowden was at pains to distance the ILP’s idea of socialization from any form of bureaucratic nationalization of industry: “Socialists do not propose that the control of industry shall be centralised in a Government Department,” he wrote. He then pointed to plans developed by miners for workers’ control of that industry, which, in his view, illustrated how to “ensure democratic management.” There will, he explained, “be control by representatives of the State and the workers and consumers, through national and regional committees.”

In the first part of his 1921 study course on the history of the ILP, MacDonald likewise made his position clear:

Under State Socialism nationalised industry would have to be managed by a bureaucracy of officials on a highly centralised system. The I.L.P. never was State Socialist in that way. Control will be based upon the workshops, federated into the district, federated into the nation, and finally federated into an international organisation. In this organisation the workers will participate in control according to schemes worked out to meet the circumstances of each industry.

Echoing his remarks in Socialism: Critical and Constructive, however, he went on to warn of the potential capacity of guilds to undermine broader civic commitments:
Guild Socialism must be carefully scrutinised. If it is merely to be a series of guilds of workmen, it will cure some evils but will not serve larger social ends and it will not be able to avoid in the end the dangers of “professionalism”; if it be grafted on to a complete social economic organisation, and be merged in the true comprehensive Socialist idea of the civic community, it will be found a social contribution to the problem of nationalised control.¹⁵

The incorporation of guild socialist ideas into the broader party program was one of several issues that would need to be resolved.

An Uneasy Tension: The Draft of the Program and Policy Committee

At the annual conference in 1921, the version of the program that would have declared the ILP to be “Communist” and endorsed the dictatorship of the proletariat effectively fell by the wayside when most of the Left Wing withdrew from the ILP following the defeat of Comintern affiliation. Ideas from this quarter had, however, influenced the draft program, and there still remained plenty of material to spark disagreement. As noted earlier, in September 1920, the Program and Policy Committee approved an initial draft of the new program, which was put before the annual conference in 1921. The draft proved to be what Philip Snowden, who chaired the conference, would describe as “essentially a compromise between two points of view which were not easily compatible.”¹⁶

Included in the NAC’s report to the 1921 conference was a report from the subcommittee responsible for drafting the new program. Fourteen members of the drafting committee agreed that the statement of the party’s principal mission should open with the declaration that “the I.L.P. is a Socialist organisation, whose aim is to end the present Capitalist System and its exploitation of Labour, together with all forms of hereditary and economic privilege, and to establish a system by which the community will own, organise, and control resources for the benefit of all.”¹⁷ But there were many differences of opinion within the committee itself, which were reflected in debates concerning the wording of certain sections of the program.

Commenting on the committee’s report, the NAC noted that the section titled “Control and Management of Communal Property” constituted “a definite change from the traditional State Socialist theory to the more recent theories of workers’ control.” The committee had been unanimous, the NAC reported, that a greater decentralization of power was the “only way to avoid bureaucracy after the socialisation of industry.”¹⁸ Visible in this shift away from state control of industry was the influence both of the Russian system of soviets and of guild
socialist models of industrial democracy. Evidently, however, Ramsay MacDonald, was not entirely happy with this new emphasis on workers’ control. The previous December, Labour Leader had published an alternative version of the draft program written by MacDonald himself. This draft proposed a more equivocal wording, according to which this section of the program should read simply: “The Independent Labour Party believes in Democracy both in its industrial and civic aspects.” MacDonald’s version also made it clear that industrial democracy meant “more and more control” by wage and salary earners. Tacitly acknowledging the various, sometimes rival, concerns within the ILP, MacDonald wrote that “the Guild Socialist as well as the democrat who suspects that the Labour Government will be sabotaged by bourgeois conspirators ought to find both freedom and room for useful work in the Party, provided they enter as co-operative and not as disruptive members.”

According to the NAC, all members of the drafting committee supported “a national representative assembly directly elected by the people.” Some, however, including Snowden and Jowett, also wanted provision for a “Co-ordinating Authority,” a central body to be composed equally of representatives from the national assembly and from an organization of producers and consumers. Others favoured a system that would provide for “the maximum of decentralisation” and “constant contact” between representatives and their constituents. Again, these proposals reflected both guild socialist hostility to the centralized power of a “sovereign” state and an idealized notion of “soviet democracy,” in which delegates are expected to adhere to the mandate given them by those who elected them, who reserve the right to recall the delegate. The NAC took note of the demand for “far more decentralisation” and for “special bodies to deal with education, public health etc.” that would be chosen by the methods of election most appropriate to the work that each would have to do.

A further point at issue in this section, the NAC reported, concerned the direct election of the national assembly. Committee member C. H. Norman—a prominent member of the party’s Left Wing—wanted the national assembly to “contain representatives of the organised producers and consumers, and of the local authorities, with a view to giving proper representation to the expert knowledge and special views which such representatives could express.”

There were also differences of opinion on the committee, the NAC said, as to what priority to give to gaining control of “local and national governing bodies.” But, despite the lack of consensus on the most contentious question of the role of direct action, the committee did agree that the ILP should aim “to destroy imperialism and render war impossible” and promote the “fullest development of the international working-class movement” and “the liberation of subject peoples.”
There was, in short, much debate about the draft program, both among members of the Program and Policy Committee and within the *ILP* more broadly, coupled with a general awareness that the *ILP* was in the process of making a significant change of direction. Although need for such a redefinition of the party’s platform was widely recognized, nothing would be decided on the subject at the party’s 1921 conference, in early April, which was instead dominated by the question of whether the *ILP* should join the Comintern. This debate left little time for a discussion of the draft program.

This was a relief for some. Near the end of the conference, after the defeat of the Left Wing’s “Moscow amendment,” Patrick Dollan, who represented the Scottish Division on the *NAC*, moved that the draft be referred back to the *NAC* for further consideration. Not only was the time that remained too short to allow for an adequate discussion, he insisted, but now that the party had rejected the idea of membership in the Third International, the “camouflaged Sovietism” contained in the draft program seemed unnecessary. Snowden, who was chairing the conference, accepted Dollan’s proposal on behalf of the *NAC*. According to *Labour Leader*’s report on the proceedings, Snowden told the conference that the *NAC* had “not sent the programme out to the branches with any enthusiasm,” inasmuch as it was, as he pointed out, an uneasy marriage of two incompatible perspectives. So the whole matter was referred back to the *NAC*.

Towards a Guild Socialist Program: The New NAC Draft

That Dollan should be the one to move for referral was perhaps not surprising. In January, reporting the results of the Scottish Division conference, he had wearyl criticized the “long and frequently academic discussion of the draft program” within the *ILP*, remarking that “the making of programs is not a healthy occupation for normal Socialists, although the theory-weavers and phrase-makers seem to enjoy it.” Of course, not everyone in the *ILP* shared his impatience with the process. Clement Attlee, for one, considered the drafting of a new program a matter “of vital importance.” In a letter to *Labour Leader*, written late in July 1921, he offered a number of arguments in support of this proposition, the first relating to the duty of *ILP* members to promote the party’s views. “As a propagandist,” he wrote, “I feel the need for a definite statement to which I can relate my arguments.” It was also important, he argued, that the *ILP* have a clear statement of its position for use in the upcoming general election and, especially in view of the recent defeats of the miners and other trade unionists in the industrial field, that the party define its “attitude to the future organisation and control of industry.” This would, he argued, demonstrate the value of political action. It was, moreover, “futile” to be debating “the claims of rival Internationals” until the *ILP* was able to agree on its own program.”
In concluding, Attlee strongly recommended that agreeing on a party program be made the “chief item” on the agenda for the party’s 1922 conference and that proposals be circulated to branches well in advance of the event itself to ensure ample time for discussion. This plea followed his final argument for the crucial importance of the program. The ILP could live only “by attracting new blood,” he wrote, and, to do so, the party needed a “definite programme that will attract the younger men that are coming forward.” These “keen souls” would be disheartened by “vague generalities or compromises” and might well be driven to “adopt other programmes which, however impossibilist, are clear and easy to understand.”

Almost simultaneously, at its biannual conference in early August, the Lancashire Division urged on the NAC the “importance of making a pronouncement on Party policy at an early date.”

By late September, the NAC had produced a new draft program, one that had the unanimous support of its members. This new draft appeared in the Labour Leader at the end of that month. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the current flurry of interest in guild socialism, it contained a section headed “Political and Industrial Democracy,” which read:

The I.L.P. believes in democratic organisation both in its political and industrial aspects, for communal ends.

The basis of political democracy must be the whole body of citizens exercising authority through a national representative assembly, directly elected by the people, with a decentralised and extended system of local government.

The basis of industrial democracy must be 1) the organisation of wage and salary earners; and 2) the organisation of consumers.

The exact form of the organisation and the machinery of co-operation between consumers and producers must be determined by experience as step by step is taken towards the achievement of the Socialist Commonwealth.

This new version of the program distanced the ILP from top-down forms of socialism, including the nationalization of industry, insisting instead that socialism must give “workers in the industry an effective share and responsibility for administration.” Moreover, should a government or “reactionary class” attempt to “suppress liberty or thwart the National Will,” as the ILP believed might easily be the case, “democracy must use to the utmost extent its political and industrial power” to defeat it.

Freed now of the need to try and keep on board the now largely departed Left Wing by including ambiguous phraseology that suggested support for the soviet interpretation of industrial democracy—what Dollan had called...
"camouflaged sovietism"—the debate on the ILP program began to move in a more definite guild socialist direction.

Yet Two More: The “Allen-Attlee” Alternative and the Bradford Version

Considerable debate about the new program ensued, from the end of 1921 until the ILP national conference the following April. On 8 December, Labour Leader published a letter from Clement Attlee that contained what became known as the “Allen-Attlee alternative.” Signed by thirteen well-known ILP members, including H. N. Brailsford and Fenner Brockway, it expressed general agreement with the NAC draft, which it declared to be “a good basis.” The main criticism of the proposed program, the letter went on, was that it sometimes seemed vague, whereas what was required was “a strong lead.”

According to Arthur Marwick, it was Allen who had taken the initiative in producing this alternative version. The NAC left the drafting of the proposed program to NAC members Snowden, MacDonald, Richard Wallhead, Walter Ayles (a Quaker from Bristol), and Emanuel Shinwell, and “none of these men were particularly interested in the theories of Guild Socialism,” writes Marwick. Allen therefore formed a group that initially consisted of himself, Fenner Brockway, and “two ex-servicemen of advanced socialist opinions, Clement Attlee and John Beckett,” to which others were later added.

Above all, the Allen-Attlee version wanted “clearer recognition” of the “principles of ‘workers’ control.” The ILP should take a definite stand “for industrial and political democracy and for devolution by locality and function as against the theory of the all-controlling State.” The letter also criticized the omission from the party’s statement of objectives “the most important of all, the conversion of the people to Socialist principles.” The weak statement on internationalism was also rejected, and the criticism of this last section of the NAC draft was scathing. To call for “a free flow of tropical products in the world’s markets” was, the letter said, “a remnant of economic individualism” and quite out of place in an ILP program. The “deliberate organisation of the resources of the world” was what the ILP should be aiming for. The letter was also critical of the reference in the NAC draft to “a relationship between the white and the weaker native peoples, which will tutor the latter in self-government.” This it rejected as “not happy” and “likely to be misleading.”

The Allen-Attlee alternative retained much of the wording of the section of the NAC draft on political and industrial democracy but made the party’s position on the latter more explicit. To the original’s call for the “organisation of wage and salary earners,” it suggested adding “to whom shall be secured the internal management of industry.” To “the organisation of consumers,” it
called for the addition of a “central body, representative of the people, both as producers and consumers,” which “must decide the amount and character of communal production and service necessary.” The internal management of each industry “must be in the hands of the workers, administrative, technical, and manual engaged therein, operating in conjunction with the representatives of organised consumers.” The Allen-Attlee version was similarly explicit about the party’s position on any attempt by reactionary forces to “suppress liberty,” stating that “it may be necessary at certain times and for specific purposes, to resort to extra-political methods, such as ‘Direct Action.’”

Scarcely a month later, a second revision of the NAC’s proposed program entered the fray. Early in January 1922, the new editor of Labour Leader—Bertram R. Carter, who had taken over from Katharine Bruce Glasier the previous August—noted the receipt from Fred Jowett of a Bradford branch version of the draft program. Among other things, this version required the party to commit itself to the view “that the kinship the working classes of all nations share should be a stronger tie than the kinship of nation, creed, or colour.” Carter expressed skepticism about what he called “Universal Brotherhood.” The “bond of nationality” did not seem to be getting any weaker, he wrote, and “the ‘colour bar’ is hard to get over.” A British worker might have “more in common with his own white employer—who, moreover, these days, may not be much further removed from penury than himself.”

Strangely, however, Carter made no comment on what now seems like the major difference between the Bradford version and both the draft program of the NAC and the Allen-Attlee alternative—their treatment of industrial democracy. All that the Bradford branch had to say on the subject was: “The I.L.P. will ally itself with and assist in the progress of the Trade Union and Co-operative movements, seeking to impregnate these and other workers’ movements with a recognition of the predominating rights of the workers over other interests, and to strengthen these organisations with a view to their participation in the machinery of the Socialist State.” Any discerning reader would have been able to predict from this where, at the party’s upcoming national conference, opposition to a more elaborate “guild socialist” constitution for the party was likely to originate.

The Bradford draft was presented as an alternative to the NAC’s draft at the Yorkshire divisional conference, where the party’s new program was the chief theme. Jowett claimed that the Bradford version was “much clearer and more vigorous.” In the end, however, the conference decided to “forward” all important amendments to the national conference without expressing any opinion on them. In contrast, across the Pennines at the Lancashire Division’s biannual conference, there was a close vote on some of the amendments. At
the meeting of the North East Division, the Stanley branch “sponsored” the Allen-Attlee version “in its entirety,” but, in a series of votes, many of its clauses were rejected. There were, reportedly, fifty-eight amendments to the NAC’s draft program on the agenda of the London and Southern Counties divisional conference, at which the NAC draft was “badly mauled.” The offending “International” section was completely replaced, and most of the revisions proposed in the Allen-Attlee version were approved.

Accompanying the lengthy debate on the party’s future program was a series of suggestions from Labour Leader contributors and readers on how to revive the ILP. Harold Croft, the agent and organizer of the Croyden Labour Party and a former ILP divisional organizer in the Midlands, argued that the ILP divisional councils and federations needed to “reverse the order of their functions” and give priority to propaganda and “educational” activities. He advocated the creation of “an I.L.P. parish” in every area, where such activities would be conducted in the “weekly meeting hall.”

In an article titled “How to Revivify the I.L.P.,” W. Randall-Reed saw the rejuvenation of the party as a task for “Young Socialists.” He had no doubt of the need to strengthen the party after “three years of industrial trouble and internal dissension,” with many branches “hovering on the verge of collapse.”Shortly thereafter, the Reverend Gordon Lang issued a similar appeal in a piece titled “A League of Young Socialists.” In the same issue, Minnie Pallister, who wrote a number of pamphlets for the ILP during the 1920s, argued that the revival of ILP branches was an urgent matter, one “constantly occupying the minds of all members of the party.” She stressed the role of the secretary in building a successful branch. Branch secretaries must be “obsessed with the importance” of the work they are doing, she wrote, estimating that five hundred such men and women were needed to rebuild the ILP.

Hopes of reviving the party were closely bound up with the adoption of a new program, and debate on that subject continued, with, for example, a letter from a Labour Leader reader named William Phillips, who was worried that the party might come into conflict with trade union leaders over the legitimacy of “direct action.” The ILP “should confine itself to the political sphere,” he urged, concluding that “if the I.L.P. would cease discussing issues that are outside the purview of its objects, it would do much to remove the animus existing between Trade Union leaders and I.L.P. bodies.” There was little chance of the ILP following his advice—particularly now that Clifford Allen, with his commitment to industrial democracy, was becoming such a dominant figure in the party. The 1922 conference would be decisive in launching both the new program and what became referred to as the “Allen regime.”