The Road Towards Departure

Four days after Ramsay MacDonald replaced the Labour government with the kind of coalition Fenner Brockway had anticipated, Brailsford, still very much an active contributor to the *New Leader*, struck what now seems a surprisingly optimistic note: “the second Labour Government has fallen,” he wrote, “and all of us feel relief.” He roundly denounced what he called “the Bankers’ Government.” From first to last, MacDonald had been “in the grip of the City,” which had been covering up its own “reckless profiteering by an attack upon the unemployed.” The new situation left the I.L.P. with questions about its own future. “May I add an entirely unofficial suggestion of my own?” Brailsford asked. “It is that the I.L.P., while it flings itself into this struggle, should aim at restoring the unity of the liberated Labour Party. We do not want to recall the differences of recent months.”

From the National Government to Labour’s Defeat

For a brief moment, it seemed as though the I.L.P. might take Brailsford’s advice to heart and attempt to let bygones be bygones as far as its relationship with the Labour Party was concerned. *Forward* urged its readers to avoid “personal bitterness” and to demand the nationalization of banks and a “constructive financial and economic policy.” The same issue of the *New Leader* that carried Brailsford’s article quoted above called on the Labour Party and the General Council of the Trades Union Congress to rally the troops for resistance. But though some in the I.L.P.—notably, Brailsford and Wise—were to make the case for restarting relations with Labour with a clean slate and would continue to argue along the same lines right up until disaffiliation, this was not to be the dominant mood.

A week after Brailsford’s appeal for unity, the *New Leader* featured a front-page article calling for a “new revolutionary outlook” and a “new revolutionary tactic.” There was no sign that the Labour Party recognized that these were needed, the writer said. In ousting MacDonald and electing its new leader,
Arthur Henderson, the party had made “no attempt to find out whether Mr.
Henderson’s views on the economy were substantially altered from what they
were a fortnight ago.” Elsewhere in the issue, Clynes was reported to have said
that “the I.L.P. are against us as they are against the Government and against
everybody else. They are irreconcilable.” His conclusion was hardly challenged
by the Leader’s assertion that the PLP standing orders were “only the superficial
manifestation of a fundamental difference in point of view, which was the real
thing that divided the I.L.P. Group from the rest of the members of the Parlia-
mentary Labour Party.” The paper confirmed that the ILP would continue
to attack gradualism.4

The rejection of gradualism was common ground for both supporters and
opponents of disaffiliation, though what exactly was meant by the term was
not clear. Certainly, Brailsford’s “‘The ‘City’ or the Nation?’” series, soon to be
published as an ILP pamphlet, pulled no punches. It had “always been evident
that the City would mobilise against socialism, and it was now clear that it
had done so against the mild quasi-Liberal reformism for which the late Gov-
ernment stood.” Labour was inevitably faced with a decisive break with its
reformist traditions, he concluded.5

Brailsford focused on the City of London. “For many years,” he wrote, it had
“been a commonplace among Socialist thinkers and writers in this country that
the balance of power among the forces of Capitalism was slipping. Since the
war it has passed unquestionably from the industrialist to the financier. It is
no exaggeration to say that for ten years the bankers have governed us.” In the
crisis, the governor of the Bank of England had refused to borrow from the
United States without the imposition of cuts in the “dole”—the unemployment
benefit. The way the issues had been presented to the public turned on what
he called the “Misuse of ‘We.’” Brailsford argued that “we” were being shoul-
dered with the responsibility for what had happened: “We are not a handful
of moneylenders who make a profit of 5 per cent by lending other people’s
money with a recklessness which ought to destroy their singular reputation as
experts. But to this unsavoury profiteering interest the entire life of the nation
is about to be sacrificed.”6 He ended with a challenge. “On this question the
Labour Movement must make up its mind promptly,” he declared. “We have
to settle this issue of the City versus the Nation. Until we settle it this will not
be an independent country, and Labour must renounce all hope of power.”7

In his New Leader article “What Should the I.L.P. Do?” Brockway attempted
to answer the question posed by his title. This edition of the Leader featured
advertisements for his own The I.L.P. in Crisis pamphlet, as well as Brailsford’s
The ‘City’ or the Nation? and Maxton’s A “Living Wage” for All. Like Brailsford,
Brockway believed that “gradualism is dead,” but otherwise, his emphasis was
very different. Capitalism was “tottering.” There was, he insisted, a real possibility of the “collapse of Capitalism in chaos.” So, he pleaded, “let us make it the final fight.”

In early October, in an “Open Letter” to delegates to the Labour Party conference, Brockway acknowledged the difficulties of Labour MPs, even the “heroism” of “those who faced misunderstanding by voting against their convictions because of a sense of loyalty to the Party.” But the ILP could not accept the present standing orders. The paper promoted a “One Hundred Thousand Shillings Fund for Socialism,” invoking Socialism in Our Time and featuring photos of former chairmen of the party from Hardie onwards—with the notable exception of Clifford Allen, who was now supporting MacDonald’s National Labour Organisation, the group formed to organize the activities of the small number of MPs from the Labour Party who now supported the National Government.

John Strachey had now broken with Mosley and was rapidly realigning himself as a supporter—though not a member—of the CPGB. In the same October 1931 issue of the New Leader, in “Where Does the I.L.P. Stand?” he declared gradualism bankrupt. He then asserted that the ILP should call for the return at the election of “only revolutionary Socialist candidates” and adopt a program that would include working to “establish a workers’ Dictatorship capable of destroying Capitalism and laying the foundations of Socialism.”

In contrast to both Brockway and Strachey, Wise declared himself encouraged by the Labour Party election manifesto, which called for the public ownership of banks together with other features that he saw as being close to the Socialism in Our Time program. But the ILP chairman’s message the following week centred on the refusal of the Labour Party to endorse ILP candidates who refused to accept the PLP standing orders. “The real issue is not rules and regulations,” Brailsford insisted, “It is policy. The Standing Orders are only the test of policy.” The real question was whether Labour would “go all out for Socialism.”

The refusal of endorsements made Brailsford’s position more difficult, as he was the first to recognize. Like Wise, he saw Labour’s program as “a frontal attack on the very centre of the British capitalist system.” It was nothing less than declaring “class war.” To commit “to nationalise banking, or even to control it effectively (if that could be done without full public ownership) is to strike at the seat of power.” The problem was that it was difficult to believe that the Labour Party was “in earnest”: had it not, “while adopting this apparently revolutionary programme, in effect banished the I.L.P. from its ranks”? Was the Labour Party, he asked, “so strong, and so sure of victory, after these desertions, that it can afford to lose a regiment before it enters the battle?”
issue of discipline had only become acute because the party had been “led into strange courses by the three deserters who now direct the enemy.” There had been rebels only because the leadership had “fallen into false hands,” and the remedy lay “not in tight discipline, but in honest leadership.”

One member—indeed, a senior officer—in Brailsford’s regiment was Fenner Brockway. Refused endorsement like the other ILP candidates, he made clear in a letter to Labour Party leader Henderson, published in the *New Leader*, that he was not prepared to say that he would never vote against the party whips. He could not break pledges “authorised by the Party programme.” He asserted that for the previous twenty-five years, the course Labour had pursued in Parliament had not been decided by the Parliamentary Labour Party. Instead, Brockway wrote, “it was dictated by Mr. MacDonald and Mr. Snowden.”

This was one of the most volatile—arguably the most volatile—periods in the history of the Labour Party. As Ben Pimlott points out, there were three splits in eighteen months: first the Mosley/New Party breakaway, then MacDonald’s National Labour Organization, and, still to come, the disaffiliation of the ILP from Labour. Initially, the National Government presented its role as short-term: it was “to deal with the national emergency only.” But the various pressures within its constituent parties resolved themselves into the decision to go to the electorate as a coalition.

The 1931 general election took place on 27 October. In September, when it became evident that MacDonald was about to call an election, *Forward* headlined Maxton’s forecast with “A Smashing Workers’ Majority.” This was not to be. On the contrary, it was a disaster for Labour. In 1929, Labour had been the largest single party in the House of Commons. Now, it was reduced to double figures, only twenty more than the once more divided Liberal Party. Even the new leader of the party, Arthur Henderson, failed to secure election, with the result that George Lansbury was elected to chair the PLP.

Those who followed MacDonald and became the National Labour Organisation could muster only 13 seats, while the Conservatives soared to a dominating position with 470. This made even more daunting the task of those like Clifford Allen who believed MacDonald had made the best of the awful choices available in August. Allen still hoped, as Martin Gilbert tells us, that MacDonald would be able to “maintain some degree of Socialist activity in what was a predominantly Conservative government.”

Exactly how many seats were held by the Labour Party after the 1931 election depends on how one counts the ILP MPs. They were in an anomalous position in that though the ILP was still part of the Labour Party, the unendorsed ILP MPs were excluded from the Parliamentary Labour Party. But however one does the counting, the Labour contingent had shrunk to around fifty. In *Inside
the Left, Brockway lists five surviving members of the ILP parliamentary group, but two of those soon left: Kirkwood did not follow the ILP when it disaffiliated, and Richard Wallhead, a former chairman of the ILP, returned to the Labour Party in September 1933. The remaining trio of Maxton, Buchanan, and McGovern were to be augmented by the success of Campbell Stephen in 1935. As Gidon Cohen says, however, there was no sign of the ILP being able to look forward to electoral success outside of a very few local strongholds—above all, Glasgow.19

Andrew Thorpe, in his study of the 1931 election, sees Labour poised “on the verge of a great transition” but lacking the “detailed policy work” that would have made its offer to the electorate credible in the way that it was to become in 1945. In fact, he says, its manifesto was “little more than an article of faith from an already doomed and pessimistic party.”20 But the extent of the defeat was a great shock to many, including the ILP. At the New Leader, Paton was about to hand over the editorship to Brockway. His final editorial appeared in the edition following the election. “Not in their most pessimistic moments,” he wrote, “did anyone imagine the Labour Party was fated to receive the crushing blow which has befallen it in this election.” It undermined democracy and made it difficult to argue against those who questioned the utility of “the democratic method.”21

A “New Era” in ILP-Labour Relations?

In the week after the election, Maxton took stock of the new situation in the Leader. He argued that had Labour adopted the Socialism in Our Time policy, it would have meant refusing to lead a minority government in 1929 and developing a militant opposition. In future, he wrote, the ILP “must think of itself again more as a Movement of the people and less as a political party with Parliamentary skills.”22

In the same issue, which also reported the death of A. J. Cook, Brailsford returned to his plea for a new era in ILP-Labour relations. “It is possible,” he wrote, “that like all pioneering movements, the I.L.P. thinks too much of recording protests and registering dissent. History does not move in that way. It moves by the common action of great masses. We shall best serve the workers by contributing with all the fire and intelligence we can command to the creation of a massive unity.” Labour should clear up “the needless tangle in the House” and the ILP should cooperate in considering how best to help it. Labour had now broken with “reformist tradition.” It aimed at economic power.23

Moreover, no one should underestimate MacDonald, Brailsford warned. He was “skilled in all the arts of evasion, negation and delay” and, as prime minister, had the right to call another election whenever he chose. It was perfectly
possible that he might “attempt yet another essay in national heroism” and try to form an anti-Tory coalition. This was best combatted from inside the Labour Party. The ILP must not have a half-hearted approach towards Labour: “We are in or out. If we are in, let us stay in with graciousness and loyalty. If we go out our fate will be such impotence as has befallen Mosley’s group.” For his part, however, Brockway remained skeptical. The standing orders dispute was a symptom of a much wider conflict, and the question remained whether Labour was going “to break with gradualism.”

Among the minority of Labour MPs who had survived the 1931 election was Dr. Alfred Salter. He thought Brailsford’s New Leader article “the first common-sense pronouncement” in the paper for months. As someone who had been a member of the ILP for twenty-five years, he had been “terribly distressed by the impossibilist attitude” in recent years. There were now, Salter insisted, “three ‘musts’” for the ILP. First, it must show “a whole-hearted declaration of loyalty to the larger Movement”; the “bitter, treacherous and malevolent attacks which have made the I.L.P. loathed amongst Labour Party members must stop for good.” Second, ILP MPs must accept the PLP standing orders “just as the rest of us have done”; they were aimed not at suppressing individual dissent but “at organised opposition to majority decisions.” Finally, the ILP must give up “toying with revolution.”

Salter was critical of Maxton, who, he wrote, had “leaned more and more of late to the Communist outlook and tactic.” There was no way that the chasm between the ILP and the CPGB could be spanned. Democrats could never accept the notion of a dictatorship of “a conscious minority.” He was scathing about the standing of the ILP: “The I.L.P. appears to outsiders as a negligible body and a spiteful rump, daily dwindling in numbers and hardly of more account than the Mosleyites.” If the changes he urged were not made, Salter predicted, the ILP would degenerate into “a mere nuisance and irritant, like the Communist Party.”

An editorial note rejected completely Salter’s interpretation of the standing order issue, and the New Leader was able to cite some support outside ILP ranks for its opposition to the standing orders. The following week, Josiah Wedgwood—one surviving Labour MP and, like Salter, a former member of the ILP—was praised for his “manly refusal to accept the tyranny of the present Standing Orders.” But the breach with Labour was widened when that party’s executive committee instructed constituent Labour parties to select only candidates who accepted the standing orders. By this time, a New Leader editorial had lambasted the Labour Party for its failure to adopt “a revolutionary Socialist policy to meet the rapidly declining condition of Capitalism and
the desperate plight of the working class.” In the same issue, Maxton emphasized this failure under the headline “Labour Has Not Learned.”

The debate on possible withdrawal from the Labour Party was now underway in earnest. *Forward* was totally opposed and supported Brailsford, claiming that he had done “more than anybody else to outline the Socialism in Our Time policy.” The *ILP* would have no future outside the Labour Party. “If it takes the last stupid step of leaving the Labour Party and going into isolation that will be the end of the I.L.P. as an organisation with the slightest influence in British politics,” it predicted.

As in the preceding years, *Labour’s Northern Voice* was heard mainly on the pro-disaffiliation side of the debate, though in December 1931, Ellis Smith made the argument that disaffiliation would lead to isolation. In the same issue, as part of the series “Should the I.L.P. Leave the Labour Party?” Bob Edwards argued for disaffiliation. The election of Labour’s shadow cabinet indicated no change in the party’s policies, he maintained. “A disaffiliated *ILP* would give us a new lease of life by attracting into our ranks hundreds of conscious Socialists” who had been driven out of the Labour Party by its shameful compromises.

At first glance, especially from the distance of the twenty-first century, it is difficult to understand why, faced with an appalling political earthquake, both sides in the dispute were not more ready to compromise, as Brailsford and a few others were urging. With its parliamentary representation so reduced and its standing so undermined by near electoral wipeout, surely Labour could not easily contemplate losing such a core of active members as the *ILP* constituted. Yet Salter’s outspoken attack on the course taken by the *ILP* in the preceding period gives us a good indication of why, in spite of this, the hardening of attitudes on the *ILP* side was complemented by the continuing intransigence of the Labour Party leadership. As Pimlott says, Labour Party leader George Lansbury had “little sympathy for the rebellious *ILP*. When Maxton gave trouble, Lansbury was as firm as Henderson that *ILP* members must subscribe to Labour Party Standing Orders or get out.” Pimlott asserts persuasively that “MacDonald’s departure made little difference to the quarrel; if anything it made the NEC and PLP leadership more insistent on a rigid adherence to Party decisions.”

As 1932, the crucial year for the *ILP*, approached, it was striking how spread across almost the entire political spectrum were so many who had played prominent roles in the party at various times in the previous decade. The disaffiliation of the *ILP* would extend this even further before the end of that year. Strachey, as already noted, was moving rapidly towards uncritical support of the Communist Party. A few years earlier, his inspiration had been Mosley, who he had once hoped would “some day do the things of which we dream.” But after
the complete failure of the New Party at the 1931 election, Mosley was about to launch the British Union of Fascists, an enterprise in which he would be joined by two former prominent ILPers—John Beckett and Dr. Robert Forgan. MacDonald and Snowden, who a decade earlier had been almost synonymous with the ILP, were now at the head of a government reliant on the Conservatives. Supporting them was Walton Newbold and the former ILP chairman Clifford Allen. Ten years or so earlier, Newbold had been successively a leader of the ILP’s Left Wing, a committed Communist, and even, briefly, a Communist MP. Others, like Salter, were still unequivocally committed to Labour.

The Disaffiliation Debate Heats Up

In the New Leader, in early 1932, E. F. Wise made a case against disaffiliation, while John Paton reported that the East Anglia Division had supported disaffiliation in light of Labour’s “continued adherence to ‘gradualist’ policies and failure to learn the lessons of the election.” Wise argued that not only would the standing orders be of little importance while Labour was in opposition, but that they could be changed at any time. The ILP should put forward “reasonable modifications.” At the very beginning of the year, Brockway had argued that it was difficult to “look at the world without reaching the conviction that we are approaching a revolutionary epoch.” His conviction was growing that the Labour Party was “so distant from the realisation of Socialist duty at this time” that continued association with it was becoming a handicap for the ILP. It was, he added two weeks later, hard to avoid the conclusion “that Capitalism is approaching a series of crises which must eventually lead to a complete economic breakdown.”

The idea that the collapse of capitalism was imminent was widespread, though by no means universal, in ILP circles. Even the philosopher—and future star of the BBC “Brains Trust”—C. E. M. Joad, believed that “a revolutionary situation may be upon us at any time during the next few years.” Many of his friends, he told readers of Forward, had joined the Communist Party. He had not, and his reasons for not doing so were also reasons for remaining a member of the ILP. He believed that violence unleashes “forces of evil which have effects unforeseen and unforeseeable.” He saw the Labour Party as torn between its professed policy of superseding capitalism and its actual policy of getting the best deal possible for workers within it. It was “no more a socialist party than Britain a socialist country.” The task was still to make it one; therefore, the ILP should remain affiliated, work to transform the outlook of the Labour Party’s members, and “seek to remould it from within.”

Wise would have concurred with Joad’s conclusion, but he dissented from the notion that capitalism was close to extinction. “There is much talk in some
quarters of the imminent collapse of Capitalism,” he noted. But what did this collapse entail: a sudden, complete stop or “a long drawn-out process of increasing trade difficulties?” How could the ILP hope to exercise any power against the organized labour movement, and was it not “the very worst moment” to split the movement? Letters critical of Wise’s support for continued affiliation with Labour soon followed, including one from Joseph Southall asking, “Where is the evidence of any change of heart in the Labour Party?” There was no doubt that the leadership of the ILP agreed with Southall rather than with Wise and Brailsford. As Maxton saw it, Wise seemed to believe that when MacDonald and Snowden formed the National Government “the Labour Party was born again.” On the contrary, he argued, Labour was “not now an instrument working for unity, but for disintegration and disillusionment.”

Brockway, reconsidering the Socialism in Our Time policy in an article with the title “After the Revolution,” concluded that it had relied on “Socialism through prosperity; a series of measures speedy but successive, to secure a redistribution of the national income and the control of the key sources of economic power.” It was now clear that it was “not speedy enough” and that a “much more drastic policy” was needed. On another page, Paton reported the “overwhelming weight of support” for disaffiliation at the South West divisional conference.

It was clear that the party was seriously divided on disaffiliation. At the end of January 1932, Paton noted that, “contrary to what had been expected,” five divisional conferences had rejected disaffiliation, with only three—London and South, East Anglia, and the South West—supporting it. One of the divisions that had rejected disaffiliation was the largest—Scotland. Forward reported the Scottish Division’s vote of 88 to 49 under the headline “Decisive Vote Against the Break with Labour Party.”

In his chairman’s address at the Scottish divisional conference, Dollan had expressed regret that “the Party was divided by theoretical differences in a kind of civil warfare.” Three of the Clydesiders—Maxton, Buchanan, and McGovern—had spoken for disaffiliation, but Kirkwood had echoed Dollan’s complaint that the movement was “split from top to bottom.” He claimed to have been “victimised” for his stance in favour of remaining within the Labour Party. He had been invited to open the Leeds ILP bazaar but was then told that he was not wanted: “That’s the tolerance of the I.L.P.!” he declared emphatically.

The Scottish conference did not confine itself to decisively rejecting disaffiliation. An addendum to its motion for the coming ILP national conference instructed the NAC to approach Labour to discuss moving “towards a common policy” in the House of Commons. This policy was to be based on a future
Labour government rejecting “Cabinet Rule” and having its ministers elected by and responsible to the PLP, which was, in its turn, to promote policy “in accordance with conference decisions.” Labour should also revise its standing orders to “allow a greater measure of freedom.” The addendum was passed by 101 to 5, with Maxton apparently voting with the minority.\(^43\)

The Scottish—and other anti-disaffiliation votes—gave hope to those who wished to remain with Labour. In the New Leader, Wise commented that it was plain from the divisional conferences that the branches wanted to stay inside the Labour Party. This claim was echoed the following day by Emrys Hughes, writing in Forward. In the same issue of the Scottish paper Paton argued that there was no “observable tendency” towards compromise by the Labour Party and that remaining affiliated could therefore “only lead, so long as the I.L.P. maintains its militant policies, to renewed irritation, confusions, and mutual frustrations.” Nevertheless, Hughes noted, there had been an “overwhelming decision of the I.L.P. Divisional Conferences against disaffiliation.”\(^44\)

Maxton rejected these arguments, along with any notion that the ILP had made itself unpopular in the broader labour movement. “However unpopular we have made ourselves with Labour Leaders and Trade Union Officials,” he argued, “that unpopularity does not extend far beyond that somewhat limited circle of the elect of the Labour Aristocracy.”\(^45\)

A week after Maxton’s article appeared, Wise made it clear that he was pleading for consideration of the ILP staying in the Labour Party “at the moment when this Party has accepted Socialism as its policy and is within measurable distance of having the opportunity of putting it into effect.” But—ominously, from Wise’s point of view—in the same issue of the New Leader, Paton reported support for Maxton’s point of view in “Packed Halls for Maxton.”\(^46\)

The tide seemed now to be turning in favour of disaffiliation.

The most fervent and uncompromising supporters of disaffiliation were to be found in the London-based Revolutionary Policy Committee (RPC), formed in 1930, at the instigation of Dr. Carl Cullen, chairman of the Poplar branch, who had already established a committee to work for disaffiliation. In early 1932, Cullen’s branch published a “Memorandum on the Present Political and Economic Situation in the I.L.P.” It assumed the imminent collapse of capitalism and saw the possibility of a revolutionary crisis developing from a general strike. The ILP should disaffiliate on the basis not of rejection of the PLP’s standing orders but in order to clear the ground for a revolutionary policy that recognized the need for a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” with the setting up of workers’ councils as a preparatory step.\(^47\)

As the ILP annual conference approached, the Poplar branch’s March program included, as one of the speakers for its Tuesday meetings, Jack Gaster,
another leading RPC member. There was also to be a speaker from Friends of
the Soviet Union, whose talk was titled “The Soviet System of Government.”
As for the coming ILP conference, it was absolutely essential, according to
the Poplar branch, to disaffiliate from what was now “a reformist party.” That
accomplished, the ILP must “adopt and propagate a definitely revolutionary
policy.” The RPC’s initial support lay in London, but even there, branches
were divided. Poplar, Clapham, and Marylebone were among those pressing
for immediate disaffiliation, while Golders Green, Leyton, and the North West
London Federation were in favour of remaining in the Labour Party and con-
tinuing to press for socialist policies.

The NAC was clearly concerned that divisions in the party were becoming
fraught. Wishing to avoid or at least minimize a split, it insisted that, contrary
to impressions given by press reporting, there was no one in the ILP who
was in favour of gradualism. The issue was simply whether or not to stay
in the Labour Party. The NAC had decided to make no recommendation on
this and to leave it “to the free decision of the Conference,” which was now
approaching rapidly.

The arguments of both sides were given plenty of space in the New Leader.
In March, under the heading “A Non-Member Remonstrates,” Louis Anderson
Fenn, the prospective Labour candidate for Handsworth, recommended that
ILPers try to “see ourselves as others see us.” He felt that the ILP had “during
the last ten years provoked psychological reactions which have prevented the
adoption of its often quite sound ideas.” ILPers did not realize “the sort of exas-
peration which their rather ‘superior’ attitudes provokes among good Socialists
who are members of the Labour Party.” The ILP had “become a sort of rival
show which claims to have custodianship of the ark of the covenant of Social-
ism.” It should “stop trying to be a political party.” This last recommendation
was likely to be contemplated by few on either side of the disaffiliation debate.

Firmly on the pro-affiliation side of the argument, Forward, and above all
Dollan, buoyed by the Scottish conference result, remained optimistic both
about the final outcome of the debate and the possibility of making peace with
Labour. At the end of February, Dollan, in “A Move Towards Peace,” wrote that
he had detected the potential for conciliation when the NAC agreed to approach
the Labour Party again on the standing orders issue. He was convinced that
there was “no outstanding difficulty.” He complained of “Communist tactics” by
the Left involving a “secret meeting” in Glasgow the previous Sunday, and he
chided those responsible with a failure to accept defeat “in a sporting spirit”—a
notion that would seem to many very odd later in the year when Dollan failed
to accept the disaffiliation decision in a like manner. He had wanted the NAC
to recommend support for the Scottish pro-affiliation motion at the coming
ILP conference, but the supporters of disaffiliation, he alleged, “evaded the issue by voting for no recommendation.”

As the annual ILP annual conference at Blackpool approached, Paton once more insisted that there was no division within the party on gradualism. As for the dispute with Labour over the standing orders, while this was immediately important to MPs, the issue had a wider significance as “the Parliamentary expression of the challenge presented to ‘gradualism’ by the I.L.P. conception of a planned and speedy advance to Socialism.” In “A Personal Plea,” Brailsford made an appeal to the party to remain affiliated to Labour. “It would be ridiculous, if it were not painful, that our tiny group should stand apart when a mere remnant of a Labour Party faces overwhelming hosts.” He wanted the ILP to fling itself with “ardour and generosity” into the “general work of the Labour Party.” The ILP was still an important factor in the larger party. “I think that the chance came last August for a dramatic reconciliation,” he wrote, “and I regret that the leaders of the I.L.P. did not seize it then.” But it was not too late. At the general election, Labour had “boldly challenged the City.” By “declaring for the social control of banking and finance, it struck at the seat of power of British Capitalism.”

But other contributors in the same issue suggested that the tide was still flowing in the direction of disaffiliation. While the NAC announced that it would be presenting “a revolutionary policy” to the conference, Jennie Lee, who had already made a reputation as a militant ally of Maxton in the 1929–31 Parliament, took the view that Labour’s commitment to socialism was only theoretical. Firmly committed to the ILP, she argued that it would be a good thing if the party was expelled by Labour for pursuing a militant policy. But if the ILP split in two over a vaguely understood and seemingly abstract issue, such as Standing Orders, then the Labour Party will have won one more round in the struggle to decide whether the organised working-class movement is to remain a pillar of the existing order, or to become a battering-ram for Socialism.” She concluded that although it would be best if the ILP reached an agreement over the standing orders with Labour, “on each practical issue of the day-to-day class struggle it must take an uncompromising stand, thus presenting the broader party with the choice of either accepting such a stand, or fighting us on concrete bread-and-butter issues, where the average worker will know which side to take and what he is taking sides about.”

The ILP might have been united against gradualism, but when it came to what to do about it, there was nothing approaching a consensus. It would take the two conferences of 1932 to decide the affiliation issue—at least for the time being. The question of what should replace gradualism would then divide it further.