For many decades it has been a standing joke to point out that “ex-Communists” far outnumbered existing Communist party members. By the end of the 1930s, this was also true of the ILP, but with a significant difference. Typically, ex-Communists rejected their former beliefs, in some cases becoming fervent denouncers of the “God that failed.” For many of the people who left the ILP, however, the story was rather different. Of course, those who followed Mosley into fascism, on the one hand, or joined the CPGB, on the other, repudiated their former beliefs, which they came to see as a great error. We must also assume that there were those who, after a youthful dalliance with the ILP, became Conservatives or Liberals later in life or simply became alienated from politics altogether. But of the fourteen thousand or so ILPers who left the party in the 1930s, a very significant proportion of those who had been among the most active members believed that they, rather than those who remained in the party, constituted the “real ILP.” As Robert Dowse says, “Who was ‘really’ the I.L.P. was a question nobody could answer.”

The Scottish Socialist Party

We have seen the efforts made in the months before disaffiliation by, especially, Wise, Brailsford, and Dollan to divert the ILP from what they regarded as a path doomed to end in self-destruction. The first ex-ILP organization to be formed, in late August 1932, was the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP). This title had real resonance in the labour movement, since it had first been used as the name of the party founded by Keir Hardie some years before the formation of the ILP. There is not the slightest doubt that the SSP saw itself as the “real” ILP in Scotland. Ben Pimlott quotes the statement made by Dollan to the founding conference, as reported in the Morning Post. “Whoever may claim to be the ILP, we in this hall are the ILP.” His audience would have regarded that as a statement of the obvious.
As we have seen, Dollan’s immediate response to disaffiliation from Labour was to question whether the Bradford conference had been representative of the ILP membership, especially of its larger and most active divisions, Scotland and Lancashire. That was at the beginning of August 1932. Then, in the 14 August edition of *Forward*, there appeared a statement whose signatories included Dollan and Keir Hardie’s brother David. It announced that “those who believe in affiliation have formed a National Committee representative of every area in Scotland, to organise the I.L.P. to maintain its historic purpose.” A delegate conference in Glasgow was announced for 21 August. The same issue carried a long reply from Paton to what he called Dollan’s “unscrupulous arguments.” The ILP secretary denied that the Bradford conference had been “rigged.” Two weeks later, the short-lived *New Clarion* reported that the Scottish “expellees” from the ILP had included two founding members of the ILP, George Hardie and Martin Haddow, “who helped start the Scottish Socialist Party in 1888.”

In spite of threats of expulsion from the ILP’s NAC, hardly a deterrent for those already determined to leave, *Forward* was able to report that 170 delegates were planning to attend the Glasgow conference. The previous day, the *New Leader* had reported that “the I.L.P. wreckers”—Dollan and fifteen other Scottish members—had been expelled for “organising openly to wreck the I.L.P.” The 1932 conference was attended by 220 delegates. *Forward*’s lengthy report claimed that, had he lived, Keir Hardie would have been among the expelled. But, “unable to ex-communicate Keir Hardie, they ex-communicate his relatives.” The paper also discussed the ownership of buildings and other property in “Property Rights in the I.L.P.: The Legal Position.” This would be an ongoing issue for some time.

In September, *Forward* reported that the new Scottish Socialist Party formed at the conference was gaining more branches than the now disaffiliated ILP, that the SSP was in the process of setting up federations of branches, and that it had adopted a municipal program. Two months later, the SSP claimed a steady increase in membership, as compared with the “Dilps”—disaffiliated ILPers. Early in the New Year, eleven branch reports appeared in *Forward*. Property disputes continued, and the paper blamed the ILP for repudiating a provisional agreement.

As we saw in earlier chapters, sniping at former comrades in the ILP continued in the Scottish paper. When the Scottish ILP conference took place, *Forward* quoted a Motherwell delegate as saying that the ILP was “divorced from the Labour Party and courting the Communist Party.” It did not take much foresight to predict that if this was so, it would be a course strewn with difficulties. The same issue of the paper reported that an ILP meeting at Glasgow’s
Metropole Theatre had been disrupted by Communists. Maxton had “challenged a persistent interrupter to a fight.” A few weeks later, the paper was even-handed enough to praise Maxton’s speech on poverty in Britain—which, it said, “created a sensation”—and to publish a “practically complete” version.8

The SSP seems to have done reasonably well, at least in its earliest years. A hundred branches and a membership of more than two thousand was reported following its first annual conference at Easter 1933, and two years later, Forward reported an attendance of more than 220 delegates.9 Forward became the party’s official organ in 1934, and the paper continued to propagate the doctrines of democratic socialism for the rest of the decade.10

Probably the majority of the pre-disaffiliation activists, and certainly a sizable proportion, went with the SSP rather than the “Dilps.” But the SSP’s very existence did raise the question of whether, since the entire enterprise had been based on staying within the Labour Party, a separate organization—particularly one confined to Scotland—was necessary. For the moment, that was answered in the positive. An SSP monthly meeting in January 1933 confidently predicted that negotiations with the Labour Party would quickly lead to affiliation.11

Labour Party initiatives featured prominently in Forward. After Labour gained control of Glasgow City Council towards the end of 1933, the paper published a celebration of the party’s successes in “What Labour Has Done in Four Weeks.” This was soon followed by Dollan’s article “What Labour Has Done in Three Months.”12 Arthur Woodburn, the secretary of the Scottish Labour Party, made fairly frequent contributions to the paper. In November 1935, he claimed that the overwhelming majority of the pre-disaffiliation ILP members remained in the Labour Party. Two years later, Forward carried his “Open Letter to Stalin: Stop the Executions and Wind Up Comintern.” In 1938, he reviewed Brockway’s Workers’ Front, which he considered “a deadly indictment of the Communist Party in Britain, Russia and Spain.” But he concluded, “A great silence settles on the I.L.P. It is the silence of the politically dead.” On the same theme the following month, he wrote, under the headline “Where Is the I.L.P.? The Present Caretakers of a Once Great Party,” that he detected “a steady flow of what remains into the Labour Party.”13 The veteran former ILPer Minnie Pallister reported on the Labour Party women’s conference in Forward in 1938.14

The SSP was not immune from the ideological conflicts of the decade, however. In early 1938, Forward headlined “Trotsky Found ‘Not Guilty,’ International Commission Reports on Moscow Trials.” This was followed a few weeks later by an article on the current state of affairs in Russia by the famous exile himself.15 This sort of thing did not go down well with all SSP members.
After the party’s annual conference the following year, we find Dollan complaining of intolerance on the part of some younger delegates who denounced *Forward* editor Emrys Hughes, “as if he were a traitor” for allowing different views to appear in the paper and for permitting Trotsky to state his case.16

From the start, the SSP was close to the other anti-disaffiliationists in England and Wales in what became the Socialist League, although it declined to enter the Unity Campaign that ultimately led to the League dissolving. Amalgamation of the two bodies was discussed but never finalized.17 But relations were good. Trevelyan represented the Socialist League at the SSP’s 1934 conference, and William Mellor brought the League’s greetings the following year.18

Though not neglecting wider British and international issues, the SSP was focused to a large extent, as one would expect, on Scottish and, above all, Glasgow politics. This was particularly true of Dollan. Gidon Cohen relates how Dollan’s autocratic behaviour led to his being sacked as treasurer, in 1937, by the “unholy alliance” of ILP Glasgow councillors and the Moderates.19 But by the end of the following year, *Forward* was able to welcome “Lord Provost Dollan.”20

By this time, the argument that there was no need for an SSP separate from the Scottish Labour Party was gaining ground, though a motion to dissolve was rejected by the 1938 annual conference. This was repeated the following year, but the conference heard that membership was declining, and in 1940, the SSP was wound up.21

**The Socialist League**

The Socialist League began in 1932 as a merger between the Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda (SSIP) and the ex-ILP affiliationists in England and Wales. The SSP, known informally as “Zip,” had been founded by G. D. H. Cole and Margaret Cole the previous year. A vital link with the trade union movement, soon to be lost, was made when Ernest Bevin, a dominant figure in the Trades Union Congress during most of the interwar period, agreed to become chairman.22 The inside back cover of *The Crisis*, a *New Statesman* pamphlet written in 1931 by Bevin and G. D. H. Cole, advertised the new organization, declaring its object to be “the development and advocacy of a constructive Socialist policy.”

During its brief existence, the SSP published an impressive number of pamphlets, with such titles as *Anglo-Soviet Trade* and *Facts and Figures for Labour Speakers*, along with G. D. H. Cole’s *National Government and Inflation* and Colin Clark’s *National Planning*. It also published a series of study guides, the first six of which, all written by Cole, dealt with matters such as banking, credit, and the gold standard, as well as capitalism (addressed in *How Capitalism Works*, published in May 1932). Others in the series included Michael
Stewart’s *Forms of Public Control*, whose aim was to suggest “reasons why we must devise new forms of control.”  

24 The SSIP established local branches, one or two of which also published material (such as the pamphlet *Housing in Stoke on Trent*, which appeared from the North Staffordshire branch). The Socialist League took over all these publications, together with the attractive uniform cover design used by the SSIP. Beginning in 1934, it also published the *Socialist Leaguer*, which, in September 1935, became *The Socialist: [Socialist: Journal] Journal of the Socialist League*, which espoused similar positions. Early in 1937, an independent publication—the newly founded *Tribune*, which adopted similar positions—began to gain growing influence.

The *New Clarion* of 13 August 1932 included a letter from the SSIP secretary, E. A. Radice, urging anti-disaffiliation ILPers and like-minded others to join the SSIP, as well as the article “Why We Remain Loyal to Labour” by Wise. Two weeks later, the paper reported that the former ILP affiliationists were holding a meeting to precede the Labour Party annual conference at Leicester, while on the same day, *Forward* reported their London conference, which had been chaired by Wise.

An advertisement in the *New Leader* in late September declared that the inaugural conference of the Socialist League would take place on 2 October. It was being organized by the former ILP affiliation committee “in co-operation with S.S.I.P.” Its aim, the advertisement said, was “to establish a Socialist educational and propaganda organization affiliated to the Labour Party.” *The ILP’s New Leader* noted that the new organization was appealing to ILP branches to support it, and an editorial note predicted, “None will.”

The Leicester conference duly took place and was followed by a meeting in London two weeks later. A significant division immediately occurred, with Cole wishing to retain Bevin as chairman and the former ILPers insisting on Wise. At this point, the latter group was clearly in the ascendant. As James Jupp notes, “Even the Socialist League, which inherited the outlook of the Fabians through the Society for Socialist Inquiry and Propaganda, soon succumbed to the more sweeping philosophy of the former ILP members who led it.” Or, as Patrick Seyd puts it, “A faction of the left had been formed to take the place of the ILP.”

The League scored its greatest success in influencing Labour Party policy during its first week. Leading League members, especially Wise and Charles Trevelyan, played a prominent part at the Labour conference, which adopted commitments to nationalize the Bank of England and the joint stock banks. A future Labour government would, the conference agreed, introduce socialist legislation immediately. “Never again in the 1930s,” says Pimlott, “was the Left so successful at Conference in the face of NEC opposition.” Nor was anything
comparable to take place again until the 1960s. This heady moment of success is nicely captured in an account of the Labour Party conference by Charles Trevelyan in an early Socialist League pamphlet:

At Leicester the resolution was passed, which I moved myself, hoping for agreement but finding to my surprise and satisfaction a hurricane of approval which swept the assembly. That resolution has put the leaders who may be at the head of the Labour Party in the event of another Labour Ministry under a definite mandate to introduce Socialist measures at once and to drive them through Parliament.

The merger with theSSIP was by no means straightforward. Although thirteen members of its executive had signed the letter inviting Labour Party members to the inaugural Socialist League conference, there was significant opposition within theSSIP. According to aManchester Guardianreport, there was a “distinct reluctance to go into partnership with theILP affiliationists” amongSSIP members. When the finalSSIPconference met on 6 November, the supporters of the Socialist League failed to achieve the necessary two-thirds majority for the merger of theSSIP with the League and had to resort to the expedient of dissolving theSSIP, which was achieved with a majority vote of 70 to 27. Cole withdrew from the League’s National Council in June 1933—ostensibly because of the pressure of work, but he would later refer to political disagreements.

The Labour Party NEC was divided about how welcoming it should be to a Socialist League application for affiliation. The decision to approve this in anticipation, subject to the League’s constitution being “in harmony” with that of Labour, was only passed with the chairman casting a vote. The League, with a membership of two thousand, was able to affiliate to Labour in 1933. As we saw in the preceding chapter, Sir Stafford Cripps was to become the dominant figure in the Socialist League. Yet, in spite of Cripps’s dominance, sufficient evidence of the influence of formerILPers remained for the League to qualify, at least partially, as an “ex-ILP” organization. A sort of backhanded confirmation of this can be found in a 1935 issue of the Comintern’s magazine, theCommunist International, which commented that the Socialist League continued the “traditional I.L.P. role in the working-class movement under a pseudo-Marxist cloak.”

The two leading figures of the anti-disaffiliation forces in theILP—Wise, until his untimely death in 1934, and Brailsford—remained active and influential. Wise’s pamphletControl of Finance and the Financiers, part of the League’s London Socialist Forum series, continued a focus that went back to at least the days of the Living Wage policy. Faced with a Labour government intent
on establishing financial control, “many British ‘patriots’ would certainly have a shot at transferring their money to foreign capitals,” Wise predicted. But the financial situation in the previously favourite destination, the United States, was “not encouraging.” Meanwhile, the existence or possibility of fascism or governments of the Left in many European countries “diminishes their attractiveness,” Wise concluded.39

Brailsford remained a frequent contributor to League publications. In early 1935, we find him expressing a very ILP-like concern with India, first in his article “The Labour Party and India.” A few months later, he complained bitterly that “every attempt that the Labour Party has made in committee to render the Indian Bill a little less undemocratic, has, of course, been defeated by the automatic working of the National Government’s majority.” The next issue included his article “Facing the Next War.”40

By this time, it was clear that the League was going to find it extremely difficult to repeat its initial but fleeting success in rallying Labour Party support on the scale necessary to influence policy. The “decisive moment,” as David Howell identifies it, was at the 1934 Labour Party conference, where “the conference platform backed by the votes of the major unions overwhelmingly defeated the League’s challenge.”41 The policies the Socialist League was attempting to promote were reminiscent of the Living Wage, or Socialism in Our Time, policy of the ILP in earlier years, particularly in Maxton’s version.

The League’s national council proposed, as immediate objectives, factory legislation to ensure the safety of miners; the raising of the school leaving age to fifteen, and to sixteen within two years with maintenance allowances; and noncontributory pensions of £1 per week from the age of sixty. These measures were to “constitute the first fundamental requirement of the transition from Capitalism to Socialism.” Prior to the 1934 Socialist League conference, the document “Forward to Socialism,” to be debated at the conference, was circulated to members. Marked “Private and confidential,” it was accompanied with a request that the “greatest care” be taken by branches and members to avoid it being seen by nonmembers. It listed as measures “already given” the socialization of finance, transfer of land ownership to the community, control of overseas trade, and “Emergency Social alleviation.” This was all intended to lead on to a five-year plan for the socialization of transport, mining, energy, munitions, chemical, textile, iron and steel industries, shipbuilding, and agriculture. There would be only limited compensation.42 “Forward to Socialism” was duly endorsed by the conference.43 Following a special conference on 25 November 1934, the Socialist Leaguer proclaimed, “We have passed out of the realm of programme making into the realm of action.”44
Further echoes of earlier ILP policies and attitudes can be found in the article “Our Challenge to ‘Gradualism,’” which appeared in one of the early issues of The Socialist (the new incarnation of the Socialist Leaguer). The writer insisted that the League was determined to win over the Labour Party. In order to “further this end and to challenge most clearly and boldly the reascendancy of ‘gradualist views’ within the Party and the whole Labour Movement, and all schemes which can classified under the heading ‘Capitalist Reconstruction,’ the National Council has decided to launch a national campaign of propaganda and recruiting for the League.” There would be forty to fifty conferences or mass meetings in towns across the country, from north (Jarrow) to south (Portsmouth) and from east (Ipswich) to west (Bristol).45

The League soon acquired a similar reputation in wider Labour Party circles to that of the ILP at the end of the previous decade. It was, Pimlott says, a “successor left wing body to the ILP.” Jupp notes that the League found itself “in the same critical relationship with the Labour Party which had forced its predecessor, the I.L.P. to disaffiliate.”46 Even more than the ILP, the Socialist League was perceived by many in the wider labour movement as a factional body comprising intellectuals. After Cripps became so dominant in 1937, Hugh Dalton dismissed the League as a “rich man’s toy.”47 For many in the Labour Party, the League was seen, says Pimlott, as “a disruptive body of middle-class intellectuals grinding a left-wing axe.”48 Patrick Seyd is probably right to point out that while the ILP, in the 1920s and even beyond, had been able to retain the loyalty of many, “irrespective of political stance,” this was not something that was inherited by the League.49

The Independent Socialist Party

That other “successor” to the ILP, the Independent Socialist Party (ISP), differed from the Scottish Socialist Party and the Socialist League in a number of ways. Unlike them, the ISP was not composed of affiliationist ILPers but of those, particularly in the Lancashire Division, who, though they had supported disaffiliation in 1932, soon came to fall out with what they took to be the ILP’s version of revolutionary policy. To the future members of the ISP, this seemed to be leading more and more to cooperation with—and possibly absorption by—the Communist Party.

The Independent Socialist Party had nothing like the public prominence or impact of the Socialist League or the Scottish Socialist Party. But like those organizations, it was led by people, notably Sandham and Abbot, who had previously played important roles in the ILP and saw themselves as being the “real” ILP. In chapter 16, we left the ISP shortly after its foundation in May 1934, with Sandham’s open letter of resignation from the ILP appearing in Labour’s
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*Northern Voice* two months later. As if to reinforce the appearance of continuity with the *ILP*, where summer schools had long been a notable feature, the same issue of the *Voice* carried an advertisement for the “*Adelphi Socialist Summer School*,” at which Middleton Murry and Sandham were to be lecturers. The impression of continuity with the past was reinforced in the following issue by Sandham’s article explaining why he had now joined the *ISP*, in which, he insisted, “the spirit of the I.L.P. must be kept alive.” Once again, he castigated his former party for departing from its authentic ethos of former times in favour of “the Communist and Russian model.”

A month later, *Labour’s Northern Voice* reported on the arrangements for first annual convention of the *ISP*, which began with a reception at the Clarion Club in Manchester. Speakers at the demonstration during the conference were Murry, Sandham, and Abbott. The conference remained wary of the Labour Party. “As Socialists,” the *Voice* declared in October, “we do not desire to see a Labour majority gained at the forthcoming election unless it is given by electors desiring Socialist reconstruction.” Cohen quotes an earlier edition of the paper (June 1934) to demonstrate that the *ISP*, believing that the Socialist League would eventually be forced out of the Labour Party, saw itself as “a live Independent Socialist Party to which they can turn.”

But any branch or member could join the Labour Party if they wished. Murry moved a motion on the *ISP*’s political aims, which ended with the declaration that “the Convention asserts that the will of working-class democracy must prevail.” The constitution adopted was based on that of the *ILP* in 1922; this move, as Cohen tells us, led the *New Leader* to brand the breakaway organization as backward-looking, a criticism that Murry was to take up within the *ISP*, as we shall see.

The *ISP* manifesto did not set out any principles or policies that many *ILP* members would not have endorsed. The party stood for “publicly owned and democratically controlled” industry and “economic equality.” It believed in revolution but only “by enlightened democratic consent of the majority” and the “full use of the political, industrial, and co-operative strength possessed by the British democracy.” The manifesto was divided into three sections headed “Recognises,” “Advocates,” and “Proposes.” One assumption about the nature of politics in the first section would have certainly been rejected by most of its *ILP* contemporaries. It stated that “the future welfare of the community depends on the establishment of economic classlessness to correspond with the political classlessness which has already been achieved.” It is extremely doubtful that many in the *ILP* believed that “political classlessness” had been achieved.

“Economic classlessness,” however, was a shared aim. Also shared with the *ILP* was the belief that “the decline of capitalism would involve “the whittling
away of former concessions gained by the people.” The two parties also held in common an uncompromising rejection of all “remedies” such as ‘New Deals,’ Fascism, Social Credit, class collaboration, evolutionary ‘socialism,’ and ‘national’ government or state capitalism.” All of these, the ISP declared to be futile and likely to divert the working classes from “their common advance towards Socialism.” Murry’s influence is apparent in the declaration that other “working-class political parties” had “not succeeded in suiting their methods to English political traditions.”

Nor would there have been much that ILPers would have opposed among the eleven policies “advocated” by the ISP. These included the “equality of women with men,” abolition of the House of Lords, reform of the Commons, and “democratisation of the armed forces, police, civil service and judiciary.” Like the ILP, the party proposed “to resist war by every means at its disposal.”

The ISP pamphlet Behind Rearmament: Preparing for Fascism in Britain! conceded that there would be “an absorption of some unemployed by reorganising on a war basis, but not on the scale that some folk imagine.” Those in control did not intend to produce a situation where wages would be forced up. The ISP General Council perceived a sinister domestic threat behind the government’s decision to rearm: “Our view is that the war preparations are deliberately intended to consolidate industry in Britain under corporate control, and to deprive ordinary folk of their democratic organisations for resisting the will of capitalism.” The council asked, “Can this coming of British Fascism be averted?”

One key objective for preventing this fate was that the hoped for “repudiation” of rearmament by the Labour Party should be “carried on to the industrial field, as it will be suicidal for democracy if Trade Union leaders decide to collaborate in forwarding rearmament which their political colleagues have denounced.” The ISP needed to get its message across: “The danger of British Fascism involved in war reorganisation should be explained and re-explained to organised labour.” The pamphlet ended with a stirring call for a “vocal, stubborn refusal to operate the Government plan. It is your job to run all risks to help in the struggle to preserve democracy.”

The ISP’s membership was not confined to Lancashire. There were branches in Nottingham, Aberfan, Hastings, and Maidstone, and even in the British colony of Sierra Leone. Yet there is no doubt that the old ILP Lancashire Division formed the core of the new party, with Abbott as general secretary and Sandham as chairman. The other big influence, early on, was Murry, who took the lead in forming a London branch. How dependent it was on him is amply evidenced by the fact that it collapsed soon after Murry resigned and joined the Labour Party in May 1936. In the meantime, Murry’s influence
was largely exercised through what *Labour’s Northern Voice* referred to as the “London unit” and the *Adelphi* summer school. The 1936 summer school was to be opened and closed by Murry; other speakers included J. Allen Skinner and Herbert Read.\(^{62}\)

There was a crucial difference between the former ILPers of Lancashire and Murry and his London branch. It was not just that the latter were intellectuals. Even more significant was that so many in Lancashire, not least its leading members, had spent many years, even decades, in the ILP, whereas Murry was, as he often reminded his audiences, a new recruit not just to the ILP and, later, the ISP but to socialism itself. The Middleton Murry Papers contain the draft of a speech to be made to the ISP convention. It is not dated but internal evidence suggests that it was to be delivered to the 1935 meeting. Murry’s warning of the dangers of focusing too much on the past was potentially applicable to the rest of the ex-ILP, but the danger was greater with the ISP, which had much less to concentrate on in the way of “practical politics” than did the SSP or the Socialist League.

Murry began his draft by acknowledging that he had been a socialist for only a few years and that, during this time, he had found himself “more and more drawn towards the Lancashire comrades.” He had come to believe that “what they meant by Socialism was fundamentally the same thing as I meant by it myself.” Then he turned to criticisms of the direction that the ISP seemed to be taking. He declared himself disappointed by “various prominent members” of the ISP who seemed to assume that “whole hearted support of and belief in the I.S.P.” was the only possible attitude for a “convinced and sincere Socialist.” Many people in Britain would “admit the need and the necessity of a new organisation of Socialists which left every member free to be a member of the Labour Party or even the I.L.P.” Yet there was “a pretty complete lack of response at present” to the idea that the time had come for “a new Socialist political party that arrogates to itself the right of being by nature infallible, and treating sincere Socialists outside its ranks as a sort of moral lepers.”\(^{63}\)

It was quite mistaken, wrote Murry, to believe that the simple solution was “the recreation of the old I.L.P.” That party had been “continually putting on pedestals men whom I had met and judged and in whom I had no faith at all.” It had done this with MacDonald, Allen, and Snowden, the latter of whom “dares to confess even now that he never could read a word of Marx.” If the notion of reviving the “old ILP” was meaningless to a middle-aged forty-five-year-old like himself, how much more so to younger socialists? They might favour the creation of a “new Socialist organisation,” but “heaven preserve them from a return to the old, still more from a return to the old with an odour of sanctity,
a new assumption of past infallibility. In their eyes it is a preposterous claim, rejected beyond appeal by history.”

Murry advised those who felt loyalty to the old ILP “to cherish this loyalty in your hearts, and not proclaim it from your platforms.” Otherwise, the ISP would become “a party of old men, brooding on their bitter stories of a past of failure.” He was, he said, “through sheer circumstances . . . in the position of being one of the chief propagandists of the I.S.P. to the Gentiles.” What was needed was an organization that would “unite and deepen the mutual understanding of Socialists active in all sections of the present Labour movement and also among the large and I believe increasing number who are unattached.” He concluded with a plea for a “new kind of political party.”

Murry complained that the right of individual ISP members to join the Labour Party was only “grudgingly conceded from headquarters.” But Labour was soon to proscribe the ISP, a “huge blow” to the new organization, as Gidon Cohen says, and one that dashed Murry’s version of the way forward for the party. Murry and the London group soon decided to urge the ISP to apply for affiliation to the Labour Party, and disputes between London and the Lancashire ISPsers followed. Murry himself resigned from the General Council in March 1936, and, following the rejection by the party’s third convention in May of a motion calling for affiliation to Labour, he resigned from the ISP and joined the Labour Party.

Rather sadly, the ISP soldiered on in much the sort of political isolation of which Murry had warned. Like the ILP, it opposed the war in 1939. Sandham died in 1944 and the party continued, chaired by Abbott until his death in 1951. Soon thereafter, it dissolved itself. Of the three ex-ILP organizations that claimed to be the “real ILP,” the most successful, in immediate terms, was the SSP, which did, largely via Dollan, make an impact on Scottish—and particularly Glasgow—politics. All of these organizations, in one way or another, veered back towards the Labour Party, though the ISP’s ambition to achieve a species of half-in-and-half-out status was thwarted by Labour’s NEC.

The Later Clifford Allen: A Limiting Case?
The SSP, the Socialist League, and the ISP could all make a reasonable case that, in one way or another, they were continuing what they saw as the ILP tradition. In this, they were different from the other groups that left the party in the 1930s—the RPC and the Trotskyists—who made no such claim. Can any sort of a case for ILP continuity be made for the former treasurer and chairman of the party Clifford Allen? He certainly retained a degree of respect and affection on the part of at least some of his former ILP comrades. Jennie Lee remembered the way he had been “the very embodiment of the martyrdom that
some of our members had suffered during the war.” She recalled his visit to her home early in the early postwar period: “I shall never forget the tall, ascetic face and figure of Clifford Allen framed in our doorway with half a dozen squat dark-looking miners grouped around him. I should not have been surprised if he had suddenly sprouted wings and a halo.”

True, this was written a few years after Allen’s death in 1939, a few months before his fiftieth birthday. Yet even just after he followed his friend Mac-Donald into National Labour, there had been those on the Left prepared to defend him—at least to some extent. National Labour was, as Kenneth O. Morgan says, “an exotic breed,” but he tells us that MacDonald still “insisted, to impressionable young aesthetes like Kenneth Clark, on his socialist convictions.” That Allen held similar convictions is without doubt: he had always regarded the case for socialism as self-evident—a matter of scientific rationality.

Allen had been approached by MacDonald in early December 1931 and asked, “Would you like to be a Lord?” Martin Gilbert tells us of Allen’s determination to maintain a socialist voice in the new government by giving it support in the House of Lords. The reaction in ILP circles to this former chairman’s decision to accept lordship was always likely to be extremely negative. Murry, as we have seen, dismissed him, along with MacDonald and Snowden, as someone he had “no faith in.”

The immediate reaction to Allen’s “elevation” was a mixture of lighthearted humour and mild spitefulness. A New Leader editorial noted the advent of “Baron Clifford Allen” and commented, “One past Chairman of the I.L.P. is a Viscount and another is a Baron. A third is the Prime Minister of a ‘National’ Government. We begin to shudder even for James Maxton and the present Chairman of the I.L.P. . . . Maxton’s phrase remains: We have no giants!” Inset in the middle of the piece was a twenty-line poem, the final stanza of which read:

The Viscount Snowden earned his noble place,
But why does Allen such an “honour” reap?
Has then apostasy become so cheap
That one with ease towards a Peerage climbs
By writing two short letters to the “Times”?

Mild enough stuff, perhaps, but the following week, it drew an immediate rebuke from Helena Swanwick, the first chronicler of the Union of Democratic Control, in which Allen had played such a prominent role. The “attack on Clifford Allen made my heart sink,” she declared, deploiring the “cheap cry of ‘traitor.’” A week later, Brailsford, by this time already engaged in what turned out to be his unsuccessful struggle to keep the ILP affiliated to Labour,
acknowledged the sincerity and good intentions of “Clifford Allen (as we may still call him).” However, he rejected the defence of MacDonald that Allen had made in his pamphlet Labour’s Future at Stake, with its “plea for reunion under his leadership within some centre Party coalition, which he seems to contemplate.” Brailsford concluded:

> With much else in the pamphlet we may agree. We need this exhortation to think clearly and talk persuasively. We did not find the right “tone of voice” in the emotional stress of last year. It is true that millions of voters could be won for a Socialist policy if we ceased to frighten them and cared only to convince them. But no conviction will lead to action which ignores the fact that there is in the society of today a fundamental cleavage of interest between the owning and the working classes.72

There was nothing so conciliatory in Maxton’s response. He denounced Allen’s desertion as “wicked” and, in reply to Brailsford, concluded that instead of making him “Lord Allen of Hurtwood,” MacDonald should have made Allen a bishop. Yet Brailsford was not entirely alone in taking a more measured view of Allen’s latest position, though Wise felt it necessary to make it clear in a pro-affiliation letter to the New Leader in February 1932 that he was not supporting Allen.73

One example of a more conciliatory view appeared in the Guildford-based Workers’ Monthly, which was published in local editions in various parts of southern England. The February 1932 issue carried a correspondent’s appreciation of Allen’s wartime role and his “good service to Socialism” as chairman of the ILP. It continued, “Again he takes an independent course. Will the future justify the attitude he now takes? Will he succeed in his endeavour to bring back Ramsay MacDonald as the leader of the Labour Party? I think the answer is decidedly in the negative.” A few months later, Allen contributed an article entitled “Socialism in Our Time” to this organ of the Southern Counties Workers’ Publications. He argued, “If when public opinion urgently demands proposals for a more common sense organisation of finance and banking we advocate our cure in a tone of hatred and arouse terror, we shall miss our chance.”74

The Workers’ Monthly editorial response was polite but firm. “We ourselves have always appealed to reason,” the editor insisted. He welcomed Allen’s contribution. If it indicated that he was “beginning to realise the wrongness of his support for the ‘National’ Government we are glad.” But he was “doomed to disappointment” if he hoped to persuade the Labour movement that “anything Socialistic will ever come out of this collection of reactionary elements” that constituted the National Government.75
Allen was not entirely neglected by the ILP during the period when the party was preoccupied with the debate on disaffiliation. In May 1932, the New Leader carried an advertisement for a talk by him under the title “The Crisis—And the Result.” It was to be given at a meeting organized by the Marylebone ILP branch, which was also mentioned in passing in the paper. Then, in August, soon after the fateful Bradford conference, the paper devoted an editorial to Allen’s position, asking, with emphasis, “Do we believe that social order and design can replace the present world chaos without a catastrophic break?” It ended on a note of incredulity: “Lord Allen thinks that not only it can, but that the National Government is doing it!”

For his part, Allen was still sufficiently concerned about his old party to comment on its demise in “The End of the I.L.P.” in the monthly publication of the National Labour Party. None of the “fragments” into which the ILP had “shattered itself” could possibly survive, he predicted. It was “a lamentable end to a great and at times romantic history.” The ILP had been right about the war. But it, and now the Labour Party also, had succumbed to “a minority mind” that dallied “with the wish to shock and frighten with revolutionary words a public that is now willing to be convinced and led into the promised land of social order of which we have told them.” It was better, Allen argued, to combine efforts. “Of course we know—whether we be enlightened Labour, Conservative, or Liberal men and women—that we shall encounter in the last ditch an insignificant group who cling to vested interest.” But this should deter no one. Those who had led for the previous thirty years were now “nearing the end of their journey.” Allen asked: “Are we, who are younger, to keep apart from each other when we could combine to express the new common will of the twentieth century?”

Allen’s approach was to lead to one of the last of his political initiatives in the shape of the Next Five Years Group, which included the future Conservative prime minister, Harold Macmillan, and the Liberal and editor of The Economist, Walter Layton, as well as Norman Angell. Inspired in part by Roosevelt’s New Deal, this group was founded at an Oxford Union meeting in early February 1935, though there had been preparatory informal discussions during the previous year.

As many political “realists” predicted, the group’s life was a very short one. It declined steeply after Macmillan abandoned it the following year. Yet it did produce The Next Five Years: An Essay in Political Agreement and two manifestos, which were published as appendices to the book. The first manifesto warned of the trend towards political violence: “Organisations of a semi-military character, exacting a strict discipline from their adherents, displaying a uniform of coloured shirts, employing common symbols and a new form of salute, have
grown in some countries into vast private armies.” Even in Britain, there were “parades of Fascist blackshirts.” The second manifesto noted that “Fascists and Communists alike pour scorn on democratic institutions and advocate their replacement by dictatorial method,” while they called for “speeding up the machinery of government.”

The foreword to The Next Five Years listed 152 signatures, including 33 marked as having attended at least one of the preliminary conferences. The “drafting committee” was identified as Allen; W. Arnold Forster; A. Barratt Brown, Principal of Ruskin College, Oxford; Geoffrey Crowther; Harold Macmillan, MP; and Sir Arthur Salter. In all, seven signatories registered dissent with one or other section of the program proposed. The book was substantial, running to 320 pages including the appendices. Part 1 comprised eight chapters on economic policy, and the second part dealt with international relations.

Very few of the signatories were associated with Labour, and none were leaders of the party, but the book contained some distant echoes of The Living Wage. The introduction declared there to be “a challenge to develop an economic system which is free from poverty and makes full use of the growing material resources of the age for the general advantage, and a challenge to safeguard public liberty and to revitalize democratic government.” Approaches relying on “muddling through” had to be rejected. The community could “and must deliberately plan, direct and control—not in detail but in broad outline—the economic development to which innumerable activities contribute.”

The chapter on economic planning favoured “planning coherently” and declared optimistically, “The motive of profit-making has already, to a greater extent than is commonly realised, ceased to be the mainspring of economic activity in this country.” Prompted by the “principle of developing resources for common good,” the future would see an extension of “public ownership or control.” There should be a “Government Planning Committee” and an “Economic General Staff” of “persons with more specialized expert knowledge, with more permanent tenure,” both of which would include “members drawn from the Trades Union and Labour movement.” The book’s epilogue argued that “the principle of government by consent and free discussion must be made much more fully operative through the extension of education—that cardinal function of a democratic State; through improvement of the system of representation, and through the further breaking down of barriers of class.”

Though most on the Left were, understandably, wary of Allen’s initiative, some spoke up for taking The Next Five Years seriously. In the Daily Herald, Francis Williams observed that “the unanimity they have been able to reach is significant, for it is a unanimity not simply of pious hopes but of positive proposals.” But he went on to declare that it was “in almost all respects the
immediate programme of the Labour Party, as I believe of any body of men and women genuinely seeking economic improvement must be. The Conservative and Liberal supporters of The Next Five Years should be in the ranks of the Socialist movement.” Yet, insofar as there really was a “Butskellite consensus” in the 1950s, Allen’s initiative can surely be seen as foreshadowing it.

To those of us who grew up with the idea that 1931 saw an unforgivable “great betrayal,” what is pleasantly surprising is the relative lack of personal animosity directed at Allen, and not at Allen alone. When the first volume of Snowden’s memoirs appeared in 1934, dealing with the years up to 1919, Forward confined itself to the comment that it must have made “happier writing” than the next volume would be. A week after the former chancellor of the exchequer’s death, the same paper announced, “Had he been a younger man he would have once again returned to the Socialist Movement for one of his last messages was to wish success to the Socialist candidate at Greenock.” The writer quoted from Snowden’s last letter, sent to his friend Martin Haddow on the day he died: “In quieter moments I go back to the old faith in which I believe as firmly as ever.”