Conclusion
The Legacy of the ILP’s Interwar Years

Like any political organization, and perhaps more than most, the ILP was never quite “one thing” at any point in its history. In the period in question, its stance and its leadership, as well as its size and potential political influence, was almost continually changing from the end of the First World War in the final weeks of 1918 to the outbreak of the Second in the late summer of 1939. One of its most prominent early leaders, Philip Snowden, was already showing definite signs of disenchantment with the party by 1920. This was reinforced after the critical reactions of many in the party, as well as elsewhere on the Left, to his wife Ethel’s outspoken criticisms of the Bolsheviks after her visit that year to Russia with the Labour Party delegation. Rapid change and, especially after disaffiliation in 1932, internal controversy, would continue for the rest of the interwar years.

It could plausibly be argued that by 1939, the ILP was an entirely different sort of organization than the one that had operated twenty years previously. In the early 1920s, it was still the main route for individuals to become members of the Labour Party and was therefore still part of the political mainstream. Its position in this respect was already threatened, and seen to be threatened, by the provision in the new Labour Party constitution for individual party membership in local branches. Twenty years later, the ILP was a much smaller entity on the political fringe, yet there were also continuities. It was throughout—in spite of all its diversions, crosscurrents, and contradictions—a residuary legatee of the pre-Leninist radical democratic currents of the Left, including guild socialism, with its emphasis on workplace democracy.

It is an almost universal judgment that the 1932 disaffiliation was a huge mistake. It is difficult to find any grounds on which to disagree. Many in the ILP itself had already reached the same conclusion by 1939. Only the outbreak of war prevented the holding of a special conference to decide whether to follow the NAC’s recommendation to seek reaffiliation. Peter Thwaites pinpoints the
choices and the consequences for the ILP when it decided not to go ahead with this in his thesis on the ILP between 1938 and 1950:

When the ILP hesitated on the brink and then took a step back from reaffiliation to the Labour Party in 1939 it unwittingly doomed itself to virtual extinction. Inside the Labour Party the ILP might have replaced or united with the infant Tribune Group to become the voice of the Labour Left. Or it might have become submerged within the mass party within a short time and ceased to be a coherent group, but at least the individual ILPers would have been in contact with the mass of the labour movement and they might have been able to exert an influence, no matter how small, on the direction the Labour Party took.³

The danger of being submerged in the Labour Party and thereby losing its radical identity was one side of the siege that the ILP experienced—mainly from forces within it and in the minds of its members—throughout the interwar period. On the other side, the besiegers were the ideas and emotions drawing the party either into a merger with the CPGB or towards trying to set itself up as its own version of a Bolshevik-style revolutionary party in a context where there was little sign of revolution, though some believed that revolution might have ensued with a more determined leadership in the General Strike of 1926.

A few years later, after the Great Crash of 1929, it looked to many as though capitalism really was on its last legs. But it turned out that there was little prospect of revolution—and if there had been, it is doubtful that the ILP could have reached any clear position on how a revolution should be conducted. The post-disaffiliation policy conflicts over revolutionary policy were to show this rather conclusively.

But this does not necessarily mean that the experience of the ILP—both before and after it left the Labour Party—was without value. There is little doubt that the core of the interwar ILP contributed more than most forces on the Left to the preservation of the traditions of democratic socialism in Britain. It was, throughout that time, both more radical than mainstream Labour and infinitely more democratic than were the Communists or their later adversaries in the fragmented Trotskyist movement.

This account began with Fred Jowett’s long involvement as a consistently prominent figure in the ILP. He was a leading member from the party’s foundation until his death during the Second World War. His continued commitment, together with that of others who stayed with the ILP through all the crises and conflicts of the period, gives a sense of continuity to an organization that saw many great changes.
But we must always remember that Mosley and John Beckett, who departed to fascism; MacDonald, Snowden, and Allen, who ended up with National Labour; and Brailsford and Wise, who opposed disaffiliation and became leading figures in the Socialist League were all once leading ILPers. Other influential figures in the ILP, for at least some of the period, included people as diverse as Fenner Brockway, Katharine Bruce Glasier, Patrick Dollan, Bob Edwards, George Orwell, Edith Mannin, John Middleton Murry, Jennie Lee, Minnie Pallister, John Paton, Jack Gaster, Dorothy Jewson, and Elijah Sandham. Yet Jowett’s tenacious stand on reforming parliamentary procedure in order, as he saw it, to make representative democracy more genuinely democratic can stand for wider trends in the ILP. The party resisted—in the end—all attempts either to depart from the democratic principles of the party or to jettison its radicalism.

The ILP was surely right to wish to expand the boundaries of democracy. Democracy, of course, has its own problems, including those of definition. As Dennis Pilon says in Wrestling with Democracy, what “democracy is or should be in the west has never been settled” in spite of the fact that “political scientists often carry on as if democracy is obvious.” For left-wing democrats, the aspiration has always been to establish some significant degree of democratic control and accountability over the economy. How they have proposed to do this and the nature and extent of the desired control has varied greatly from time to time and place to place, but that goal has always been present.

Democracy always requires defending, deepening, and expanding. The ILP support for Jowett’s proposals, albeit not as robust as he would have liked, meant that the party never accepted the complacent constitutional attitudes that were found so often in the Labour Party; nor, in the end, did it enter a would-be revolutionary cul-de-sac—although it came alarmingly close to the latter. Yet it is not without significance that in 1939, Jowett felt that he had been a lone voice. It reflects the way in which concern with issues of parliamentary reform, like Parliament itself, had been sidelined by the ILP during the post-disaffiliation years.

With the new Labour Party constitution in operation, it was, and still is, easy to conclude that the ILP was doomed from the beginning of the interwar period. Certainly, its position in the new dispensation could be regarded as anomalous, but there is no shortage of anomalies in British constitutional and political practice. And it is worth noting that the initiative to leave Labour came from the ILP. Its position was certainly made difficult by the unbending insistence by the larger party on its parliamentary standing orders and refusal to endorse candidates who would not agree to accept them. But neither under MacDonald’s leadership nor subsequently was there any move by Labour to expel the ILP, and at the end of the 1930s, when it looked as though it was
returning to the fold, the attitude from Labour’s NEC seems to have been relatively welcoming. That reaffiliation did not take place at the end of the 1930s was, once again, the decision of the ILP.

Some in the party suggested that the ILP should adjust to the new situation in the party brought about by Labour’s 1918 constitution by following the pattern of the Fabian Society, concentrating exclusively on research, the promotion of policies, and “making socialists.” There was never much likelihood of that happening during the interwar years. A very wide spectrum of ILP opinion was determined to retain a more active role of participation in local and national electoral politics. This continued after disaffiliation, though there was bitter conflict over the place of such activities, as well as over the attempt to put forward workers’ councils as an alternative.

At the beginning of 1920, it looked as though the ILP was going to resolve the question of its future role by throwing in its lot with the Communist International. But this was rejected the following year at the expense of losing some members to the new Communist Party of Great Britain, though not on the scale of a major split. For the time being, the siege from that side was lifted—or at least eased to the extent that it no longer threatened the very existence of the ILP, which would have surely been rapidly absorbed into the CPGB had the ILP’s Left Wing carried the day in 1921.

Given the mutual hostility that developed from 1924 onwards between MacDonald and the ILP “rebels” inside and outside Parliament, it is easy to overlook both the earlier support for the soon-to-be Labour leader and the degree to which he was dependent on the ILP. Without its backing, MacDonald would not have become the first fully established leader of the Labour Party, nor would he have been prime minister in the two minority governments. Had Clynes secured just another handful of votes, he might well have interpreted the role of chairman differently. One can only speculate about the impact that Clynes’s success might have had on the development of the Labour Party and British politics more generally.

There is no doubt that in his “wilderness” years, when he was out of Parliament following the war, MacDonald was clearly dependent on the ILP—and made efforts to present himself as concerned with the issues that animated the party. Without repudiating his earlier, more conservative views, MacDonald made a real effort between 1918 and 1922 to signal a degree of support, or at least respectful consideration, for the more radical views and policies the party was debating. This is true of the questions of industrial democracy, the role of MPs, and direct action. MacDonald’s position during the war may have been more equivocal than those of some other prominent ILPers, but it was a dominant factor in his support in the party. The positions he took in the
immediate postwar years can only have helped to consolidate his position as its leading figure and candidate for the leadership among both ILP parliamentarians and the wider membership. This would be in great contrast to his later dismissive, even contemptuous, response to ILP policies—especially the Living Wage report—in the second half of the decade.

The five or so years that followed the rejection of Comintern affiliation were the most creative and productive period for the ILP between the two wars. No longer internally besieged by the “Left Wing,” it still had reasonable relations with the rest of the Labour Party, although experience of the first Labour government soon put this under severe strain. Allen’s notion of the ILP as a “nucleus” carried the implication that it would be leading the way as Labour’s most “advanced” element. This was bound to be resented, to at least some extent, in other parts of the Labour Party.

If these parts were going to be won over to the ILP’s “distinctive program,” a great deal of tact and patience would be needed. The same qualities were required of the Labour Party and its leadership if the ILP was not to evolve into a permanent internal opposition. Such qualities were in short supply on both sides. In the end, Allen’s personal loyalty to MacDonald would overcome his criticisms of Labour’s approach under the latter’s leadership, as the position he took in 1931 and subsequently demonstrated. But this was not remotely true of the vast majority of ILPers.

The party had taken a long time to arrive at its “guild socialist” 1922 constitution, but that constitution played relatively little part in subsequent internal discussion. This is surprising given the long and passionate debates that had taken place in 1921 and 1922. The collapse of the broader guild socialist movement seems to have been reflected in the declining focus on the subject within the ILP. But throughout the interwar period, the ILP did remain hostile to “state socialism” and in favour of “industrial democracy.”

Allen clearly believed that socialism was simply the most rational and most “scientific” way of both running the economy and becoming a socially just society. In line with this belief, he proposed, in early 1924, that MacDonald take advantage of the government’s control of resources to begin inquiries into major industries and “set the enquiring mind of the nation dispassionately to work.” His view of democracy entailed a minority Labour government proposing radical policies and then, following a parliamentary defeat, fighting a subsequent election on those policies—rather than waiting until it could acquire a prior mandate. When considering this, we should note that in his address to the 1925 ILP conference, Allen was concerned with the unlikelihood of Labour, or any other party, obtaining a majority of votes rather than of parliamentary seats. “It is doubtful,” he said, “whether British politics will long
continue to be limited to two great Parties. If that is true, then it is unlikely for some time to come that any one Party will be able to secure a majority of votes polled.”

The short period of the “Allen regime” constituted the most successful and significant of the interwar years for the ILP. In part, this was because of Allen’s ability to obtain donations from, largely, the more prosperous pacifist associates with whom he had worked during the war. But there was also a determined energy during this period of organizational changes, including the replacement of the Labour Leader with Brailsford’s New Leader. Along with this went more energetic, organized, and confident campaigning.

While all of that was important, surely the major achievement of the period was The Living Wage report. In its initial form, especially as promoted by Brailsford, the report sought to devise and promote a policy that would attract popular support and be difficult for political opponents to counter. It was, at the same time, intended to open up the prospect of winning democratic backing for more radical socialist policies. However, for it to be adopted by the Labour Party, the concerns of trade unionists, fearful that the political side of the movement was trying to seize its territory, would have to be conciliated. This, again, would require great tact and patience, both so conspicuously lacking in the ILP.

The rejection of a more patient, long-term approach soon became evident, as the Living Wage policy quickly became Socialism in Our Time and the step-by-step and flexible strategy of the original document was abandoned in favour of the demand for speedy implementation of a comprehensive program of radical socialist measures. More than with any other individual, Jimmy Maxton exemplified the restless and relentless pursuit of the socialist commonwealth. It is difficult to understate his impact on the ILP. From the mid-1920s, it was increasingly Maxton who was most likely to come to mind whenever the ILP was mentioned.

Even those who disagreed with him most strongly always testified to Maxton’s extraordinary qualities. The notion of “charisma” is overused, but he was certainly an orator who could generate enthusiasm and support that was little, if anything, short of devotion. His sincerity was beyond question. He was liked and respected even by political opponents. The problem for the ILP was that, however contrary to his own declared belief that the ILP had “no giants,” he was in danger of turning the party into a one-man band. This was particularly true in the post-disaffiliation years. Above all, he appealed to those committed to the uncompromising pursuit of left-wing goals. His political purism is best exemplified by his “two dictators” stance in the Abyssinian crisis.
One thing that Maxton clearly was not was what would now be called “a good team player.” That he was unlikely to fulfill this role in a Labour Party context was already suggested by the “murderers” episode early in his parliamentary career. Nor was this his forte within the ILP, as his behaviour as ILP representative at the 1925 Labour Party conference and in the 1928 Cook-Maxton campaign revealed. But just how much the party came to revolve around Maxton is evident in the episode of his threatened resignation and the subsequent plebiscite over Abyssinia.

The tendency to turn individuals into unchallengeable icons is not confined to organizations of the Left, but it sits very awkwardly there because of their egalitarian values. Maxton was not the first iconic figure in the ILP. Long before, Keir Hardie had been granted this status as had, to a lesser extent, Snowden and MacDonald, as Murry was keen to point out to the ISP. Maxton’s near-iconic status helped to take the ILP out of the Labour Party, with a consequent loss of membership. In what direction would it now turn?

One possibility that was immediately ruled out was the path taken by Oswald Mosley. For a few years, he had seemed likely not only to begin to rival Maxton in ILP circles but even to claim the leadership of the Labour Party. His Birmingham Proposals and Revolution by Reason had been taken very seriously, though it was not clear to what extent they were an alternative to The Living Wage or simply a contribution to the debate around that report. But as the authoritarian and nationalistic strains in Mosley’s thinking became clearer, they were rejected by the ILP, although it is true that some former ILPers, most notably John Beckett, followed him not just into the New Party but into the British Union of Fascists.⁶

What of a move to the supposedly revolutionary Left? By the 1930s, circumstances appeared to favour a new attempt to work with, and eventually merge with, the CPGB. The departure, in different ways and in different directions, of two former chairmen of the ILP—Wallhead and Allen—helped to clear the ground for this. Wallhead, like Allen, had started as a supporter of the Bolsheviks but had come back from the 1920 visit to Russia critical of the regime. One of the few Labour survivors of the disastrous 1931 election, Wallhead had initially gone along with disaffiliation but had returned to the Labour Party in 1933. He died the following year. In 1931, Allen had put himself well beyond the pale in ILP eyes by siding with MacDonald and accepting a peerage.

Things now looked very different to many still in the ILP. The apparent success of the Five-Year Plans in the USSR contrasted with the disasters of the stock market crash and depression in the capitalist world. A younger generation of ILPers were keen to show themselves to be authentic revolutionaries,
and many rather older members, like Brockway, were equally keen to turn their backs on “gradualism.”

The party embarked on what it believed to be a revolutionary course. But, while many could support the need for a revolutionary policy, relatively few were agreed on what that actually meant. It is probably true to say that for most ILPers, their conception of revolution was of a transformative growth of socialist values and attitudes among an overwhelming majority of an inclusively defined working class leading to radical social, economic and political change. Precisely how this might be translated into political action was far less clear. It would quickly become evident that any attempt to prescribe a strategy would lead to fundamental disagreement and conflict. In particular, there was no way to bridge the gulf between the Revolutionary Policy Committee, which sought eventual merger with the CPGB, and those like Paton who aspired to replace it completely.

Fear of being merged with the CPGB powered the opposition to the United Front policy, which seemed so essential to the RPC. This apprehension led to substantial defections from the ILP in Lancashire and to the formation of the Independent Socialist Party. Yet not long afterwards, with the differences over Abyssinia as the catalyst, as well as its long-nurtured hostility to Brockway’s criticism of Soviet foreign policy, the RPC gave up what had come to seem like a hopeless attempt to bring the party at least into alliance with the Communists. Most of the Trotskyists who had joined in the post-disaffiliation years also soon abandoned their attempts to convert the ILP into the sort of organization they envisioned.

It is ironic, particularly for a party routinely seen as “in the centre” or centrist, that by the later 1930s, the ILP and the CPGB had effectively swapped places on the conventional political spectrum. True, the attempt to apply democratic centralism was even more of a failure in the case of the ILP than it usually is. Yet in the “class against class” period at the beginning of the 1930s, it had been the Communists who rejected any sort of alliance with so-called social fascists, let alone with any political forces outside the working-class movement. By the later years of the decade, it was the ILP that dismissed the notion of a “popular front” intended to include not only the CPGB and the Labour Party but also elements of the “bourgeois” parties. Instead, it favoured a much more exclusive “workers’ front.” It was now the ILP rather than the CPGB that pursued a form of “class war.” It was the ILP that regarded the League of Nations as an irredeemably bourgeois and imperialist entity, while the CPGB supported it once the USSR had joined. And it was the ILP that supported the revolutionary policy of the POUM during the Spanish War in opposition to the Communists.
The way the CPGB was regarded by ILPers—a spectrum ranging from the benevolence of the RPC and some others through mild suspicion to outright contempt—contrasts with the much more unanimous ILP commitment to the USSR as the “first workers’ republic.” The Moscow trials and especially the experience of the Spanish Civil War began to undermine this commitment, yet many ILPers clung to the idea that somehow, as Brockway asserted in 1938, there was a socialist economic basis in the Soviet Union that might be salvaged. Uncritical views of aspects of Soviet reality still persisted.

Sometimes, the statements relating to Stalin’s Russia of some of those who were, or had been, ILP members seem truly shocking with the hindsight that the twenty-first century gives. One example comes from Jennie Lee’s 1942 book *This Great Journey*, where she attributes the USSR’s famine of ten years earlier to a “war” in which peasants who killed their livestock and refused to cultivate the land rather than conform to Soviet methods of farming and land-holding trapped themselves into famine. It was famine from such causes that I had seen in the Ukraine. But the plus factor added by Russia was not poverty, or disease or illiteracy. It was exactly the reverse. It was the fight against these barbarities. 

Jennie Lee was, as noted earlier, by no means one of the more credulous figures on the British Left as far as communism and the USSR were concerned. No doubt, too, we should recall the wartime alliance with Stalin. And, as Tony Judt says of the Soviet Union,

> many people needed to believe in its self-definition as the homeland of revolution—including quite a few of its victims. Today, we do not know what to make of the many Western observers who accepted show trials, minimized (or denied) the Ukrainian famine, or believed everything they were told about productivity and democracy and the great new Soviet constitution of 1936.

The blindness and wishful thinking involved in left-wing perceptions of the USSR even at the height of Stalinist atrocities were not, of course, confined to the ILP. The best-known example of this is the Webbs’s *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation*. But they were anything but alone. We might be tempted to discount as overly partial the publications of the Friends of the Soviet Union such as *The New Democracy: Stalin’s Speech on the New Constitution* or *Spies, Wreckers, and Grafters: The Truth about the Moscow Trials*. Nor is it surprising that the Anglo-Soviet Parliamentary Committee published the 1933 pamphlet *More Anti-Soviet Lies Nailed*, by its secretary, W. P. Coates. What is rather
startling is that the latter contained a foreword by the then leader of the Labour Party, George Lansbury, which hailed the “wonderful experiment” of the USSR and declared that “we are not called upon to judge or accept all the means they adopt to attain their ends.”

Yet few would challenge Lansbury’s credentials, in the domestic context, as a radical democratic socialist. The same is true of Charles Trevelyan, though some might find his baronetcy and position of monarch’s representative in the county, as Lord Lieutenant of Northumberland, a little anomalous. We have already encountered him a number of times. He first appeared in chapter 1 as a radical Liberal MP before the First World War, initiating a House of Commons debate on secret diplomacy in which Fred Jowett made a “vigorous speech.” In chapter 3, he appeared as one of the new postwar recruits to Labour and the ILP, and in chapter 5, he was briefly mentioned as one of the MPs who strengthened ILP parliamentary representation in 1922. His admirable attempts to raise the school leaving age featured in chapters 6 and 11 with, in the latter case, his resignation as the Minister of Education of the second Labour government after the failure of his Education Bill. He was also noted there for his support for continued ILP involvement in electoral politics and his declaration that the Labour government ought to aspire to do more than just “govern decently” and should make an effort to “break through to Socialism and establish a new Society.” Finally, as a leading member of the “ex-ILP,” we saw him experiencing a moment of triumph as, in effect, a Socialist League spokesman at the 1932 Labour Party conference and bringing the League’s fraternal greetings to the Scottish Socialist Party in 1934.

In 1935, Trevelyan was, he told readers, “in Soviet Russia for quite a long time,” and on his return, Gollancz published his account of the visit as Soviet Russia: A Description for British Workers. Trevelyan recommended “the great book being written by Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb.” His own chapter headings include “Russian Democracy,” “A Classless Society,” and “The Holidays of the People.” He claimed that in the sphere of economic life, “the Russian worker is a free man indeed compared with the workers in our own capitalist lands” and that the introduction of secret ballots would make the “mechanism of Russian Soviet Government as completely democratic as our own.” He told his readers that the “Communist Party as such does not direct government either in the village or the factory or the Kremlin” and that “the most vigorous debating organisation in the country is the Communist Party,” with “no curb on the frankness of discussion or the vigour of opinions.”

With even people like Lansbury and Trevelyan successfully persuaded of the benevolence of Stalin’s Russia, it is hardly surprising that reports that went further than to suggest that the Soviet Union might be still a little way
short of socialist perfection were dismissed as hostile propaganda and that even mild criticism was challenged. Hobsbawm captures the attitude towards Russia of many on the Left—including ILPers: “Whatever its weaknesses, its very existence proved that socialism was more than a dream.”\footnote{12} Furthermore, so much hope was invested by the Left because, as Kevin Morgan says, “over time the revolution in Russia came to function as a surrogate for its absence elsewhere.”\footnote{13} The best that can be said for the ILP was that by the late 1930s, it was less uncritical than much of the rest of the Left.

Many in the ILP subscribed to the myth of soviet democracy, believing that genuine control of Russia lay, or at least had lain in the earliest days of the revolution, in the hands of the largely workplace-based grassroots. All could qualify as “workers” by making a positive contribution to society, and the Communist Party’s role was confined to voluntarily accepted intellectual guidance. Even those who saw the practice of Stalin’s regime as a cruel parody of soviet democracy still clung to the hope that the genuine article could still be established—or restored—as long as the state remained in control of the economy. Such a notion did not then seem so incredible as it does today.

Versions of soviet democracy on the British Left varied in theoretical consistency, if not in practicality. In the early days of the CPGB, when it demanded representation on councils of action, it was fiercely opposed by the “Left Communists” of its erstwhile rival, Sylvia Pankhurst’s Communist Party (British Section of the Third International). This challenge was on the grounds that such bodies should be made up entirely of delegates from shop-floor “industrial” bodies. Political organizations must be entirely excluded from direct representation.\footnote{14} This may have been utopian, but it was consistent with the ideals that had informed syndicalism and similar demands for “workers’ democracy.” But, though the ideal of soviet democracy was shared by many in the ILP, the workers’ councils advocated in the party in the 1930s for immediate implementation were to be ad hoc bodies made up largely of “political” representatives rather than delegate bodies proportionally representative of groups of actual workers. Such bodies could satisfy neither the criteria for pure soviet democracy nor those of advocates of (reformed) parliamentary democracy like Jowett.

Everyone in the ILP was familiar with delegate democracy as practiced in British trade unions, political parties—including the ILP itself—and other voluntary organizations. The tendency of such a system to favour the objectives of the most active participants could lead to allegations that it produced results unrepresentative of the opinions of the membership. In the ILP, this was the case argued for a referendum on disaffiliation by those who claimed that the decision of the Bradford conference of 1932 did not truly reflect the views of
the majority of members. Many trade unions have provision for the requisitioning of special conferences or members’ referendums as a safeguard. In all voluntary organizations, like the ILP, the tendency for the “militants” to push it too far in a direction not favoured by less active members is and was balanced, ultimately, by the ability—much employed in the ILP of the 1930s—to leave the organization. Delegate democracy as a structure of state power would be very different in that it would lack any such an option. Believers in the reality of soviet democracy in Russia or of the possibility of bringing about a more authentic version in Britain seem to have given little consideration to the ways in which practice might fall short of the utopian ideal.

What can be said to sum up the nature of the ILP in the two decades between the wars? One cannot, logically, insist that throughout the period, the ILP included a range of different beliefs that were generally tolerated—at least until the existence of the party seemed to be threatened—and then go on to argue for its possession of uniform ideology. Can any valid generalizations nevertheless be made?

The ILP did more than most organizations of the Left, in practice as well as in theory, to support the equal status of women. The party is sometimes described as adhering to “ethical socialism.” Certainly, most ILPers had a strong sense of moral purpose. Thwaites calls it “a libertarian party, with a respect for the freedom of political units which was reflected in its own ultra-democratic structure and constitution.”15 That is true enough. Anything that smacked of authoritarianism was always going to meet with opposition from the vast majority of ILPers—once it had been clearly identified as such. The socialism that the party hoped to see accomplished “in our time” was definitely to be democratic and egalitarian, with a much greater liberty for the individual than capitalism could deliver.

The ILP included pacifists. More broadly, it was consistently antimilitarist and antiwar. Yet in its response to the Spanish Civil War, the party showed a willingness to support the use of force when used defensively against fascism. Did ILPers, as uncompromising revolutionary socialists, foresee a violent revolution? This was never clear. For some, force would have to be used, again defensively, when the predicted violent revolt of supporters of capitalism faced with the prospect of socialism took place. In such circumstances, force might be legitimately needed to resist the imposition of fascism.

In his book The Totalitarian Enemy, written during the early months of the “phony war” in 1939, Franz Borkenau noted that “in Russia the old landowners, bankers and industrialists have been killed or driven into exile.” He went on to say that “in Republican Spain, on the contrary, the OGPU [Soviet secret police] killed and drove into exile those who wanted to kill or drive into exile landowners, bankers and industrialists.”16 The ILP would have endorsed the
comment on the role of the Russian secret police, but most of its members would have indignantly disclaimed any desire to kill adherents of capitalism. In the Spanish context, the ILP would have defended the POUM against any such allegation. It did not see support for revolution and solidarity in the fight against Franco as in any way contradictory.

In the ILP utopia—or at least the “workers’ democracy” version of it—far from being exterminated or expelled, members of the former “capitalist class” would be rapidly converted into useful members of the socialist commonwealth, helping in one way or another to advance the cause of humanity. As “workers,” they would have the right to take part in the election, mandation, and, if necessary, recall of workplace delegates, who would faithfully pursue the policies laid down by their constituents. Those unable to work would, of course, also be accommodated with similar rights.

As a general rule, the ILP shared many of the beliefs and assumptions of the wider Left. It is often difficult now to understand why they were accepted so uncritically. Marx and Engels gave a brilliant sketch in the Communist Manifesto of the development of societies through different socioeconomic stages in the past and the predicted future. This was often interpreted not as a sequence of ideal types revealing the essence of feudalism, capitalism, and socialism but as something close to an actual historical account. The French Revolution could be trimmed and moulded into an unambiguous bourgeois revolution, while Britain’s Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century could become something close to the beginning not just of modern industrial capitalism but of capitalism tout court. The achievement of socialism would be a similar sudden and once-and-for-all transition. The resulting conclusion was all too often that “come the revolution,” everything would be possible, but without it, nothing could be achieved. Yet if, in some ways, the bar was set very high, in other respects, what was deemed to constitute socialism was much less demanding.

As with others on the Left, socialism for the ILP was in danger of being seen mostly in negative terms—as an absence of capitalism. Public ownership and control of the economy, however nominal, seemed all that was required to meet the basic criteria for a socialist society. That a socialist society was supposed to be infinitely more democratic and egalitarian than anything in the present or past, that the mission of socialism was to enhance as far as humanly possible the well-being and happiness of humankind was not lost sight of in the ILP. But it had to struggle with the notion that—essentially—socialism equalled public ownership. This was so even though the party always rejected “state socialism” and supported “industrial democracy.”

The shortcomings of the ILP during the interwar period are easy to detect. Murry had some justification for criticizing the tendency to grant iconic status
to leaders later found wanting, such as MacDonald and Allen. The easy acceptance of Maxton’s seeming inability to play a representative role showed that this had hardly become a thing of the past. Yet it is reasonable to ask whether the ILP was any more confused and inadequate than any other part of the British Left.

If we seek signs of a lasting impact of the interwar ILP, we should look at the postwar Labour Party rather than at the disaffiliated ILP of later years. So many of the ILPers who have appeared in these pages contributing to the debates and controversies of the period went on to play roles in the Labour Party—as Labour MPs in some cases, such as Paton, Brockway, and Bob Edwards. As David Howell points out, whether they stayed with the ILP, like Brockway and Jennie Lee, or sided with the Labour Party at the time of disaffiliation, like Emrys Hughes, “all the ex-ILPers were insistent that the breach should not be repeated.” One of the main advocates of disaffiliation in 1932, Fenner Brockway, would rejoin the Labour Party after the war and become active in the Tribune Group on the Labour Left, a prominent proponent of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament as well as the chair of the Movement for Colonial Freedom and a founder of War on Want. He would take part in many other campaigns, including those mentioned in the introduction. He would die, still active on the Left and as a Labour peer, just a few months short of his century, in 1988.

Another firm supporter of disaffiliation had been Jennie Lee. She returned to the Labour Party and was elected again as an MP in 1945. She became the first Minister for the Arts in Harold Wilson’s government from 1964 to 1970. In this role, she played a crucial part in what Wilson would later claim as the greatest achievement of his government—the creation of the Open University. Losing her parliamentary seat in 1970, she became, like Brockway, a Labour member of the House of Lords.

For Labour, the inheritance from the ILP—and the ex-ILP—was a mixed one. It contributed to the radical and democratic aspects of the Labour Left. At the same time, it is not hard to see the factionalism that characterized the ILP’s participation in the larger party in the later 1920s, reproduced in later episodes. To be fair, the art of pursuing critical questioning and radical proposals while avoiding degenerating into unity-undermining sectional activism is a particularly difficult one that is rarely adequately practised. The post-1945 history of the Labour Party illustrates this abundantly. This should not obscure the ILP’s positive role.

Apart from this general, but not to be underestimated, contribution to the preservation of democratic socialism or radical social democracy, some significant questions need to be asked about the ILP’s legacy. Do any of the ideas
debated and adopted by the ILP in the 1920s and 1930s still have any relevance for those who aspire to revive Labour in Britain, or to social democracy or democratic socialism more generally, after the neoliberal decades? Some of the values of the ILP are timeless but need to be constantly reasserted—notably, its internationalism, anti-imperialism, and antimilitarism. The egalitarian aims of the ILP, as well as its suspicion of all warlike activities, seem more urgent than ever at a time when, both at a global level and within so many countries, the gap between rich and poor seems ever widening and the first decades of the century have demonstrated the all-too-often negative consequences of even well-intended military intervention. All of these were certainly values cherished by the ILP, but they were also widely shared by much of the rest of the political Left and sometimes far beyond.

There are at least three more candidates for contemporary relevance that are more particular to the ILP. They are Jowett’s campaign for “real” representative government; the guild socialist, or at least guild socialist–influenced, constitution of 1922; and the Living Wage policy adopted four years later. The relevance in each case lies more in the general thrust and underlying aims of these policies than in their specifics. It is not necessary to revive Jowett’s particular formula to pursue his aim of making elected representatives accountable to their constituents and the executive accountable to the people’s representatives. At a time when the public regard for politics and politicians, never that high, is at a very low point, this goal is surely more relevant than ever.

The twenty-first century may be unlikely to see a revival of the elaborate blueprints of guild socialism. Yet achieving at least a degree of representation for employees in both the public and private sectors and creating effective forms of social management that go at least some way to reconcile the interests of producers, users, consumers, and the community at large are still relevant aspirations for any social democratic party.

The same is true of the ILP’s living wage policy, the continuing relevance of which has been evident in the new Living Wage campaign in Britain. Even more generally relevant is the principle that Brailsford, Creech Jones, Hobson, and Wise advocated: the need to make “a simple and concrete appeal to the average worker” and to take goals that are widely supported as a starting point for policies to advance equality and social justice. That the general thrust, if not the specific details, of these three ILP policies remains current the better part of a century later suggests that the party should not be relegated to the status of a “centrist” body floating uncomfortably during the 1920s between the remainder of the Labour Party and the British Communists.

The merit of the post-disaffiliation ILP lies in the fact that it tested the notion of a “revolutionary policy” to destruction. Whether or not gradualism
was inevitable, it became clear that there would be no serious support for a Lenin-style revolutionary party in Britain—even one detached from the edicts and the embrace of Moscow—at any time that could be foreseen. The democratic and ethical values of the ILP were under siege in the 1920s and 1930s not so much from outside forces as from the conflicting ideas in the heads of its members. That, despite contentious debates within the party ranks, these values were for the most part upheld may not be the most impressive of the ILP’s achievements, but their survival surely counts as at least a modest success.