Chapter Eleven
From MacDonald to Gaitskell

He who fights and runs away
Lives to fight another day. (Nursery Rhyme)

It looks as if Mr. Gaitskell has had second thoughts. Clause 4 is not to be omitted from the Constitution; it is merely to be added to. But only those who are taken in by Mr. Gaitskell’s tactical changes of emphasis will rejoice. For what Mr. Gaitskell has been doing ever since Mr. Jay’s famous article is seeing how far he can go and in what direction.

There are various ways in which socialism can be evicted from the Labour Party, and if Clause 4 is not omitted it can always be reinterpreted. The interpretation which is contained in Mr. Gaitskell’s proposals to the National Executive Committee, and which in the main has been accepted, is essentially a rewriting of Clause 4 and a restriction of public ownership to little more than its present extent.

Thus, Mr. Gaitskell’s change is not a retreat. But he has managed to give the appearance of one who

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2 Prior to 29 April 1995, Clause 4 of the Labour Party Constitution stated that one of the ‘Party Objects’ was: ‘To secure for the producers by hand and brain the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.’
3 Jay 1959. The article in question occupied the front and back pages of the paper under the headline: ‘Are We Downhearted? Yes! But We’ll Win Back’.
has retreated. This could assist him in two ways. It is liable to disarm the Left and delude them into thinking that they have won a victory when they have in fact been defeated. And it could help to build up an image of Mr. Gaitskell as a reasonable man who is willing to compromise, unlike those rabid fellows on the Left.

The origin of Clause 4

Why is it so easy for Clause 4 to be reinterpreted? Because ever since it was included in the Labour Party constitution, it has been continually understood in different ways. The phrase ‘common ownership’ has been assigned no unambiguous meaning and the phrases ‘the most equitable...that may be possible’ and ‘the best obtainable’ leave everything open. This is no accident. The clause was included in the constitution in 1918 (and amended in 1929). The original draft was by Sidney Webb and Arthur Henderson and, then as now, the aim was to produce a formula wide enough to embrace radically different tendencies. The Labour Party had been formally constituted in 1906; but it was only in 1918 that it adopted what is substantially its present constitution. In 1918 three main steps were taken.

First, the foundation of constituency Labour Parties, with individual members, began the effective destruction of the power of the ILP inside the Labour Party. Till then one could only join the Labour Party by joining an affiliated organisation, and the ILP provided the only counterweight to the power of the trade unions. Since the ILP provided the essential political organisation within the Party, its views and members had to be respected. When the Labour Party built its own political organisation in the form of the constituency parties, this was no longer necessary.

Secondly, the trade-union representation at both local and national levels was weighted so as to secure trade-union control of the NEC.

Thirdly, the Labour leadership, divided into pacifist and pro-war factions during the War, reunited. It was not until 1922 that James Ramsay MacDonald was re-elected to Parliament and became leader of the Party again. But MacDonald’s position in the Party was assured from 1918 onwards. Because of the Tory attacks on him he won the partial support of the ‘Left’; for his policies he had the support of the Right.