



JOHN NICHOLSON

How do we get unity on the left?

In Permanent Revolution 9 Mark Hoskisson called for a radical reappraisal of where the left is and where it is going. John Nicholson, Convenor of the Convention of the Left Organising Committee, here puts forward his own views.

Dear Comrades

Blair's New Labour is allegedly finished. Brown's Neo (?) Labour is hurtling towards a precipice. The longest soundbite in history is nearly over. But their bloody legacy, of warmongering, privatisation and environmental destruction continues vampire-like to offer succour to the undead – and the Tories will give us more of the same if elected next time.

The danger is that this creates a vacuum, one that the far right rushes into, assisted in their legitimisation by both main parties. That's why the challenge needs to come from the left, the only ones who can offer the ideological basis for an alternative. We have to make, and win, the arguments that peace is better than war, that public is better than private, that sharing, co-operating and recycling are better than shopping, conspicuous consumption and debt. It is capitalism that is to blame not its scapegoats – the migrants, refugees, the fat, the young and the poor.

But the left is weak. We may never have been so fractured as we are today. It will take time and hard work – patience and honesty on all sides – to heal the recent rifts. That does not mean we should not try. Achieving socialism will not come without the maximum unity of socialists.

So, for example, future organisation of the left should be by consensus. We need to develop pluralist, inclusive, tolerant and democratic ways of working. We cannot just put a flag in the sand

and say "join us, we're the party": that has been tried and failed. But we should be willing to think long-term. If we can work together in practical ways, making demands and campaigning in unity, we could all come together in a few years time, perhaps under the umbrella of the left.

To do so, we cannot let elections get in the way. The bourgeois parliamentary electoral system is not of our choosing, but that means we must find ways to avoid it causing us conflict. Inevitably the two main parties will be electioneering from now on, on the single campaign slogan of "vote for us because we're not them", and there will be pressure for all of us to conform to voting Labour just because they are not the Tories.

But we could try to come to electoral pacts, or at least non-aggression agreements, in order to maximise support for the left. And

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we should fight the fascists anyway, by campaigning in the communities where they seek to gain a foothold, not necessarily by standing in every seat or saying "vote Labour because they are not the fascists". Our challenge is essentially to Labour for paving the way for the right; our tactic should be principle not populism.

Most of all we should be seeking agreement to common demands, actions and campaigns. The Communist Party of Britain has put together its Left Wing

Programme, the Labour Representation Committee has launched its recent 10 point petition, the SWP and ISG have raised Charters. There is much in common in all these. We should work together in practical ways to debate and agree these demands and take them out in campaigns in the communities – regardless of which organisations we all belong to.

Convention of the Left

Most immediately, the Convention of the Left aims to assist the latter. The Convention is both a protest at Labour's Conference in Manchester this September and a chance to develop a positive alternative. The initial Protest against the Cost of the War will be followed by four days of debate and discussion – based loosely on Politics, Planet, Public Services and Peace.

The Convention will be both a protest at Labour's war and privatisation, racism and pollution, authoritarianism and inequality, and a practical demonstration that there is an alternative. The Convention will be about an entirely different world, one that

can be built by working people, for working people. The Convention will be united in our determination to combine our strengths and develop through open and participatory debates the rebuilding of the left today.

Of course there will be doubts. "It's been done before", "it's the same old people (emphasis old!) who are not going anywhere", "it's a sinking ship". For an idea that's only just been floated, this particular metaphor perhaps doesn't hold water. People are not deserting this

ship. More and more are signing up (including those who haven't been involved in left politics before and don't define themselves as such). Just maybe this enterprise will boldly go where others have not succeeded.

After all, supporters include Tony Benn, John McDonnell, Jeremy Corbyn, Mark Serwotka, Jeremy Dear, Matt Wrack, Rahila Gupta, Tariq Ali, John Lister, Jonathan Neale, Kate Hudson, Andrew Murray, Hilary Wainwright, Colin Fox, Pam Currie, Bill Greenshields, George Galloway, Abjol Miah, Ken Loach, Lindsey German and Derek Wall. Sponsoring organisations include the Labour Representation Committee, the Left Women's

Network and Left Economics Advisory Panel; Scottish Socialist Party; Communist Party of Britain; Green Left; Red Pepper; Permanent Revolution; Respect; Socialist Workers Party; Greater Manchester Association of Trades Union Councils, Manchester Trades Council, Liverpool Trades Council, Morning Star, Education for Tomorrow, A World to Win and many others.

Where do we go?

We are not saying that this means the construction of another political party. But we do think we should find ways in which the left as a whole can co-ordinate action both nationally and locally

wherever we can. We are not aiming to displace existing united campaigns, but to strengthen these and to encourage working together across the widest range of organisations and individuals.

We want to encourage the development of local left forums, where appropriate, and to support those already in existence, in order to promote discussion and co-ordinate united action across the left, in an inclusive, participatory, pluralist, tolerant and democratic way.

CONVENTION OF THE LEFT

Convention opening statement

WE EXPLICITLY challenge Labour's programme of warmongering, neo-liberal privatisation and failure to tackle environmental destruction.

We believe that there is an alternative. The wealth exists in the world to abolish famine and poverty and to pay for our essential needs; the debt-fuelled culture of conspicuous consumption does not produce a fairer or happier society – and is anyway unsustainable; and peaceful collective public enterprise is preferable to the private profit-making of the unregulated market and its escalating competition for scarce resources.

The problem is capitalism, which produces only for profit not need, which destroys the environment and carries out endless warfare in pursuit of market domination.

But we also believe that we must win these arguments. The left is weak and has been repeatedly forced on the defensive. We must find ways to develop and promote alternative positive policies and demands – of peace, social and

environmental justice, public ownership, workers' rights, civil liberties and equality.

We must join together with all those seeking a better society, as an anti-capitalist left fighting for an alternative socialist society.

Question time for the left

The Convention of the Left therefore aims to debate alternative strategies that are critical of capitalism – environmentally and socially just, inclusive and peaceful, pluralist, tolerant – in pursuit of a greater common objective that benefits the many and not the few. We aim to ask ourselves the essential questions – the whole Convention is a kind of "Question Time for the left" – and we hope to arrive at some of the answers.

We also aim to encourage participation from below, not top-down platforms. We want to start defining new ways of working – so that we can join together in making policies, putting forward demands and campaigning in practice – regardless of the

organisations (or none) that we may belong to or support.

Participation in debate – unity in action

We are not saying that this means the construction of another political party. But we do resolve to find ways that the left as a whole can co-ordinate action both nationally and locally wherever we can. We are not aiming to displace existing united campaigns, but to strengthen these and to encourage working together across the widest range of organisations and individuals.

We therefore resolve to encourage the development of local left forums, where appropriate, and to support those already in existence, in order to promote discussion and co-ordinate united action across the left, in an inclusive, participatory, pluralist, tolerant and democratic way.

We also resolve to hold a "Recall Event" on Saturday 29 November at which we will seek agreement to ideas and demands emerging from the Convention.