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Keith Laybourn 23/2/2012. This was finalised in October 2010.

The Independent Labour Party and the second Labour Government c. 1929-1931:

the move towards revolutionary change

Keith Laybourn

It is generally accepted that the Independent Labour Party disaffiliated from the Labour Party in July 1932 because of its reluctance to accept the 1929 revised Standing Orders of the Labour Party which forbade all Labour MPs from voting against the Government and committed them to voting as directed by the Labour whips, except on grounds of conscience.¹ It is argued that the attempt to enforce the 1929 Standing Orders in 1932 led to the disaffiliation of the ILP from the Labour Party. However, what is less agreed is what led to this state of play. Indeed, why was there so much feeling over the new Standing Orders that disaffiliation could be considered the only course of action by the majority of ILP delegates who attended the Special Meeting at Bradford in July 1932? Why were the new Standing Orders the reason, or pretext for, disaffiliation? In answer to these questions, R. E. Dowse, in his book *Left in the Centre* suggests that there was a clash of personalities and policies within the context of the revolutionary fervour of ILP leaders such as Fenner Brockway and James Maxton and that this led to disaffiliation.² It is a view endorsed by Alan McKinlay and James. J. Smyth who suggest that the tensions were beginning at the time of the

¹ Gidon Cohen, *The Failure of a Dream: The Independent Labour Party from Disaffiliation to World War II* (London, I.B. Tauris, 2007), pp. 11-12, 18-28; Gidon Cohen, 'The Independent Labour Party, Disaffiliation, Revolution and Standing Orders', *History*, vol. 86, 282 (April, 2001); F. Brockway, *Socialism Over Sixty Years: The life of Jowett of Bradford* (London, Allen & Unwin, 1946); Keith Laybourn, "'Suicide During a Fit of Insanity' or the Defence of Socialism? The secession of the Independent Labour Party at the special conference at Bradford, July 1931", *Bradford Antiquary* 3 (1991), pp. 41-53.

² R. E. Dowse, *Left in the Centre: The Independent Labour Party 1893- -1940* (London, Longman, 1966), pp.181-2.

1926 General Strike and the 'Socialism in Our Time' campaign which attempted to raise the pace of change to socialism, but which also succeeded in dividing regional bodies such as the Scottish ILP.³ R. K. Middlemass, in his book *The Clydesiders*, concluded that disaffiliation was a 'suicide during a fit of insanity'.⁴ More recently, Gidon Cohen has suggested that there was reasoned debate in the move towards disaffiliation.⁵ All three interpretations raise questions about the nature of the decision to disaffiliate. The first implies long-term decisions, the second a more immediate decision following the collapse of the second Labour government, whilst the third suggests that it was a hard fought and reasoned debate led to disaffiliation. Ironically, none of these are exclusive of each other, although they clearly vary in emphasis. The fact is that there had been tensions between the ILP and the Labour Party before the formation of the second Labour government, during the administration of the second Labour government, and afterwards. The second Labour government merely heightened the potential for conflict and division. But, as David Howell has reflected, there may be no clearly defined explanation based upon the Labour Party's gradualism and the battle over Standing Orders, for neither issue would have gained a majority for disaffiliation. Indeed, as Howell writes, 'The trajectory of the ILP in the decade after 1922 cannot be captured adequately in the narrative of socialist disenchantment with the compromises of gradualism.'⁶ Nevertheless, nuanced or not, the narrative of the second Labour government provided the context and the final reason for disaffiliation.

The ILP famously voted to leave the Labour Party at a Special Conference of the ILP held at Jowett Hall, Bradford in July and August 1932, almost a year after the end of the second Labour government. The fact that there was an intervening period of a year between the end of the Labour Government and disaffiliation has meant that considerable emphasis has been placed upon the

³ A. McKinlay and James J. Smyth, 'The end of the "agitator workman": 1926-1932', in A. McKinlay and R. J. Morris, *The ILP on Clydeside 1893-1932: from foundation to disintegration* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1991), pp. 177, 200.

⁴ R. K. Middlemass, *The Clydesiders: A Left Wing Struggle for Parliamentary Power* (London, Hutchinson, 1965), pp. 259-71.

⁵ Cohen, *The Failure of a Dream*, pp. 14-28.

⁶ David Howell, *MacDonald's Party: Labour Identities and Crisis 1922-1931* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 308.

events of that year, most markedly the famous negotiations over Standing Orders between the ILP and the Labour Party in May and June 1932.⁷ Labour's general election defeat of October 1931, when Labour's parliamentary representation fell from 291 (in 1929) and 287 (in 1931) to 52, had certainly pressured the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) to tighten ranks and to seek the full application of the new Standing Orders of 1929. Yet one should not forget that throughout the term of the second Labour government the reformed ILP group under Jimmy Maxton had simply ignored the new Standing Orders, as did a total of 126 Labour MPs throughout the lifetime of the second Labour administration.⁸ Indeed, the fight over the revised Standing Orders was as fervently played out in more than two years of a second Labour government as it was in the year after its fall. Indeed, the ILP MPs became intense critics of the 'gradualist' Labour government and Labour Party and some of them began to advocate a 'new revolutionary policy' *en route* to disaffiliation. The period of the second Labour government was thus crucial in, and central to, the process of political change within the ILP. It ensured that the disaffiliationists, probably a minority at the time of the second Labour government, were able to secure the majority of support they needed for their policy of disaffiliation and revolutionary change.

This tension between the ILP, on the one hand, and the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and second Labour government, on the other, was hardly unexpected given the protean nature of the Labour Party. The fact is that the ILP had always exercised its political independence of the PLP. Indeed, Fenner Brockway, sometime Chairman of the ILP and long-time editor of its paper the *New Leader*, summarized this long-standing policy and practice in the *New Leader*, 10 July 1931, stressing that the ILP MPs had always accepted the policies of the Labour Party Conference except

⁷ *New Leader*, 5 August 1931 indicates that the PLP considered the revised Standing Orders on 24 May 1932 but that the Labour Party National Executive Committee decided not to revise them on 26 May. On 1 June 1932 the PLP decided not to revise them but on 5 June 1932 the ILP offered to meet the Labour Party on the issue of revision of Standing Orders. On 23 June the Labour Party Executive informed the ILP that there would be no revision of Standing Order. On 8 July the NAC of the ILP announced its intention to submit a resolution in favour of disaffiliation at a Special Conference at Bradford at the end of July 1932.

⁸ Brockway, *Socialism Over Sixty Years*, p. 300, indicates that 126 out of the 287 MPs (291 according to most indications) voted against the second Labour Government during its existence. The *New Leader*, 12 June 1931 suggest that the figure is 126 out of 280 in an article on 'Relation between the Independent Labour Party and the Labour Party'.

on the issue of armaments: 'The Labour Party believing in decision by international agreement, the ILP by national example.'⁹ In June 1932 he added that the ILP had always honoured its 'conditions of affiliation' to the Labour Party but at the same time had 'maintained its right to advocate Socialist policies beyond the Labour programme. That right has never been and should not be challenged.'¹⁰

In order to defend that position the ILP had in fact taken a decision at its 1930 Easter Conference (held at Birmingham) to reconstruct its Parliamentary group on a resolution on 'basis of acceptance of the policy of the ILP' as agreed at its annual conferences and the NAC.¹¹ It was carried by a vote of 7 to 1, after a vigorous debate in which the minority expressed the view that such an action would fragment socialism and halt the socialist advance.¹² This effectively meant that the ILP was intending to act as a party within a party but discussions took place and appeared to resolve the differences between the ILP and the Labour Party on 25 July 1930. However, on 30 July 1930 the ILP, without warning the Labour Party, re-issued its request for ILP MPs to pledge themselves to the policies of the ILP. This led to a spate of meetings and correspondence between the ILP and the Labour Party in July and August 1930. The discussions went into November and December, when the ILP attempted to force ILP - sponsored MPs to commit themselves to a pledge of loyalty to the ILP.¹³ Alongside this was the demand of the NEC of the Labour Party and the PLP that the revised Standing Orders of 1929 should be accepted, the failure of which leading to Tom Irwin's parliamentary campaign in East Renfrew in November 1930 being supported only by the ILP. The fact is that these types of conflicts between the ILP's demand for the loyalty of its members and the Labour Party/PLP demand for the loyalty of the ILP MPs, rumbled on throughout

⁹ *New Leader*, 10 July 1931, article on 'The Crisis before the ILP' by A. F. Brockway.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 12 June 1931. Elements of this also appear on 1 April 1932 in the *New Leader* report on A. Fenner Brockway's address 'On the Coming Revolution' to the ILP Easter Conference.

¹¹ The Labour Party, *Report of the 32nd Annual Conference. 1932* (London, Labour Party, 1932), Appendix VIII, p. 293. The resolution was put forward by Hilda Jennings, an ILP delegate from London.

¹² Howell, *MacDonald's Party*, pp. 292-3, indicates that the main opposition came from Patrick Dollan, the leading figure in the Glasgow ILP and strong rival to Jimmy Maxton, and Tom Stamford.

¹³ Labour Party, *Report, 1931*, pp. 295-6.

the entire period of the second Labour government. The debate over Standing Orders might have heated up in the summer months of 1932 but it was an ever-present issue in 1930 and 1931.

Crucial to the decision of the ILP not to compromise on their assumed rights of independence of action was the political record of the second Labour government which offered proof positive of the failure of socialist 'gradualism' to some sections of the ILP and spurred them along the route to more revolutionary policies. As Fenner Brockway stated at the Easter Conference of the ILP in March 1932

If the experience of a Labour Government had filled the minds of only the working class section of the electorate with a positive faith and a positive sense of achievement they would be immune to all the power and scorn of the Capitalist Parties. It was the failure of the Labour Government during these months of office which made the minds of the working class in a negative condition which easily responded to the negative phrases and fears during the three weeks of the election.¹⁴

To some sections of the ILP the second Labour government was a missed opportunity and the introduction of socialism now required a new direction.

I

Despite this frustration with the second Labour government one should not forget that there were tensions developing between the ILP and the Labour Party long before 1929. The ILP, formed as a national socialist party at Bradford in 1893, had seen itself as the intellectual godparent of the Labour Representation Committee and the Labour Party in the early twentieth century. However, it had had to reassess its position in 1918 when the Labour Party committed itself to socialism. Eventually resolving to remain in existence and affiliated to the Labour Party in the early 1920s, it sought to influence the Labour Party through its growing influence on the Clydeside. It exercised some significant parliamentary influence and was largely responsible for the PLP electing James Ramsay MacDonald as Labour Leader in 1922. However, its relations with MacDonald and the first

¹⁴ *New Leader*, 1 April 1932.

Labour government of 1924 went sour, even though John Wheatley, Fred Jowett, and other ILP activists, did gain office in that government. Indeed, there is the infamous remark of MacDonald, at 10 Downing Street, when presented with a resolution from the ILP parliamentary group: ‘Well, Brockway, what commands have you brought me today.’¹⁵

Nevertheless relations between the ILP and the Labour Party had been relatively good up to that point in the 1920s, Clifford Allen, the ILP Chairman, maintaining a close personal friendship with MacDonald. However, once Fred Jowett took over from Allen as Chairman in 1925 and James Maxton replaced him in 1926, relations grew much worse. The ‘Socialism in Our Time’ programme that the ILP mounted in the mid 1920s divided members of the ILP and worsened relations with the Labour Party, whose Leader was willing to point to the contradictions in the programme. Indeed, drawn up by Clifford Allen, and friends, and advocating gradual ameliorative policies such as the living wage, the campaign stressed the need to redistribute the income to the mass consumers in order to create the home demand that would reduce unemployment. However, once Allen was removed by the Clydesiders the preamble was amended to indicate that the need to bring about the collapse of capitalism when it was evident that the majority of the policy was designed to make capitalism work more efficiently in the interest of the workers.¹⁶ Several months before the new policy was approved by the ILP Conference in April 1926 its advocates stated that ‘They believed that ‘the old order was breaking down’ and that resolute socialist policies would be need to ‘carry us through the period of transition from the old to the new civilisation’.¹⁷

MacDonald and the Labour Party pointed to these contradictions and largely dismissed the campaign much to the annoyance of the Clydeside section of the ILP.¹⁸ MacDonald feared that the living wage policy, with its effective advocacy of a national minimum wage, would be a ‘millstone’ around the neck of the Labour Party and that socialism would arise out of the healthy aspects of

¹⁵ F. Brockway, ? Inside the Left? p. 152; also quoted in D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 409.

¹⁶ *Bradford Pioneer*, 1 January 1926.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

society and not its failing sections.¹⁹ It was condemned further by MacDonald at the Labour Party Conference in 1927 as ‘a programme of flashy futilities’.²⁰ In addition, there was some local disquiet amongst ILP members. The Bradford ILP discussed the ‘living wage policy’ in February 1926 and voted in favour although there was criticism from Councillor Brooke who was ‘anxious lest trade union power should be undermined’ and others who felt that ‘Socialism in Our Time’ would ‘bolster up the capitalist system’.²¹ Some clearly felt that the proposal was ‘fathered by Impatience and mothered in Piety’.²²

This rising conflict between the ILP and the Labour was markedly evident at the Labour Party conference held at Birmingham in 1928, when Labour’s general election manifesto *Labour and the Nation* was debated over three days. MacDonald emphasised the need for gradual change to state action to deal with unemployment, the assumption being that unemployment was a failure of capitalism and that socialism would ultimately deal with it. MacDonald’s critics talked of class conflict and the need for faster moves towards socialism. However, Jimmy Maxton did admit that socialism could no longer be approached by a ‘long, slow process of gradualist, peaceful, Parliamentary change’ and declared that once the programme was implemented socialism would be still as far away as ever, ending with the cry ‘let your slogan be: “ Socialism is the only remedy”’.²³

Tensions were clearly running high even before the second Labour government came to power in June 1929 and even before MacDonald consigned most of the ILP’s 37 (of 291 Labour) MPs to the back benches cramped and confined by with new Standing Orders that aimed to prevent them voting against raising amendments to government legislation or voting against it. The ILP was not about to be muzzled.

II

¹⁹ Quoted in D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1977), pp. 452-6, from *Socialist Review*, March 1926.

²⁰ Quoted in D. Marquand, *Ramsay MacDonald* (London, Jonathon Cape, 1977), p. 454

²¹ *Bradford Pioneer*, 5 February 1926.

²² *Ibid.*, 9 April 1926. The quote is taken from H. N. Brailsford’s speech at the ILP Conference of 1926.

²³ Check

Shortly after the ILP disaffiliated from the Labour Party in July 1932, Brockway wrote an article on 'Why the ILP left the Labour Party'. In it he stressed emphatically that 'We have heard much of loyalty. It was not that the ILP which was guilty of disloyalty. It was the Labour government.'²⁴ He reiterated that the ILP had always maintained its freedom of action in the House of Commons, whilst remaining loyal to the socialist decisions of Labour Party conferences, but explained how it had become disenchanted by 'gradualism' of the Labour Party and the policies of the second Labour government. To him, and many members of the ILP, the Labour government had abandoned its responsibility to introduce socialism. To Brockway it was the 'gradualism' of the Labour Party and the capitalism of the Labour government that had led to the ILP's disaffiliation and he anticipated a new more revolutionary approach to socialism, whilst reminding his readers that it was going to be one developed by the ILP in a British context not one adopted by the Communist Party: 'The rigidity of mind and method of the British Communist Party makes it incapable of appealing to the mass British working class or of adopting policies applicable to the British situation.'²⁵

Brockway had previously listed the failures of the Labour government at the Easter Conference of the ILP in 1932 when, as Chairman, he had discussed 'The Coming Revolution'.²⁶ His argument was that the Labour Government had failed because it did not press forward with socialist policies. He dismissed the view that it could not act because it was a minority government by stressing that, in that case, it should not have taken office. But he argued that even as a minority government it could have pressed ahead with socialist measures and forced the other political parties to reject them and form a coalition government, or that it could have ignored parliamentary defeats and hung on to power as long as it could in an attempt to highlight the need for socialist measures. Instead it flirted with capitalism: 'It meant going from compromise to compromise. It meant that a Government which called itself Labour actually became the instrument of making the

²⁴ *New Leader*, 5 August 1932.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 April 1932.

condition of the working class worse,....'²⁷ Brockway then outlined some of the policies of the Labour government, and particularly the Anomalies Bill, which deprived many unemployed married women of their rights to insurance. In the final analysis, Brockway's explanation of the failure of the second Labour government and disaffiliation was that gradualism would not achieve socialism and that the minority Labour government simply failed to carry out socialist policies. The failure of the second Labour government was to be the platform for a flexible and more revolutionary policy that would be fought out within the ILP throughout the 1930s.

III

The second Labour government quite simply intensified the perpetual conflict of political independence between the ILP and the Labour Party. Reflecting upon the second Labour in January 1932, almost equidistant between the resignation of the second Labour government and disaffiliation, Brockway asserted that apart from the tensions between the ILP and the Labour Party in the 1920s 'There was the further shock which followed the futility of the Labour Government of 1929 to 1931.'²⁸

From the formation of the second Labour government in June 1929 the ILP MPs were opposed to many of its policies. Maxton and most sections of the ILP opposed to the Labour Government's Unemployment Insurance proposals in the autumn of 1929, advocating amendments which it considered to be in line with the more generous approach agreed at Labour Party conferences and the Trades Union Congress.²⁹ The complaints of Fred Jowett, Jimmy Maxton and John Wheatley were that only an extra £12 million per year was being made available for the unemployed and that a higher level of expenditure was required, that they could not agree with the 'not genuinely seeking work' clause which would have denied benefits to some of the unemployed, and that they objected to the clause preventing payments to the newly unemployed for the first six

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *New Leader*, 15 January 1932.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12 June 1931.

days.³⁰ In the end, the Government proposals were amended and ‘dole’, or transitional payments for those without automatic benefits who had made contributions to the Unemployment Fund, was made easier to obtain. However, this opposition to the unemployment policies signalled both the difficulties that were to emerge between the ILP and the second Labour government and the serious tensions within the ILP between its factions within its Parliamentary Group and throughout the country.³¹

The fact is that the actions of Maxton, Jowett and Wheatley led to some criticism of the second Labour government. Patrick Dollan, and a large section of Scottish ILPers, remained loyal to the second Labour government. Indeed, one ILP loyalist reflected that ‘Wheatley will stop at nothing in his frenzy to bring Mac down.’³² Evidently, not all ILP members saw the second Labour government as already being a failure.

Initially there was a willingness amongst some of the ILP rank and file in the regions to accept that this issue was a teething problem faced by a minority government. A Huddersfield ILP wrote that.

Prevented from carrying out a real Socialist programme, through the lack of a Parliamentary majority, the Government has nevertheless made every effort to put some new spirit into capitalist enterprise. A new overseas Trade Development Council has been created and the Trade Mission are to go, or have gone, to South America....³³

This particular passage, indeed, hints at acceptance of MacDonald’s general assumption that socialism would arise out of the success of capitalism. Such optimism was not to last.

Within a few months of this conflict the ILP felt obliged to re-iterate its long-held belief that it had a duty to act as the socialist conscience of Labour. Its long-assumed political and tactical

³⁰ Referred to in the *Bradford Pioneer*, 22 November 1930.

³¹ Howell, *MacDonald’s Party*, pp. 289-91, indicates the extent of the division within the ILP ranks over the action in the House of Commons and the nature of four meetings by the Parliamentary Group of the ILP.

³² *Ibid.*, p.291.

³³ *Huddersfield Citizen*, September 1930.

independence was asserted further by the National Administrative Council's statement to the ILP Conference of Easter 1930:

But the I.L.P. has always been an independent Socialist organisation making its distinctive contribution to Labour Party policy and having its distinctive function within the Party.

Whilst the I.L.P. has worked with loyalty to the Labour Party principles, its liberty of action when fundamental Socialist issues are involved has not been questioned. Throughout the period of the war, and on many occasions before and since, I.L.P. members in Parliament, including several members of the present Government, have felt it necessary to vote according to their convictions, even though the majority of the Party took another view.

The suggestion is now made that all Labour members of Parliament and all Labour candidates should undertake never to vote against the Government. It is unreasonable to ask members of the Party to accept without question all the proposals of the Government when those proposals are not themselves subject to the decisions of the Parliamentary Party, and in many instances do not comply with the programme authorised by the Labour Conference.³⁴

The ILP was prepared to reprimand the recalcitrant child it had helped to produce, as it fledged into the party of government. Indeed, James Maxton, the Chairman at the 1930 ILP Conference, informed his audience that despite the Labour Party declaring itself to be socialist in 1918 the ILP, after a lengthy debate concluded in the early 1920s that 'our work was not nearly finished and that we should apply our minds to bringing Socialism in to the political and social affairs of this nation as an objective of speedy realisation'.³⁵ To Maxton and the ILP the Labour government was far too gradualist and ineffective and believed that a more revolutionary approach

³⁴ J. Maxton, *Where the I.L.P. Stands* (London, ILP, 1930), p.14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

to socialism was required. His speech on this was subsequently published in a pamphlet entitled *Where the ILP stands*.³⁶

As a result, the ILP was frequently opposed to the legislation of the Labour government. As already seen, it was particularly concerned about unemployment and poverty at the end of 1929, seeking to amend the Unemployment Insurance Bill of 1929. It also sought to amend the Coal Mines Bill of 1930, in order to introduce a minimum wage. It made amendments to the attempt to form a Public Loans Board. In October 1930 Fred Jowett, the ILP MP for Bradford East, moved an amendment to the King's Speech explaining that 'Socialism is the official policy of the Labour Party and it was not recognised in the King's Speech.'³⁷ The ILP also opposed local interference in the maintenance allowances in the Education Bill and also sought the extension of rights during the discussion of the legislation on National Health Insurance between December 1930 and January 1931, stressed the need for extended membership on the Committee of Privileges, opposed all army, navy and air force estimates as a matter of principle, and demanded an alternative vote in the Representation of the People's Bill.³⁸ There was also a general criticism of the Labour government's failure to put into place a trial for the Meerut prisoners in India.

At the Labour Party annual conference held at Llandudno in October 1930, famous more for the debate and vote on Mosley's policy than anything else, the MacDonald, by popular acclaim, made a brilliant speech in defending the government's performance on public works for the unemployed. Nevertheless, Maxton, moved what was effectively a vote of censure on the Labour government but it was defeated by 1,800,000 votes to 330,000.³⁹ In the wake of this the ILP Parliamentary Group discussed the Mosley 'memorandum' economic policies for Britain and rejected them, although five ILP MPs did support Mosley's radical policies. But that was merely an interim distraction and more serious conflict was to come.

³⁶ James Maxton, *Where the ILP Stands: Presidential Address of J. Maxton* (London, ILP Publications, 1930), a 15 page pamphlet.

³⁷ Brockway, *Socialism over Sixty Years*, p. 270.

³⁸ *New Leader*, 12 June 1931

³⁹ Labour Party Conference *Report*, 1930 (London, Labour Party, 1931), p. ?

Subsequently, the ILP's disagreement on the policy for the unemployed led to a speech by Brockway in the House of Commons, made at the time of the Conservative Motion of Censure of 1 April 1931, to be published under the title *A Socialist Plan for Unemployment*. The Conservative vote of censure was based upon the failure of Labour's unemployment but the ILP amendment to this outlined a socialist policy for unemployment based upon the Socialism in Our Time programme of establishing a living wage, raising the school-leaving age, reducing the hours of the working week, increasing old-age pensions, unemployment allowances and widows pensions, developing a national housing scheme, and extending credits to Russia in the areas of shipbuilding and engineering. On this occasion the ILP voted against the Conservative motion of because it felt that 'the Conservative Party are more the political enemies of the unemployed than any other section.'⁴⁰ Brockway dismissed the Conservative policies on unemployment as attempts to further worsen the condition of the unemployed by reducing 'dole' and attempts drive the long-term unemployed to despair by separating those unemployed for more than a year from the rest of the unemployed. Brockway attacked their penchant for tariffs, which he saw as equally unsatisfactory as free trade. Reflecting the ILP position, he criticised the failure of the Labour government to tackle unemployment through socialist measures, regretted its acceptance of the need to increase productivity before unemployment could be properly tackled, and reminded the Government that whilst the ILP group would vote against the Conservative censure but 'if the Government are to secure our support, their unemployment policy must be based upon Socialist principles'.⁴¹ Ultimately, that meant to the ILP a minimum standard of living, nationalisation and national planning, and the setting up of import and export boards to control imports and exports.

The second Labour government did not heed the warning from, what was by then, the fragmented ranks of the ILP Parliamentary Group that was divided and losing some ILP MPs to Mosley's New Party. Most famously the ILP rebels opposed the second Labour government's

⁴⁰ A. Fenner Brockway, *A Socialist Plan for Unemployment: Speech by A. Fenner Brockway* (London, ILP, 1931), p. 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Anomalies Bill, debated in Parliament in June and July 1931. When enacted it eventually deprived up to 200,000 insured married women of the right to unemployment benefits simply because they were unemployed but married to employed husbands and working in areas where there was no work and where they were deemed as not 'genuinely seeking work'.⁴² This was blatantly discriminatory for it did not relate to men, married or single, or single women, who had paid their contributions but were seeking work in similar areas where there was no work to be had. The Bill was introduced by Margaret Bondfield, the Minister of Labour, and supported by Dr. Marion Phillips, MP for Sunderland and secretary and Chief Woman Organiser of the Women's Section of the Labour Party.⁴³ Although the second reading was carried overwhelmingly by 231 votes to 19, with about 60 per cent of MPs not voting, it was a mixture of ILP MPs and Conservatives who opposed this measure which was designed to save a mere £5 million for the Treasury.

George Buchanan, Jimmy Maxton and Fenner Brockway headed a small group of about a dozen ILP 'rebel' MPs, including Fred Jowett, Jennie Lee and J. F. Horrabin, who opposed the Bill. Brockway asked 'Why do women who claim their legal rights become spongers?' adding that 'The working woman who is married if she has a legal right to benefit has the right to get it without being blackballed and libelled...'⁴⁴ He also complained of the 'grave abuses that the unemployed suffer'.⁴⁵ As a result they forced an all-night session in which they forced 32 divisions on the Bill. However, it was Duff Cooper, a Conservative MP, who probably did the Government most damage when he accurately reflected that

There had been only two whole-hearted and effective speeches made on behalf of the Bill, the speech of the right hon. Lady who introduced the Bill and the speech of the hon. Lady the Member for Sunderland. It is remarkable, perhaps regrettable, that a Bill that is going to affect so seriously the position of so many married women could find only two sound

⁴² .Labour Party Conference *Report*, 1930 (London, Labour Party, 1931), p. ?

⁴³ Marian Goronwy Phillips, *A Woman of Vision: A Life of Marion Phillips* (Bridge Books, 2000).

⁴⁴ Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons, 254. col. 2129, 8 July 1931.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 254, col. 2189, 8 July 1931.

supporters in the house, and both should be ladies and both should be single.⁴⁶

Indeed, the Anomalies Bill was considered by Brockway to be the overwhelming justification for the ILP's willingness to flout Labour's new Standing Orders.⁴⁷ At the subsequent ILP Easter Conference of 1932, he reflected that this Bill was one of the worst examples of the failure of the second Labour government:

The Labour Government became responsible for this cruel measure as a result of one of the meanest capitalist agitations this country has ever witnessed. It was in literal truth an agitation to rob the pittance of the unemployed in order to safeguard the luxury incomes of rich from increased taxation. The same agitation compelled the representatives of the Labour government to accept the principles of the Means Test on the Parliamentary Committee and to agree the May Committee which resulted in the cut in unemployment benefit rates, the wages of public workers, the social services – which the National Government has since imposed.⁴⁸

Throughout the period of the second Labour government, then, the ILP had been critical of many of Labour's policies. Indeed, even when it supported the Government against a motion of no confidence on 1 April 1931 Fenner Brockway made it clear that the ILP support was because it feared the opposition parties had no better plans than Labour for the unemployed, although Brockway added that he also hoped that the government would introduce an unemployment policy based upon 'Socialist principles' and that that would gain the support of the back-benchers.⁴⁹ The ILP's political support was conditional.

The political defection of Ramsay MacDonald in August 1931, his formation of a National Government, and the calling of a general election in October 1931 brought matters to a head. The Labour Party demanded that all its parliamentary candidates should sign a document accepting the revised Standing Orders of the Labour Party. As a result 19 ILP candidates refused to sign and were

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 254, col. 2210, 8 July 1931.

⁴⁷ *New Leader*, 1 April 1932.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 1 April 1932.

⁴⁹ Fenner Brockway, *A Socialist Plan for Unemployment* (London, ILP, 1931), p. 8.

thus not endorsed by the Labour Party. Three of them were amongst the five ILP MPs who were elected in the 1931 general election – Jimmy Maxton, R. C. Wallhead and John McGovern and were joined by two successful ILP trade unionists, David Kirkwood and George Buchanan, who also declined to accept Standing Orders. These five ILP MPs formed the ILP Group in the new Parliament and were not admitted to the meetings of the PLP. Matters were not helped by the fact that the Labour Party Conference of October 1931 did not accept that the ILP could act as the organised socialist conscience of the Labour Party. Negotiations between the ILP and the Labour Party faltered and the issue of disaffiliation was seriously raised at the ILP's 'Easter Conference of 1932 whereby a narrow majority [188 votes to 144] the delegates rejected disaffiliation and voted in favour [by 250 to 53] of the Scottish amendment for conditional affiliation.

A similar motion at the Easter Conference of 1931 had been defeated by 173 votes to 37. Nevertheless, as a result of the 1932 vote negotiations were re-opened between J. S Middleton, Assistant Secretary of the Labour Party, and John Paton, of the ILP, in the hope that a compromise might be arranged. In the end, this was not to be for, as already indicated, the negotiations of May to June 1932 failed to achieve a compromise.

IV

Even though the vote in favour of disaffiliation was carried in July 1932 one must not assume that the majority members of the ILP were opposed to working with the Labour Party. As already indicated the resolution to disaffiliate from the Labour Party had not been carried. The fact is that many ILP supporters, former ILP and Labour MPs, had voted against the various pieces of legislation put forward by the second Labour government from time to time without wishing to disaffiliate or leave the Labour Party. The various estimates, offered by Brockway, Jowett, and others, suggest that 126 Labour MPs, from all sides of the Party, voted against the legislation put forward by the second Labour government.⁵⁰ Whilst some of those were ILP MPs who became

⁵⁰ Look at footnote 3.

committed to both disaffiliation and the new revolutionary policy others were not William Leach, an ILP MP for Bradford Central and Undersecretary in the Treasury of the first Labour government, was strongly opposed to disaffiliation and campaigned against it fervently in the *Bradford Pioneer*, the ILP and Labour paper. A close friend, and one-time employer, of Fred Jowett, the MP for Bradford East, he wrote numerous articles in the *Pioneer* at that time edited by Frank Betts, the father of Barbara Castle. Leach complained, contentiously, that the ILP was weakening the whole movement as it had the second Labour government, 'by its continuous assertion of Labour untrustworthiness, and yapping at the heels of the present leaders'.⁵¹ In July 1932 he suggested that there were disappointed vanities at work within some sections of the ILP and 'that MacDonald and Co. have gone East, the disaffiliationists would go West. All the fruits of ill will, antagonism and open war are bound to follow in both cases.'⁵²

At the 1932 Bradford Special Conference itself E. F. Wise, one of the intellectuals in the Party who had been attracted into it by Clifford Allen, opposed disaffiliation stating that whilst 'he made no attempt to defend the actions of the last Labour Government, nor did he reject a simple vote against them. But he saw nothing in Standing Orders to prevent members saying what they pleased inside and outside the Parliamentary Labour Party.'⁵³

Others agreed with this sentiment, and many members were to leave the ILP between 1932 and unable and unwilling to leave Labour or to accept the new revolutionary policy. Before the decision was taken John Arnott called for the Labour Party to prevent the ILP's defection.⁵⁴ The *Leeds Citizen* concurred and stressed that 'If the ILP is dissatisfied with the Labour Party it will not improve it by committing suicide in a passion of indignation.'⁵⁵ In the wake of disaffiliation only one of the 32 members of the Labour Group on Bradford Council left the Labour Party, the Bramley ILP agreed to remain with the Labour Party, and on 24 September 1932 a Yorkshire Conference of

⁵¹ Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left* (1943), p. 238.

⁵² *Bradford Pioneer*, 8 July 1932.

⁵³ *New Leader*, 5 August 1932.

⁵⁴ *Leeds Citizen*, 11 December 1931.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 29 January and 1 April 1932.

Affiliated ILPers was held.⁵⁶ Patrick Dollan, in control of a substantial proportion of the Glasgow ILP, formed the Scottish Socialist Party which claimed 107 ILP branches and about 50 per cent of the Glasgow ILP membership, in an attempt to remain loyal to the Labour Party.⁵⁷ Others agreed with the sentiments and many others were to leave in 1934 and 1935, unable to accept the new revolutionary policy of the ILP or convinced of the need to develop Marxist policies. A rather sad editorial in the *Bradford Pioneer*, presumably written by Frank Betts, concurred with the fears of those who felt that the ILP would now go into political oblivion.

The Independent Labour Party now joins the numerous small groups engaged in useless and obscure warfare against the organised Labour army. Along with the Communist Party, the Socialist Party of Great Britain and other eccentric groups quite unknown to the general public, the total sterility of a once great and influential party seems assured.⁵⁸

In the end the ILP determined on disaffiliation, a course of action which a substantial part of its membership could not accept. It was only the furore caused by the second Labour government, and the constant pressure by Maxton, Brockway and the other leading figures, that seems to have given Brockway, Maxton, and others of a disaffiliationist mind the support they sought.

V

The Independent Labour Party was clearly at odds with the Labour Party throughout the 1920s and early 1930s. Yet once it had determined to continue as an independent socialist party affiliated to the Labour Party it had re-emphasised its continued commitment the introduction of socialism. It felt free to express its concern at the failure of the 1924 minority Labour government to press forward with socialist measures. Anxious to speed up the process of introducing socialism it developed the 'Socialism in Our Time' campaign in the mid 1920s, which brought it into conflict

⁵⁶ *Bradford Pioneer*, 5, 12 August, 9 and 30 September 1932; *Leeds Citizen*, 19 August 1932; City of Leeds Labour Party, Minutes, 13 October 1932.

⁵⁷ *Forward*, 27 August, 3 September 1932, quoted in 'McKinlay and Smyth,' *The end of the 'agitator workmen'*, p. 198.

⁵⁸ *Bradford Pioneer*, 5 August 1932.

with Ramsay MacDonald and the Labour Party. The final straw was the second Labour government which Brockway described as a 'futile failure'. Despite attempts to muzzle internal opposition through the revised Standing Orders of the PLP, the ILP MPs regularly voted against the second Labour government, particularly on the issue of unemployment. Its failure to deliver socialism, indeed its commitment to operating capitalism, convinced the ILP that it should pursue revolutionary rather than gradualist policies in establishing socialism. In the end that meant that the ILP some members of the ILP felt that would have to disaffiliate from the Labour Party. The problems with the second Labour government made the ILP's disaffiliation inevitable given the Labour Party's insistence upon imposing the new Standing Orders to prevent ILP MPs from voting according to their own wishes. The record of the second Labour government almost ensured that the ILP would flee the Labour Party nest. The timescale of the ILP's disaffiliation arises largely from what is perceived to be the failure and futility of the second Labour government.

VI

In any epilogue it is clear that the ILP abandoned its gradualist policy of 'Socialism in Our Time; when at its 1933 conference held at Derby it accepted a 'new revolutionary policy'. This was based upon a type of syndicalist workers' council programme, although it meant different things to different sections of the ILP. In it the ILP, advocated the creation of a United Revolutionary Party with the Communists and favoured approaching the Comintern, the international organisation of communism, for membership. The Revolutionary Policy Committee of the ILP, powerful in London and led by Dr. Cullen, pushed for a close association with the communists. However, it was opposed by the Unity Group, strong in London, East Anglia and Lancashire, that attempted to overturn the 'new revolutionary policy' and emphasise the parliamentary and ethical aspects of socialism but, failing to do so in 1934, separated from the ILP and formed the Independent Socialist Party, taking much of the ILP membership with it. Other Trotskyist elements formed the 'Marxist Group and also opposed the 'new revolutionary policy'. Finally, a fragmented and weakened ILP rejected any affiliation to the Comintern conference at its York conference in

1934.

After that the ILP's 'new revolutionary policy' grew less relevant as the party splintered further and declined rapidly. What is important to realise here, however, is that the second Labour government convinced some powerful sections of the ILP that there was a need for a change in policy and the end of gradualism. In this context the need to disaffiliate from the Labour Party seemed logical and necessary although the alternative policy never seemed well defined or universally understood by all the various sections of the ILP. In the end many of the leading figures who been involved in the ILP's disaffiliation later expressed that disaffiliation was a mistake.⁵⁹ But it was a mistake engineered and galvanised partly, possibly substantially by the failures of the second Labour government.

⁵⁹ Fenner Brockway, *Towards Tomorrow: The autobiography of Fenner Brockway* (London, Hart-Davis MacGibbon, 1977), p. 107; Jennie Lee, *My Life with Nye* (London, Jonathan Cape, 1980), 175-184.