The Fate of Mr Bevan

DEVELOPMENTS on the British Labour front are still unfolding themselves and it is likely that by the time this despatch appears in print, some of them would have taken final shape. That an explosion has taken place within the Labour Party, however, is clear. When Mr Attlee presents the frightful choice, as he is reported to have done,—" It's Bevan" or me ", it does bring to a head the four-year-old dispute in Labour's policy and leadership. To remove for all time the central cause of disunity in the Labour movement would be a drastic surgical operation. That such an operation may kill the Movement is also a possibility, though, of course, it is quite another matter.

To say that the Bevan poser whether the opposition would support thermo-nuclear retaliation in the event of an act of aggression in which only conventional anus were employed, caused the explosion is to simplify the circumstances of the current rupture in the Labour Party. It is unfortunate, as it was confusing to Mr Bevan's supporters, that the issue in the last round of the Commons' defence debate was made to depend on this very poser. Equally unfortunate is the impression given in the popular press that the rupture is the result of "a clash of personalities" in the struggle for the "eventual leadership of the Labour Party." From a very narrow viewpoint, this may be true. But what appears equally true is the fundamental difference between the two groups in the Party on broad questions of policy. In an historical context this group relationship and its corresponding policy differences are nothing less than a reflection of an inner-party struggle for a Right or a Left policy.

The Bevanites are by no means a cohesive group. Their members appear to have been drawn together more by political instinct than by a clear unity of views. In the current rupture, the Bevanites find themselves all over the place: Messrs Grossman and Wigg supporting the Atlantic Alliance; Messrs Freeman and Acland plumping for independence and neutrality and Mr Bevan himself, in the final phase, standing up against thermo-nuclear warfare but only in a conventional arms war. It is this confusion in the Bevanite ranks that the Shadow Cabinet's resolution hopes to exploit.

Despite differences, however, the Bevanites do possess an underlying Left policy and it is well to work out what the Left position really amounts to in terms of foreign policy—a field where the group differences take their most extreme form. A re-reading of Mr Bevan's speech in the Commons shows that there is a thesis, which all the other Bevanites repeated in one form or another. At tire risk of over-simplification, this thesis could be summarised as follows: The decision to manufacture and possess the H-Bomb is put forward by the Government and the Official Opposition as an instrument of policy—the policy being deterrence. But, says Mr Bevan, the reality of the situation is that the instrument is the policy itself. " Instrument " and policy " are indistinguishable and to speak of "deterrence " and " positions of strength " is plain political humbug. In other words, the H-Bomb is a matter of foreign policy and not of defence and if that is the case, it must be clear that there can be no basis for negotiations with the Soviet Union. Such a foreign policy is opposed by most of the Bevanites.

This position of the Bevanites, aid in particular of Mr Bevan himself, is claimed to be valid on two grounds. In the first place, Britain has become absolutely committed to waging war with nuclear weapons, if war has to be waged at all, in view of her membership in the Atlantic Alliance. This makes British foreign policy less independent and thus less flexible for the pursuit of negotiations, compromise and a settlement with the Soviet Union. Sir Winston Churchill had already intimated the extent to which his plans for high-level talks had been vetoed by the Americans. Secondly, say the Bevanites, the policy of "negotiation through strength " has proved to be worthless because the instrument " has come to govern " policy." Sir Winston had intimated that America and its allies were stronger than Russia and yet it remains a fact that negotiations have not been carried out.

What, then, is the Beamtie alternative? There can be perceived a common denominator in the varying viewpoints of its members. In an article in the New Statesman John Freeman has put the position as follows:

" Mr Bevan says in effect: 'Negotiate with the Russians now, while there is still time '. Crossman and Wigg say: 'One supreme effort now, to find a basis for peaceful co-existence '. Here surely is near agreement ".

It is "negotiation now " that all the Bevanites want.

What of the Labour Party? It is now clear that the Attlee leadership had hoped for a quick withdrawal of the parliamentary whip on Mr Bevan and thus create a fait accompli before the rank and file woke up to the situation. Mr Bevan's indisposition—due to an attack of influenza—had averted this and already some constituency Labour Parties have made representations against the intended expulsion. But, from the reported determination of the Attlee leadership to carry out the expulsion, it is clear that only the wholesale rejection of this course and thus of the leadership by the Labour MP's will save the situation.

All the circumstances suggest that the intentions of Labour leadership are thwarted by bad tactical calculations. The General Election is not far off and the process of expulsion from the Parliamentary Party to the National Conference would subject the Party to unremitting turmoil for some six months or so. More than that, those who think that expelling Mr Bevan would restore the Party's health reveal " an astonishing ignorance of the rank and file ". It appears more likely than not that the crowds will continue to back Mr Bevan against German rearmament and nuclear strategy, whether he is thrown out into the wilderness or not. If Mr Bevan is expelled, will the other Bevanites follow him as Sir Richard Acland has done before being asked? This must remain largely uncertain until the Parliamentary Party meets next week, but, maybe here too Mr Attlee has misjudged the situation. Mr Bevan's claim to be valid on two grounds. In the first place, Britain has become absolutely committed to waging war with nuclear weapons, if war has to be waged at all, in view of her membership in the Atlantic Alliance. This makes British foreign policy less independent and thus less flexible for the pursuit of negotiations, compromise and a settlement with the Soviet Union. Sir Winston Churchill had already intimated the extent to which his plans for high-level talks had been vetoed by the Americans. Secondly, say the Bevanites, the policy of "negotiation through strength" has proved to be worthless because the instrument "has come to govern "policy." Sir Winston had intimated that America and its allies were stronger than Russia and yet it remains a fact that negotiations have not been carried out.

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