

INTERVIEW

Ken Livingstone

ON 12 March, Gwyn Williams (GAW) of our editorial committee and Tim Williams (TW), research assistant to Dafydd Elis Thomas, M.P., went to interview Ken Livingstone (KL) at County Hall, London:

GAW: You spoke at the Wales Congress up here. We see the structures and activities coming out of that Congress as some kind of alternative politics. How would you compare that with what you've been doing in the GLC?

KL: There's no real comparison. What's been coming out of the Wales Congress is people outside the structures of government building their own structures of support, financial, political and emotional, in a sense re-creating the sense of community which has been lost in so many parts of Britain. In one sense, the sense of community which existed in the mining areas has actually been able to extend itself throughout Britain, though in much diluted form. It's still for many people in cities like London who've come into contact with the miners' support groups, adopted collieries and so on, the most alive experience of community that many of them have ever had, because they've grown up in cities where the community has been swept away, redeveloped. The class links which used to exist have gone. So it is a very valid and alive organisation, growing from the grass roots up. Whereas the GLC is an institution of the state which is part of the structure of imposition from above by the governors of society and what we've done is burrow our way into it and try to change the way it works, try to strike some responsive chords in the London community, which we've been able to do with many sections of that London community. Try to use it in a way which actually protects the people of the city, rather than just controls them. So they are two completely different forms of organisation. But, if they can be married together, so that you have that community network developing on the outside, outside of government, and radical influence within government, and they marry up and become mutually supportive

of each other, I believe you can then really talk about transforming the nature of British society in a very democratic way.

GAW: You've scored some striking successes here. People even speak of trying to create 'a GLC for Wales'. What principles would you filter out from the way you've acted?

KL: I think in one sense, London is so untypical of Britain. We've got 147 different languages spoken here, we've got a million people of Irish descent, a million who are black, perhaps as many as half a million of lesbians and gay men. It is the most incredible mixture of different racial, religious and sexual groupings. And at the same time, it's almost a political hothouse, particularly in the inner half of London, where every group has its own branch, its outlet. Every issue or campaign is there. So you can get a very unreal picture of Britain from just being in London. And I wouldn't say there's a series of lessons from the GLC which the rest of the country can take up. The London Labour Party and the Labour GLC have developed in the way they have in response to what the population of London now is. We reflect our area. If you try to drop the GLC on to, say Cardiff, the signals would be very blurred ...

GAW: Cardiff is nearer in character to London than any other part of Wales.

KL: And it still wouldn't work there. I think what's important is the styles of operation. We've tried to be more open and democratic. We've tried to turn to groups in our area and to say ... 'What can we do for you? How can we change the way the GLC works? What demands do you have to make of it?' In what we've done, we've tried to bring the community into this building to tell us what they want, rather than go out and say ... 'We've got a plan for you!'

GAW: You're there talking about



using some form of state power to fund autonomous groups. That does seem peculiarly relevant to Wales. We stand for that kind of thing in Plaid Cymru, while Tim here is a member of the Labour Party. What kind of relationship do you see between this new and imaginative kind of politics and old-style Labour politics? A socialist power has some time to emerge for the whole island of Britain, has it not?

KL: I look upon the emergence of the Greens in Germany, for example, as being largely because of the very right-wing nature of the Social Democratic Party here. It's very interesting in this election in the Saarland that's just taken place, where you've got a very radical, almost GLC-type social democratic party there, the Greens have been kept to a very small vote. It's very difficult to make assumptions about the country I've only spent two weeks in in my entire life, but I strongly suspect that a lot of the radicalism and socialism in Plaid Cymru is a reaction to what used to be a very traditionally right-wing Labour

Party. I would assume that the sort of people who, living in Wales, are in Plaid Cymru, if they were living in London would be London Labour Party activists. I look forward to a future where there are not two socialist parties in Wales but one.

GAW: You don't care which one it actually is?

KL: I should like to see the British Labour Movement change so that the Labour Party was basically a federation of all the views on the Left. I'd like to see both wings of the Communist Party come back into the Labour Party. I think, in one sense, the Labour Party should be the parliament of the Left in Britain. Not imposing a very rigid discipline from the centre, but recognising the diversity of all the different views, the different needs of different areas, trying to bring them all working together. Unless you do bring all the radical and progressive currents of opinion together, you are not going to win.

GAW: I was in the communist movement for thirty years before joining Plaid Cymru. Tim is in the



Labour Party. What we both find is that the Labour Party in Wales in its majority form, is like the Bermondsey party here.

KL: The kind of people we got rid of in London.

GAW: Well, how did you get rid of them?

KL: In one sense, they went. Because London changed. There was a time when London was a solid, conservative, working-class community, with middle-class suburbs. Radicalism wasn't much of a force then. With the breaking of London's industrial base, the movement of all those jobs out of London, then with the high unemployment, the old craft trade unions, like the engineers and the electricians, dramatically reduced in influence within the Labour Party. The unions that became predominant were the public sector ones, T and G, NUPE and

so on. There were large numbers of women and black people. So the trade unions started to change.

When I first got on to the London Labour Party executive ten years ago, a guy called Bert Fry who was the secretary of the T and G used to just lay down the line and every trade union delegate voted for it. It was a very right-wing line. That generation of trade union leaders retired and a more flexible group emerged. At the same time, the constituency parties were moving dramatically to the Left, reflecting the much more cosmopolitan nature of the London population.

We didn't do it by some grand conspiracy. It happened inevitably because London's population had changed. That traditional working-class conservatism still exists in pockets, but it is not typical of

London any more. We are. So I haven't got a master plan for how to get rid of the Right. In one sense overriding all that, I think, is that the right-wing of the Labour Party, having run the country for two fairly lengthy periods in the last twenty years, and failed so dismally, tended to devalue the credibility of the Right throughout the Party. A lot of those people have either gradually been moved to the Left themselves or have given up or been replaced.

GAW: In some ways, something of this order has happened in Wales, which used to be one of the most macho in Britain. Today, getting on for 47% of its core working population are women, who scarcely exist within the organised Labour movement. We find that the English Left are terribly ignorant about Wales: they tend to see us as heroic miners or God knows what. They have to realise - and I'm sure Tim will agree with me here - that Labourism in Wales is one of the most conservative forces in the country.

There's a crisis now over this Wales Congress, one of the most promising self-managing movements we've had. The NUM and the support groups want it to continue, but the Labour MP's are now pulling out and calling for the Congress to be wound up, typical Labour parliamentarianism which means paralysis. Would you be prepared to work with Socialists, inside and outside the Labour Party, if need be, against that Party itself? Or is this too difficult a question to put to a Labour man?

KL: No. If I were in the Labour Party in Wales, I would presumably be a left-wing dissident on a local right-wing council and I would work with all the groups in the community to force that council to change its position. I don't think you can just have the fight conducted within the Labour Party; you have to have a wider alliance. I've no doubt whatsoever, if at the next General Election, Labour's one or two votes short of majority in parliament, Plaid Cymru would support socialist policies. We should not take a high-handed attitude towards smaller socialist parties which might win some

seats in parliament. The Labour Party must recognise its own deficiencies and either correct those deficiencies or work directly with those smaller socialist parties.

TW: Can I ask a question on a central issue? The kind of political role which the Labour GLC has played in socialist development - can it be maintained?

KL: I do believe there is a parliamentary road to socialism. It's inevitable that there has to be one. Because if you try any other route, all the forces of the state and capital will be used against you. There's no way the Left can take power by a manoeuvre or a coup or by some major industrial strategy. Because at the end of the day, during the last twenty years, we've had the British army turned into basically an instrument of civilian control, all the training's been done in Northern Ireland; the police - I mean, 50% of the police have been trained to shoot. The power of the state, its press, its army, its police, the international backing it would get, with American troops stationed here - the only way forward is for socialist forces to win a major election victory, to actually demonstrate that the majority of the people of Britain want socialist policies. Now, you can't do it by just winning parliamentary elections; you've got to build support structures in the community ... things like the Wales Congress developing, things like workplace branches of the Labour Party, so that there is a real base of support when that government comes under pressure. But, to try and do it without demonstrating at the ballot box that you've got the vote of the people in Britain, I think you would find yourself pushed aside by the military or the police or international forces. You've got to do it democratically, there's no short cut.

GAW: We've been struck in Wales, as people have been elsewhere, by your uncompromising stand on Ireland. It's a very brave stand. How do you see that within your overall picture. What made you do it, then?

KL: I knew nothing about Ireland until the troubles started again in

1969. As the years have progressed, I've gradually learned more about our history and our record in Ireland. The more you read, the more outraged you become. You can't read the history of Britain in Ireland without feeling that this is one of the most disgraceful chapters in human history. We have re-written the history so that it doesn't look so bad, we deny the full-scale of what we've done to the Irish people. We've effectively destroyed a nation for hundreds and hundreds of years; we've denied it the right to develop properly, we've halved its population - the population of Ireland is still only half of what it was before the Great Famine, we've prevented its industry developing, we've kept it as basically something for us to make money out of, a cheap labour force. You cannot look at this without feeling a strong sense of outrage. At the time I became the leader of the GLC, it was two days before Bobby Sands died, and that was a major force running through those early months and you just couldn't **not** condemn Thatcher for standing there and allowing those deaths to roll on one after the other without taking any initiative. When I look at the situation in Ireland, the nearest analogy I can think of is Algeria, where the French presence was sustained there by the French who had moved there and occupied a privileged position. The Protestant majority in Northern Ireland play the same sort of role. Now, I don't think the Protestants in the North should go, because they've been living in Ireland so long now that they're as Irish as Gerry Adams. Both Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams are products of Ireland; they both reflect Irish culture and, while it might be deeply offensive to some-one like Enoch Powell to realise it, that is actually the case. Both Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland have more in common with each other, in culture and religious attitudes, than either have with mainland Britain. The sooner we wake up to this blindingly obvious fact, the sooner the killing will stop.

GAW: You made some interesting comments on Europe in your interviews with Tarig Ali. You clearly see the EEC for what

it is, but you said you'd be willing to join a socialist Europe. You seem to have less of that blank, basilisk hostility to Europe that many Labour people have?

KL: I think there has been a large strand of opinion on the Left which is very nationalist. There's been some sense of superiority and a quite false pride, allied to a nationalism of a quite gross kind. I think people in Britain have deeply resented the fact that European nations have passed Britain in an economic sense; we are now very much falling behind and drifting into a backwater in that sense. France and Germany are infinitely stronger than we are. I just find this so gross. Every time you see national leaders, whether it's Mitterand or Thatcher, playing their own nationalist card to win votes at home - the institutions of the Common Market are inherently continuing nationalism. It creates an environment in which each national leader appeals to the xenophobia of their own population, while stirring up hatred against other groups in Europe. The only way to break out of that stage is to have a united Europe, one European parliament, so that politicians would know you'd have to have a basis of support within each section within each nation. Each people would have to feel they were a part of whatever governing coalition emerged. The growing power of the multinationals now, which is enormous and threatens the whole of the European economy, I don't think can be tackled very easily by any one nation. A united Europe could actually do that, control the multinationals and provide an alternative to Moscow and Washington. It could ensure that you actually removed all nuclear weapons from both eastern and western Europe. You could eventually see a European community which genuinely **was** one nation, but which recognised the diversities of the component parts and would be a tremendous alternative to the sterility of a world frozen into Russian and American camps. And, I like to think, would actually be able to give a lead in developing both the Russian and the Third World economy. Tremendous potential, but it requires of us all to say 'We strip ourselves of

our nationalism, we accept the fact that we are all just human beings.'

GAW: This is what I would like to ask about. I know only what I've read in *The Guardian* - what other bloody paper can you read? Would you like to comment on the trouble on the GLC?

KL: When we come to look at what went wrong with the rate-capping campaign, I think we will find that people went around, quite genuinely for the most part, quite sincerely, convincing themselves that what they wanted to happen **would** happen. The leaders of all the rate-capped councils kept re-assuring each other that we were all going to stick together. Given that the GLC and the other three upper-tier bodies had to set rates by a local deadline which the lower-tier didn't have, when this strategy started out, I said to them quite firmly, 'I will find it almost impossible to get the Labour GLC, with a majority of four, to vote for illegality. So if you go down this road, we'll try and we'll be with you, but you're going to have a spectacular early failure which is going to undermine the rest of it.' I think that, at that stage, which was nine months ago, their view was broadly - 'either we will move the GLC so that people do stand firm' - which was optimistic almost beyond belief, or 'it won't matter' or 'People will accept that the GLC will fail.' The trouble is, people see the GLC as so much the main authority that there'd still be a focus on us. And we tried and we've gone along as far as we could with the party policy and we tried right up until the last day. I recommended to my party that we should refuse to set a rate, but have a fall-back position so that, if we **knew** we were going to lose in the council and that a Tory rate was going to be set, we should have a maximum budget which allowed for growth. This was seen as a great betrayal by some who said 'There can be no fall-back position, so that you force people to stand firm,' I think that was unrealistic. People who face surcharge, if they're going to give in, they're going to give in, whether there's a fall-back position or not. On the Sunday, after we'd been able to prevent a rate being set for

three days, the right-wing of the Labour group came to me and said 'We have ten or twelve votes. If you can't carry the maximum budget, we (the fall-back) will vote for the Tory budget or whatever is the best Tory or Alliance budget on offer.' I tried to persuade the rest of my colleagues on the Left that, at this stage we should try and unite around the maximum budget. They weren't prepared to compromise and the Right then actually voted for a lower precept than the government was demanding.

It was a classic case, I think, of people assuming that if they just stand firm a little longer, there'll be a victory, oblivious to the fact that what you're doing is inevitably going to lead to a greater defeat. Political leadership involves being able to say 'This is where we are going' and carrying people with you. There is no great skill in a political leadership which says 'We will lead you to defeat.'

GAW: Indeed not. I have heard Hywel Francis, whom you have met, contrast the leadership of the South Wales NUM recently with the national leadership of the union by saying that the former was 'revolutionary', that is, knew when to retreat, while the latter was a 'rebel'. Would you make that distinction between a leader who is revolutionary in the sense of working for a long-term objective and one who is an insurrectionist?

KL: I count myself a rebel. All my gut instincts are divisive, discordant, dissident. If I'd been born in the Soviet Union, I'd have been in a labour camp by now. I've never adapted well to discipline, and when I come under pressure I just get more and more cussed. It is **only** for me at the last minute, when I know it is absolutely hopeless, that I'm prepared to make a compromise to survive, but I do it very reluctantly. I'm not one to beat a retreat easily, I come very close always to being smashed into the ground before I accept there's a need to back off.

GAW: This we can see, but you've created something, whereas rebels on the whole do not.

KL: The principle about compromise that you have to ask

yourself is ... I think the rules you lay down about compromise are that you compromise only when you have to and then try to strike a compromise in a way that takes you closer to your objective rather than farther away from it. It is so easy for politicians to slip into compromise as the normal form of operation.

GAW: *I didn't use the word compromise. André Gorz says somewhere that we all live in contradictions under capitalism and that some contradictions we shouldn't even try to resolve. We should live in them and burrow through them like Marx's Old Mole of Revolution. That's what you seem to have been doing only you're much more public and declaratory at it. And it seems to have worked?*

KL: I think there's this other problem that the way that the British Left operates is of the assumption that all leaders betray. And so they wait for that to happen and then the next generation immediately strike out to overtake them, replace them and so on. If there is a betrayal that's justified, but it's become a style of life in which there's a lot of people on the British Left who only advance themselves by attacking others. And this is not helpful. You've actually got to try to win people. You've got to try to build the maximum amount of unity around a set of achievable goals, not make impossible demands so that you can then condemn the people who can't achieve them.

GAW: *I agree, but you would also agree that here, skills in communication are essential and you obviously have them in abundance?*

KL: I've been very lucky. I cannot think of any other person on the British Left since Aneurin Bevan who has been able to produce **the goods** in the way that I have. Bevan was able to set up the National Health Service. I've been able to cut fares, expand the arts spending, restore cuts. We've got an institution here which does good things for Londoners and they see it. Normally when you've got leftwingers in government, they are stuck in positions where they can't build that popular base.

Tony Benn was **always** kept in things like Industry and Energy, nowhere where he had a frequent popular platform, where he could impact on people's daily lives. I think that was a quite deliberate decision. The popularity which Bevan developed as he created the Health Service, I think, played a large role in the growth of his position and stature in politics. I am here simply because the GLC is a machine that can do good things for Londoners.

GAW: *Are you optimistic generally?*

KL: I am optimistic. I think we will see Labour win the next election or come so close that it becomes the government. The only doubt in my mind is whether we can win a majority or will we just be a

TW: *What will then be the role of any of the GLC and similar institutions in the new dispensation? Will these initiatives be simply defensive - if we don't have power at the centre, at least we have it here - or do you see them as embryonic forms of a new relationship between socialist local authorities and a socialist state?*

KL: It's the latter. I would hope that the next Labour government would not try and impose things from the centre but would actually look for a real devolution of power to local authorities. Throughout the debate on the Welsh and Scottish devolution bills, my gut feeling all the time was that, if people want it, they should of course have it. But my guess was

preconceived plan?

KL: I have learned from all the events that have happened around me in my life and since I became politically active. In that sense, not using it in a derogatory sense, I am very much a pragmatic politician. I learn as I go, push, how much farther I can go, pushing the boundaries all the time. I don't adopt a theoretical approach, though; there's no great construct I fit society to. I just try and evaluate where I am and see how much farther I can get in the direction I want.

GAW: *But you have a very hard core of idealism?*

KL: That's my personality; it's not theoretical. I've always been a supporter of the underdog. I've always had basic gut instincts which were almost inevitably going to lead to socialism.

GAW: *Comrade Livingstone, have you anything to ask us?*

KL: In other times, when I wasn't so knackered ... The last week has not been very easy ... when you fall out so spectacularly within your own party as we have done, it's a very emotional and draining process.

GAW: *We really appreciate what you have done, in seeing us at this moment.*

KL: *It's been a really interesting discussion.*

GAW: *I hope to see the day when you're president of a federal, socialist union of republics of the Island of Britain.*



minority government. I think Thatcherism will be decisively rejected at the next election. Thatcher may not even survive to make the next election, tremendous strains are building up inside the Tory party now and in the British and American economies. I think once those start to go seriously wrong, which they will by the end of the year, then there'll be a major shift away from the government. Labour has to seize that, actually use the fact that there'll be tens of millions of people looking for a lead and actually provide that, show that we have got economic policies to turn this economy around, that we have got the will to impose them and that we are going to be a much more democratic and open party than we've been in the past.

that both those things would have been fatally flawed, they'd have been bureaucratic, just the same old group of politicians in a different building, and no-one in Wales or Scotland would have felt any closer to government or any more in control. If you really want people to have some degree of involvement and control and confidence they have a say in Wales, you've got to get much closer, you've really got to get down to local government, borough councils, district and community. All of these things, if anything, are too big. You've really got to push these down to the lowest possible level.

TW: *Tariq Ali was disturbed that you hadn't read the socialist classics. Do you learn as you go along? You don't adhere to the*

The National Left

Plaid Cymru National Left was established as an organisation within Plaid Cymru with the purpose of creating a left-wing group which would look at the historical position of Wales, draw up a political programme that would address the contemporary problems of Welsh society and campaign on the basis of that programme.

The National Left is open to members of Plaid Cymru and to those who are not members of any party. If you are interested, contact Emyr Williams, Felin Dulas, Aberhosan, Machynlleth, Powys.