

# Bringing it all back home:

## the evolution of democratic centralism in the SWP

Pat Stack, July 2013

In the recent faction fight in the Party debates quickly centred around issues of democratic centralism. But what is democratic centralism? Judging from much of the debates during the faction fight, democratic centralism would seem to amount to this formula:

Democratic Centralism =

- a three month pre-conference discussion period, with factions tolerated
- a Central Committee (CC) elected by a slate system
- majority votes taken at an annual conference end the matter, regardless of how close the votes were
- no permanent factions
- the party's strategy settled for nine months of the year, unless changed by the CC

But, as Joseph Choonara put it so well at our January conference, democratic centralism was not supposed to amount to three months of democracy followed by nine months of centralism.

For many comrades the essentials which I outlined above as “the democratic centralism formula” have been the only ones they have known as party members; yet these particular forms of organising (slate election, three month discussion period, no permanent factions) were developed not out of some newly discovered “lost works of Lenin” but out of a particular need to solve a particular problem at a particular time.

At the emergency conference Alex Callinicos seemed to want to tag me with the term “medium” because I had used a particular quote from Cliff throughout the aggregates. So just to be clear, I am not in any way trying to argue that any of the late comrades I quote in this article would have been on my side or anybody else's during our current dispute. To do so would be crass and stupid. I am merely trying to go back to first principles. So, at the risk of becoming “Mystic Pat”, let me just remind comrades what Cliff said on the subject:

The successful working of democratic centralism on a national or international scale requires a high level of homogeneity in the party, a high level of consciousness, training and also trust between leaders, as well as between all members and the leadership. If “staff” and “troops” are well integrated, discipline follows 99 per cent from conviction and only 1 per cent from mechanical obedience. (Cliff, Lenin Vol III, p57)

Never was such an interpretation more appropriate, never was it less adhered to. So how has this happened? It is worth just taking a walk back through our history.

In the late 1960s the IS was a very loose and almost ultra-democratic organisation. In 1968, immediately following and in response to Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech, the IS put out a call for left unity. The main target for this call was the International Marxist Group (IMG), which was an orthodox Trotskyist (Fourth International) group who had enjoyed some success building out of student unrest, and whose best known member was student leader Tariq Ali. The IMG had many faults, but was considerably less sectarian and more serious than the rest of the orthodox Trotskyist left.

Sadly the IMG ignored the call, but one small sectarian group (mainly interested in entry work to recruit for their own organisation) did respond. This group in no way shared our politics but thought we offered fertile ground for their operations. At the time they joined the IS had already got one very dogmatic secret faction and so internal life was becoming fantastically disrupted by effectively two parasitic groupings working within the main group.

As John Molyneux writing a few years later describes it:

The first of these groups, Workers Fight, was tolerated as virtually a separate organisation within IS for three years, during which time they contributed little except permanent disruption.

The second group was the Right Faction [which] operated secretly, refusing even to constitute themselves as an open faction. The Right Faction was finally expelled after they had been overwhelmingly defeated on every point at the 1973 conference. In the meantime, however, they had succeeded in filling numerous issues of the Internal Bulletin with unbelievably obscure articles on Marxist economics and in wrecking several branches.

At a time when IS was trying hard to turn itself into a working class organisation these episodes constituted a serious diversion and waste of time but they also had other consequences for the way in which we conducted our internal affairs. Because any sign of disagreement among the leadership was immediately pounced on by the permanent oppositionists in the hopes of producing a split, the leadership developed the habit of keeping their differences to themselves.

On top of all this the organisation then did suffer a serious split (its most serious until the current one) when a number of comrades including key figures (a former Socialist Worker editor, a former national secretary and a very prominent public speaker) formed a faction, the IS Opposition, and were ultimately expelled.

In addition to the problems of factionalism the organisation was also becoming very aware of the paranoia of the state. It is hard now to explain just how mystified the British ruling class had become. The post-war consensus had rapidly and radically broken down.

Student revolt was greeted by incomprehension and fear, rising worker militancy taking on a political hue was causing serious alarm, IRA bombs were causing hysteria, and two miners strikes had inflicted huge defeats on the ruling class even raising the question “who rules the country?”.

Various figures on the fringes of the ruling class were talking about setting up private armies, a leading Tory was warning his children to enjoy their Christmas as it might be the last before the red hordes took over, and the spooks were getting very, very agitated. There is little doubt that the IS was being very closely scrutinised, its leading members and militants coming under surveillance.

In order to deal with all these problems, the group needed to examine its internal life. At the 1975 conference it was decided that there would be a new streamlined full-time CC elected directly by conference (rather than by the National Committee, as had been the case). It was decided that it would be elected on a slate system and that factions would be allowed to be formed in a three month period before conference, but must dissolve afterwards, and let their differences rest.

Although this was the formal position, it has to be said that when serious divisions came along (Women’s Voice, Flame, the “downturn analysis”), although there were no formal factions, debates were carried out within the organisation for an extended period, with little regard by any side to formal rules about three months. The rules had been partly designed to deal with mischief makers, and were not used as an excuse to outlaw genuine division.

However even allowing for this, and understanding that necessary corrective measures had been taken, the new structures were not without their problems or indeed their critics – John Molyneux and Chris Harman, to cite but two, who could hardly be described as malicious mischief makers.

In John’s case those concerns predated the 1975 conference, and grew substantially down the years, leading to him unsuccessfully running for the CC in 2005. Apparently now, however, separation by the Irish Sea and the green pastures of my native land seem to have soothed my dear old friend’s troubled mind.

Writing as long ago as 1975 John states:

After the 1973 conference it was decided that we had wasted enough time on internal debate and that now was the time to go out and build. For a while this worked well but gradually problems accumulated, and unfortunately the leadership’s habit of keeping their differences within a restricted circle

persisted. The result was that issues ... would fester... and then burst over the heads of an unsuspecting membership.

For some time we have had a situation in which the membership learns of differences in strategy and approach among the [leadership] only through vague rumour and in which open debate takes place only after crucial decisions have been taken.

Four years later Chris Harman delivered an even more strident critique. Having found himself at loggerheads with the majority of the CC at the time following the “punk paper” debate, Harman wrote an article for the IB entitled “[The sort of leadership we need](#)”. In it he raised serious concerns, not just about the leadership, but about the internal life of the party. After penning a strident attack on the failures of the CC of the day he went on to say:

Something more radical is needed than changing the composition of the CC: there has to be a change in the structures within which our leadership operates and, above all, in the way in which issues are argued out within the party.

He went on to explain the problems with the new structures:

We decided, in effect, to try to protect the organisation against internal and external centrifugal pressures by establishing a small, centralised leadership of six (and later nine or ten) comrades. I was a supporter of this move... However, experience has shown that we were wrong to make the change to the new structure.

The change was based on the false premise that you can avoid the political pressures that develop in a period of difficulty for revolutionaries by restricting the number of comrades involved in the effective decision making of the organisation. We reached the stage where we feared that any discussion outside a very small group of comrades at the Centre would lead to unnecessary rows, to a factional atmosphere in the organisation, to more splits and more losses. Fear of ‘rocking the boat’ when times were difficult led us to downgrade the importance of discussion over national perspectives, strategy and tactics...

We even convinced ourselves that it was our tight structure which had held us together during the downturn, not our correct politics. I myself forgot what I had written in *Party and Class* nearly ten years before:

“By being part of a (democratic centralist) organisation, workers and intellectuals alike are trained to assess their own concrete situation in accordance with the scientific socialist activity of thousands of others. ‘Discipline’ means acceptance of the need to relate individual experience to

the total theory and practice of the party. As such it is not opposed to, but a necessary prerequisite of the ability to make independent evaluations of concrete situations. That is why 'discipline' for Lenin does not mean hiding differences which exist within the party, but rather exposing them to the light of day so as to argue them out. Only in this way can the mass of members make scientific evaluations...

"Without an organisational centralisation aimed at giving clarity and decisiveness to political differences, the independence of rank and file members was bound to be undermined. Ties of personal affection or deference to established leaders became more important than scientific, political EVALUATION." [Harman's emphasis, and a chillingly apposite last sentence.]

One has to presume that as Chris healed his differences with the leadership (in particular Cliff). Over a period of time his concerns receded, yet much of what he wrote has a resonance today, and indeed must surely have re-entered his thoughts during his quite scandalous marginalisation during the latter years of the German/Rees regime.

The problems Chris was highlighting were to be strengthened during the period of the downturn. It would be a gross caricature to say all the SWP did in the downturn years was to read books and theorise. The Party threw everything in to the various disputes that emerged, notably the miners' strike and Wapping.

However there is little doubt that, particularly as we began the adjustment to the new situation, the theoretical development of the organisation became a central feature of our work. Big branches covering quite wide geographical areas were encouraged.

The outside world was difficult – with the loss of struggle and as Cliff described it a period of defeats punctuated by disasters. The retreat from revolutionary politics was real, movementism and the growth of left reformism (in particular Bennism) became enormously attractive to erstwhile revolutionaries, pulling much of the far left off course. To stand up to this and preserve revolutionary Marxism, meetings on the history and traditions of the movement became central to our perspective.

The problem though was how did democratic centralism function in such circumstances? It was no longer the feedback and pulls of and on shop stewards, the day-to-day struggles of workers, the waves of student unrest that were in the main informing the membership, and therefore creating the two-way tension with the leadership which lies at the heart of democratic centralism.

After all who knew more about the Russian Revolution than Cliff, the German Revolution than Harman, the Comintern than Hallas? Even if the odd individual developed a “heresy” how could it be tested, and why would the membership trust a “gobby would-be intellectual” against the people who had lived and breathed this stuff all their adult lives. In other words who could teach the teachers?

A whole cadre was developed with a high level of political knowledge, but little experience of “challenging the leadership”. In other words, a democratic deficit was opening up. At the height of the downturn this didn’t have a huge practical impact. But as we began to try and re-emerge more fully into the struggles outside it began to matter a lot.

The problem was that having installed processes to deal with factionalism, entryism and state surveillance we left them intact as the party itself was facing the very different problems of the downturn era. The concerns that Molyneux and Harman had raised were now beginning to have much more serious effect, and yet the structures were never less challenged.

In part it was easy to point to the rest of the left and say “we are getting it much more right than they are”, and this was true. We have survived when much of the left has collapsed. These truths, however, did not mean there were not problems.

As the 1990s and 2000s progressed the absence of challenge to the leadership during the downturn remained, even when the day-to-day activities of comrades were beginning to tell them that things weren’t right. Initiatives could be launched as the main priority of one NC, and two NCs later have vanished without any explanation, or more crucially without anyone daring to ask why. Pre-conference perspectives for one year were rarely reviewed the next.

Comrades were told the party was mushrooming in size whilst their branch meetings were getting smaller and smaller, yet hardly anyone spoke up. Branches were split, and split again, with various formulas like the short lived “troika” put in place to sustain them, and then for a period they were abandoned altogether.

When in the early 2000s Molyneux, I and others wrote a letter to the CC/NC asking for membership and paper sale figures, we were denounced at an NC by various CC and NC members. One NC member even went as far as to say we were “disgusting”.

Although from time to time real tensions and differences arose in the CC they were kept away from the membership. In public the CC was always united – the cadre always followed. The organisers, in turn, were conduits for the CC wisdom. Far from feeding back the realities of their districts they told the CC what they/we (at the time) wanted to hear. Chris Harman

once described organisers meetings as being like a gathering of sales reps competing to bring the best news to head office.

In turn the cadre told the CC what they wanted to hear. In private there was growing unease, but in public all was sweetness and light. And if it wasn't, god help you. A style of debate and denunciation emerged that was often pure bullying, and a complete distortion of our tendency's tradition.

Much of this distorted practice was acknowledged at the time. Its three main proponents, Rees, German and (slightly later) Bambery, were removed (or removed themselves) from the leadership, and in response to a collective exhalation of democratic rage the Democracy Commission was set up. In preparation for the commission Chris Harman in reply to an IB article by Neil Davidson wrote the following:

Nevertheless, there has been and remains a real problem. It is not that comrades lack democratic rights in the abstract. As Neil recognises, conference is free to replace or change the composition of the CC every year, it chooses a new National Committee each year, and the National Committee can censure the CC if the majority of its members want to. On top of this there are national delegate meetings at least twice a year... The problem is that our structures have not in practice encouraged people to participate actively in decision making. There has been a tendency for comrades to rely on the CC to make decisions, even if this is in part because on very important decisions, such as the attitude to the anti-capitalist movement and the initiative to launch Stop the War, they could see that the CC was correct. The result is precisely the vicious circle of people leaving decisions to the CC and CC members falling into the easy trap of assuming that only they have the capacity to make the decisions. This is what we have to deal with. We need a national leadership which is wider than just the full time members of the CC...

We have to try to work out some structures better than the present ones. But that means confronting the practical difficulties as well as any attitudinal approaches that have developed in recent years. That is why it seems to me that a conference-elected commission to make recommendations is a better way forward than three months of discussion in internal bulletins. Hopefully such a commission could look at other experiences from the history of the movement and internationally, talk through the issues with long established lay members of the party, and suggest clear proposals (or alternative proposals) to be voted on.

That commission did seek to genuinely get to grips with what had gone wrong and what could be done to ensure it couldn't happen again. Yet those 1970s structures emerged from

the other end almost completely intact, and as a result the problems Harman highlighted remained unresolved.

Which brings me to the recent faction fight. In part I have no doubt the rebellion was greatly aided by the fact that for the first time in a long time we had recruited a large number of young members, were developing an impressive young cadre completely disinclined to blindly following orders. This was of course magnified by the nature of the issue itself.

Yet the faction fight – in the course of which we've now lost about 350 members and roughly 90 percent of our students – was made much worse because of the dysfunctional democratic structures we inherited from the past and have failed to fix.

But there are better methods from our history to refer to. Going back to the IS Opposition split of the mid 1970s I asked Ian Birchall if it was handled in the same way. He recalls a very different atmosphere:

It always used to be the practice that the opposition were positively encouraged to attend conferences so that the argument could be had. I was at the Party Council when the Higgins lot were expelled. Paul Mackney (as their chosen representative) was invited to speak on their behalf even though he was not elected. There was no foot-stamping, very little demagoguery or threats, but a sober discussion about the perspectives.

And the SWP certainly cannot afford losses caused by uncomradely debate or reprisals. The CC claimed that at the height of the greatest crisis our party has ever known, 1,000 members had turned up to aggregates. Funnily enough the faction put the figure at about 1,300.

There has been much talk of “punching above our weight”, which may be true, but if those figures are accurate (and it's hard to see why they wouldn't be) then even with the faction's higher estimate “our weight” would seem to be considerably lighter than most of us were led to believe. A departure of another 300, 400 or 500 members would be a disaster.

At the heart of this potential disaster in my opinion lies a mechanical view of democratic centralism that needs to be challenged. It seems to me much of our cadre need to be won to a view of democratic centralism that sees them bringing their own experiences and views into the party, disagreeing without feelings of guilt or disloyalty, and understanding that a revolutionary party can only really function properly in an atmosphere of frank and open discussion and debate.



I know many will say that we already have this as we have NC meetings, party councils, conference etc. Comrades though need to be brutally honest as to whether those bodies really perform such functions.

CCs are never infallible. They need to be challenged, they need to be honestly informed. That was true of CCs with Cliff, Harman, Hallas on them and is surely even more true of a CC that has grown up without experiencing huge collisions and struggles, without being responsible for forging the theoretical bedrocks of our tendency, without the huge all round experience of those former leading comrades.

Therefore we need a cultural and political shift back to the true spirit of democratic centralism. However, it seems to me that in order for that transformation to take place, some practical changes have to follow.

The first question has to be: what are the immediate needs of an organisation of our size today? We have to be realistic about our size and the tasks that face us. As already stated above, our active membership (before recent departures) would appear to be rather less than 1,500. In these circumstances models that fitted the Bolsheviks on the eve of taking state power are clearly inappropriate.

So too, I would argue, are models based on an expected surge in membership, in particular worker militant recruitment, at a time when the struggle appeared to be onward and upward, especially if those models were designed to combat particular problems as outlined above.

I believe we face a twofold challenge as a party today. One is to intervene effectively in the struggles, campaigns and movements that cross our paths as we continue to try and “punch above our weight”. The other is a longer term strategic look at where we are, where the class is, what the balance of class forces are. Emerging from that are wider issues around the united front, oppression today and the state of the student movement. For the first we need the unity in action that is essential to any serious revolutionary organisation. For the second, we need a democratic openness that allows wide ranging discussions, exchanges of ideas and debates, not hindered by arbitrary time limits, or rules.

We have to break with the notion that all these questions were answered in the decades before many of today's comrades joined. We have to break with the notion these comrades merely need to be “taught the line”. Again to quote Hallas:

The self-education of militants is impossible in an atmosphere of sterile orthodoxy. Self-reliance and confidence in one's ideas are developed in the

course of that genuine debate that takes place in an atmosphere where differences are freely and openly argued. The 'monolithic party' is a Stalinist concept. Uniformity and democracy are mutually incompatible.

Of course these two elements are not that lopsided; we also need democratic discussion for effective intervention, and ultimately we need to reach united (or majority voted) conclusions to theoretical questions. Else we become headless chickens or debating societies. However three months can't begin to deal with such strategic and theoretical renewal.

Does this mean turning us into a "talking shop" – or worse, institutionalising divisions in the form of "permanent factions"? Above all, what we need now is a process of clarification of our ideas. The best way to avoid permanent division along preset lines has to be to open up the party's structures. We may not want or need permanent tendencies, but we do want ongoing debate, discussion and discourse. It is clear that at the present time the three month rule is as inappropriate to that process and our current needs as it may have been appropriate to deal with the entryism of the early 1970s.

Therefore I think we need to clearly distinguish between outlawing permanent tendencies repeatedly going over the same old ground, and a genuine opening up of a free exchange of ideas, where comrades can come together freely, communicate freely, publish freely and debate freely without being made to feel that they are doing something fundamentally undemocratic and un-Leninist.

Furthermore I think we have to move away from a notion of a CC necessarily being of like minded comrades. For a leadership to function effectively there have to be tensions, arguments, different approaches, battles of will. The history of the Bolsheviks is one of constant battles within the leadership, right to the point of insurrection itself, where I think we can safely say the differences between Lenin and Trotsky on one side and Zinoviev and Kanenev on the other were of the most profound importance. All four remained in the leadership – rather different to our own recent axing of two CC members whose removal was motivated by Alex Callinicos on the grounds of "nuanced differences".

Furthermore in a period where the Party cannot easily put together a full time leadership forged in great struggle, huge ideological ferment, or life long revolutionary experience it seems to me we need a larger body than currently exists. I also think that it should be made up not just of full timers but also comrades who currently work. We need to bring more of the feel of the outside work into the leadership, more connection to current debates and arguments on the campuses and elsewhere. We need a CC that is taking a wider feel of the Party's pulse.

Will such changes in and of themselves solve all problems? Of course not, but I feel we need structural changes as a necessary counterweight to bad habits and bad education, and clearly show a commitment to the cultural change that the Democracy Commission failed to deliver.

I think the changes fit the needs of the Party today much better than our existing structures. I am also convinced that we must never again allow “a version” of democratic centralism to remain unchanged, unchallenged and unreviewed, as the world around us changes, as the tempo of struggle increases or slows down, as new arguments develop, and old certainties become dated, as the Party grows or shrinks.

In order to avoid that, it seems to me we have to go back to the very essence of democratic centralism as argued for in Party and Class. We have to understand that democracy is not some sugar coating for centralism, but on the contrary the lifeblood of everything that makes the centralism function.

It can't be dismissed as a hindrance to intervention and struggle. There is surely no more depressing sight then seeing longstanding revolutionaries arguing that ongoing democratic debate is an obstacle to intervening in the class struggle.

At one aggregate I did, a large number of comrades turned up who hadn't been seen for some time – one was estimated to have not been at anything for five years. Now there may be deep problems for the CC having to draw on inactive loyalists to outvote activists, but comrades turning up to meetings is something we should all welcome.

However when those comrades, who have had no part in any of the discussions (including the person who hadn't turned up for five years) vote not to hear any more than six minutes from one side, and not to let that side sum up, very serious alarm bells ring. I have no idea what you describe such a process as but it sure as hell ain't the democratic centralism which, to requote Hallas, required:

self-reliance and confidence in one's ideas... developed in the course of genuine debate that takes place in an atmosphere where differences are freely and openly argued

A Party that fails to fully discuss, debate and involve the membership is not a party that is going to intervene effectively or correctly. Members must bring their experiences, insights, and the pressures of daily political life on them, into the party. Discussion must be informed by those experiences, insights and pressures.

In doing so they are bringing the experiences of the workplace, the campus, the campaign, back to the branch, the District, the NC the CC. They are forming the debates that are a prerequisite to effective action and intervention. Debate is neither a luxury extra, or an annoying diversion.

Leninism faces a huge challenge in the 21st century, and one that it will fail if treated like a dead dogma. If however we take the central guiding spirit of Lenin's vision of the party, and adapt it to the needs of today and tomorrow, democratic centralism can remain at the forefront of building for revolutionary change.

To achieve that it is necessary to understand that for the centralism of united action to really work, democracy, argument and discourse are essential. Comrades have to have faith that even if they have ended up on the losing side of an argument, the democratic structures they participated in are open, honest and thorough, and that arguments can be revisited where necessary.

Such democracy can't be restricted to three months, stamped on by constitutions, outlawed, by dictate, or ignored when it is hammering at the centralist gates. If it is then all that's left are orders and rules, 99 per cent discipline and 1 per cent conviction, that's a recipe for disaster and a negation of everything our tradition stands for.

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