

Parliament: the Mother of all Deceptions

By [William Bowles](#)

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There — it sickens one to have to wade through this grimy sea of opportunism. What a spectacle of shuffling, lies, vacillation and imbecility does this Game Political offer to us?

I cannot conclude without an earnest appeal to those Socialists, of whatever section, who may be drawn towards the vortex of Parliamentarism, to think better of it while there is yet time. If we ally ourselves to any of the presen[t] parties they will only use us as a cat's-paw; and on the other hand, if by any chance a Socialist slips through into Parliament, he will do so at the expense of leaving his principles behind him; he will certainly not be returned as a Socialist, but as something else; what else is hard to say.

As I have written before in these columns, Parliament is going just the way we would have it go. Our masters are feeling very uncomfortable under the awkward burden of GOVERNMENT, and do not know what to do, since their sole aim is to govern from above. Do not let us help them by taking part in their game.

Whatever concessions may be necessary to the progress of the Revolution can be wrung out of them at least as easily by extra-Parliamentary pressure, which can be exercised without losing one particle of those principles which are the treasure and hope of Revolutionary Socialists.

— William Morris, the Commonweal, Volume 1, Number 10, November 1885, p. 93.[1]



Written one hundred and twenty-seven years ago under the heading of 'Moves in the game political' in Morris's own weekly publication the *Commonweal*, his statement could have been written today, except of course, not a single person of 'note' on the left, would ever have the balls to make such a statement about our 'hallowed institution', Parliament. Even less, dare to diss our 'sainted Parliamentary Socialists' as being nothing more than fakes who sold our inheritance for a mess of pottage.

Morris's understated wit and acid sarcasm peppered his weekly observations on the events of late Victorian Britain's capitalism, just as much a two-party system then as now. Morris's observations were of course, ignored by the left of his day just as they are still ignored today by what's left of the Left.

So what does this tell us about our current predicament? First, it's obvious that we do not have a Left, of any kind. Yes, by all means individuals of various flavours do exist with some idea of what's going on and why, but by and large we have what remains of a left that was created in Morris's day and one that still thinks it's 1885 judging by the apparently blind belief the Left has in the capitalist version of democracy, what Morris called Parliamentarism.

It was around the time that Morris wrote the words above that the leadership of the organised working class chose the route of reforming capitalism, theoretically via the Parliamentary process rather than the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist order.

And after all, Morris's mistrust of a professional political class is well borne out by events of

his day and ours; corruption, thievery and fraud on a grand scale let alone the obvious fact that the political class is now well and truly bought and paid for by corporate capitalism. A deal sewn up whilst the populace was busy being turned into 'property-owning democrats' during the Thatcher era through privatizing public housing and selling it for a song.

Morris's vision of Socialism has, for obvious reasons, been dismissed as 'utopian' and worse, all but written out Morris's history as a revolutionary socialist. Instead, he has become ace wallpaper designer and all round Renaissance Man but not someone who also advocated violent revolution, not because he wanted to but as Morris was wont to point out, those who rule will never relinquish their power voluntarily. An observation borne out by events, over and over again.

So what is so 'utopian' about Morris's vision of a small, sustainable, locally based and owned economy? It sounds remarkably like what today we would call a Green vision of the future, television is full of shows advocating just this. But mainly it's Morris's rejection of State Socialism that got him airbrushed out of our socialist past as well as his nostalgic yearnings for our lost history of creative work; no less real now as then.

Morris felt that nothing more in the way of governance was needed than a local one administered by the inhabitants (or those hired on their account). Utopian? Well yes in the sense that such an arrangement would never be permitted under capitalism. But is it workable?

As the sustainable 'movement' gathers pace, it all the more resembles Morris's self-administering local commonwealth with its small scale production serving local needs. A process made all the more necessary given the deliberate de-industrialization/de-skilling undertaken by successive governments. All of it predicted by the way, or at least noted as it happened by the very people being laid off.

But for this to happen, the giant cartels that dominate and control the economy in the interests of a few shareholders (that are not even human but instead consist of vast stock portfolios owned by insurance companies and banks), would have to be dismantled.

Of course, it's an immense task and perhaps one of the reasons (though not the main one) as to why those early socialists opted for the 'Parliamentary Road to Socialism'. Well, 1945 was as close as we ever got to some kind of half-arsed, reformed capitalism with a socialist face but it wasn't to last long; by 1980 it was all over. A mere thirty-five years during which time we did make valuable gains in certain areas but the fundamentals haven't altered: what the Lord giveth, the Lord can take away as we are learning to our collective cost.

Looking around me now with imperialism on the literal warpath around the planet, wielding weapons that likely would have made Morris's blood run cold, he would nevertheless recognise our world as it once again most closely resembles his own. A world of rampant imperialist capitalism, unrestrained by a powerful counterforce with the end of the Soviet Period and once again falling apart at the seams as its internal contradictions spin it out of control.

Strikingly, Morris would have also instantly recognised the financial speculators who have caused such havoc in the pursuit of filthy lucre, as his own age was littered with these self-same parasites.

But I contend that Morris' vision of self-sustaining local communities is even more doable today than it was in his time, not that it can be done overnight, it would have to be an ongoing process of transformation. For example, let's start with the banks by busting them up and creating a network of local banks designed to finance local development and serve the community. What's so difficult about this? And why, when our 'publicly-owned' media alleges to debate the economic crisis are such ideas never entertained?

There are unfortunately other, even larger obstacles in our path. The step advocated above would never be allowed by global capital. Busting up Barclays Bank for example, would incur the wrath of the US/UK financial cartel and threaten to undermine the credibility not only of the 'austerity' drive but of the illusory importance that the banks play in preserving civilization as we know it. Worse still, we'd have to bust them all up and only the State can do this thus we are back where started: taking over state power (only to abolish it once the reign of capital is removed according to Morris).

So goes on merrily the political disruption of our present system. Far more grim than this bad joke of Parliament and representation is the process of its economical breakup. All over the country an attempt is being made to stimulate trade by the huge advertisements called exhibitions; and royalty is playing its due part in a commercial country by opening these, and so killing, if possible, two birds with one stone ♦ exciting loyalty on the one hand, and trying to get it to spend money on the other. The success on the commercial side is not yet great, and trade is still 'dull' ♦ a word which covers something of the same suffering as the conventional phrases used in describing a battle do. 'The enemy annoyed our advance much:' we all know, if we choose to think, the kind of misery that such phrases cover, and in our commercial war it is, I repeat, much the same. — (ibid), Notes on Passing Events, Volume 2, Number 21, 5 June 1886, p. 73.

Again, I suppose it should not need repeating that Morris's experience of capitalism was almost exactly the same as ours; that crises, small, large and cataclysmic, are intrinsic to capitalism and occur with monotonous regularity, the latest being perhaps the last hurrah of a system so devastating in its technological power that it now threatens the very existence of the ecosystem that keeps us all alive. That it persists at all is some kind of miracle made possible only by persuading us that there is no alternative.

In any case it would seem to me that we have reached a critical juncture in the (d)evolution of Representational Parliamentary democracy and the role it has played in maintaining capitalism. A vision inherited by successive generations of socialists as an alternative path to socialism. A juncture moreover that has been entirely overlooked by the Left. A Left that still behaves as though it were still 1885 never mind 1945.

However, the ruling political class and its allies in the media, *have* realised just how bankrupt the system is but without signing their own metaphorical death warrants, there is nothing much they can or want to do about it except tinker and of course repress all those who oppose our very English Fascism by one means or another.

Clearly it's not possible to reform Parliament and the democratic process from within. We need only view the attempts that have been made by the same people who need 'reforming'. Our entrenched political class will never relinquish power voluntarily, there's too much at stake.

Increasingly, it looks like the only way forward is community by community given that we have neither trade unions or political parties around which to unite and with which to project our demands, at least at present. Not that trade unions aren't an important voice but they no longer occupy a central role in the majority of workers' lives.

This is the dilemma and why the Left is bereft of ideas and of any kind of legitimacy, for the Left is also a product of the same thinking that has created our professional, political class and one that has its roots in a no longer existent industrial working class. It sees the way forward through utilising the same mechanisms and the same centralising powers as those it would seek to replace.

If a significant minority have lost all faith in the political process and clearly they have, why should they put their trust in a Left that operates in the same manner, even if with a different end in mind?

The seeds of change already exist within our local communities and have always existed in some form or other but as discrete endeavours, disconnected from the wider issues. But focusing them around a community, a geographical location contextualizes the issues and makes it possible to share experiences with other communities. It's where we live and work; where we entertain and educate ourselves and cure our illnesses and where 'austerity' plays itself out on a daily basis.

What form it would take is still not clear in my mind let alone how individual communities could work together but I assume that a revolutionized local council could eventually form the basis for the transformation. Whatever, it's obvious, especially to the political class that the current setup is irretrievably broken, let alone totally compromised, hence the endless and vain exhortations in our complicit media to 'restore legitimacy to the political order'.

And, to be a little more realistic, such a project is one that will have to be built over time and crucially, it's identifying the starting point. Somehow, I get the feeling that it's the notion of community that's at the heart of my vision. What is the idea of 'community' based upon if not that there exists a communality of interests; shared goals and aspirations as well as needs. And for many, increasingly where they live is often the only place they feel that they are, or could be, a part of something larger than themselves.[2] It's an idea that Tory halfwit Cameron has tried to exploit with his 'Big Society' PR stunt, knowing full well that as a people, we have no control over our rulers actions but yearn desperately to belong to something that we are a part of and have some control over. Ultimately the Shopping Mall just doesn't cut it, especially when you're broke.

Notes

1. The book, 'Journalism – Contributions to the Common Weal 1885-1890' by William Morris, edited by Nicholas Salmon is published as part of the William Morris Library by Thoemmes Press, 1996. Find it secondhand online for about £14. Also, check out the late Nicholas Salmon's [Morris Archive](#) housed on [Marxist.org](#)

2. I've explored this idea elsewhere, noting that television has exploited this need through its endless programmes on 'heritage', ancestry, history, roots, family, do-it-yourself, green living, ecology, crafts, archeology, recreating the past, back to the land, the list goes on and on, and many hark to a past that corporate capitalism has ruthlessly annihilated, whether it be your local bakery or driving a six-lane freeway through an area of outstanding natural

beauty [sic]. It's the feeling that we have been cheated, sold a bill of goods of no particular value. That ultimately capitalism has failed to deliver on its promises and perhaps even more importantly, forced us (and the world) to pay too high a price for its baubles.

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