

Extract from the debate on Foreign Affairs: the Labour government's position with regard to the Vietnam War. Labour Party Annual Conference, Scarborough, Oct 4 1967

The Chairman: ... I now call on Cambridge C.L.P. and Hertford to propose and second Composite Resolution No. 28.

5 Mr. G. Steele (Cambridge C.L.P.) moved be following Resolution (Composite Resolution No. 28):

This Conference calls upon the Labour Government to dissociate itself completely from the policy of the United States Government in Vietnam and urges it to support U Thant and the overwhelming majority of the United Nations in trying to persuade the Government of the U.S.A. to end the bombing of North Vietnam immediately, permanently and unconditionally.

Conference believes that any settlement must be based upon the 1954 Geneva Agreement, which required the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Vietnamese soil, and the reunification of Vietnam under the government chosen by the Vietnamese people.

25 He said: Mr. Chairman, in moving this Resolution I should like to begin by considering the plight of the President of the United States of America. He is a man beset by many problems. He has his poverty programme, his space programme, his race programme, and his

domestic difficulties, yet overriding all these he has the problem of Vietnam and all its perennial problems. He and he alone must decide the policy the United States of America follows, and whatever policy he pursues he knows it will not meet with the universal approval of his countrymen.

40 On one side he has his doves urging him to end the war and sue for peace, and on the other side, alas too influential, he has his hawks begging him to step up in every way the armed conflict and seek military victory. So all along the line he is scratched and marked and spotted, as would be any man having to work in such close proximity with birds, of whatever feather.

50 It is an unhappy situation which is worrying for the President and I am sure he derives a great deal of comfort and consolation from the warm support he gets from allies in pursuing his policy.

55 Mr. Chairman, I think it is high time that one such ally, namely this country, ceased to give one scrap more comfort or consolation to President Johnson in supporting his ill-begotten, misdirected and wholly criminal policy. I hope Conference will decide here today that the Labour movement will no longer

associate with the United States policy in Vietnam, and what comfort and support
65 and encouragement we can muster must be directed instead at those growing numbers of Americans who are urging the end of this bloody war. God knows, they need our support more than does the
70 President.

It is perhaps easiest for us here today to criticise the United States of America. It is far harder and requires more courage to be a dissenter in the United States. I
75 have no doubt that we shall be told that such an action will have no effect and will be misguided. I quote the Prime Minister on this, who said that our objective is not to strike allegedly moral postures or to
80 make unhelpful denunciatory declarations. In deference to his view I shall not press the argument in moral terms, though in passing I must say that no one ever told me the day when the Labour Government
85 ceased to follow courses of action from a moral starting line.

As for moral posturing, the word 'posture' suggests to me an uncomfortable and awkward stance, and I know this
90 very well from going round defending Government policy which I have been doing in Cambridge during the recent by-election. I find myself, in answer to questions about Vietnam, having to hold
95 my tongue, cross my fingers and drag my feet, and I am wondering personally how long I can remain in this uncomfortable

posture and at the same time have a hand still willing to hold a Labour Party card.

100 As for the Prime Minister's point of view about denunciation, here again I will not concentrate on this, although it does seem to me that little has been achieved in changing United States policy as a result
105 of *sub rosa* and *sotto voce* utterances behind the scenes. Perhaps on this score alone we should see whether a clear, loud declaration will achieve more than quiet murmurings down a private hot line.

110 I shall then pay heed to the Prime Minister's remarks about moralising and denunciation. I take comfort from another remark he made. He said it is absolutely wrong—in this context he meant
115 incorrect—to suggest that the Americans pay no attention to us. If this is right, as I believe it is, perhaps they will continue to listen to us, not denouncing, not moralising, but explaining to them that
120 their policy is doomed to failure because it is misguided and misdirected.

A great deal of America's difficulties in dealing with Vietnam stem because of this persistent and powerful body of
125 opinion, which holds even today, that the United States must pursue a war in Vietnam as a means of combatting the so-called menace of Communism. There are too many people shaping this policy in
130 the United States who see this problem's solution as the annihilation of the revolutionary forces, the obliteration of

North Vietnam and the permanent occupation of South Vietnam, both as an
135 example to other countries who may erupt
in civil conflict against reactionary
regimes, and also as a staging post and
perhaps a launching pad from which they
can launch what they feel may be the
140 inevitable ultimate armed conflict with
China itself.

This view is not only desperately
dangerous to world peace, it also prevents
the solution of the immediate problem,
145 and I suggest it hampers a *détente* in other
trouble spots throughout the world.

At least our Government does not go
this far. At least it is prepared to explain
that Vietnam must have a political and not
150 a military solution, but why do we not go
further? Why do we not explain to the
United States that this conflict is a civil
conflict on the part of the whole
Vietnamese people seeking to shape their
155 own future? Surely, Mr. Chairman, no
country is better able than ours, arguing
from our own history and our own
experience, to explain this to the United
States of America.

160 We have known the power of national
movement, of people's desires to seek
independence and national identity. We
have seen the fierce and determined action
and devotion to these causes, whether in
165 Kenya or in Ireland or in India, or indeed
in the American colonies themselves, and
we know too well that these springs

cannot be dammed by force of arms,
whether the arms be muskets or bren
170 guns or napalm. We have learned the
lessons at the cost of loss of many
English lives. Now let us teach it to the
United States. After all, they were not
slow in teaching us our history lesson in
175 1956 at the time of Suez.

I do not denounce, I do not moralise, I
will not even doubt the sincerity of the
chief figures in this matter. I believe
President Johnson wants peace, and I
180 believe Harold Wilson wants peace, but
how can we expect a response from the
other side when President Johnson still
shows this ambivalent and erroneous
view of the struggle? How can he expect
185 a response to offers of peace when, as he
did in a speech last week, he goes on to
compare the United States determination
to win in Vietnam with the determination
they showed against Nazi Germany ?
190 Then he goes on in the same speech to
talk about totalitarian regimes not being
able to understand the nature of United
States democracy. I had not realised that
the N.L.F. was a totalitarian regime.

195 If any moral posturing is unhelpful, it
is this attitude still colouring American
policy which has the United States posing
as guardians of the Faith, as if in some
holy war against the infidels.

200 L.B.J.'s supporters may see him as the
good Texan sheriff against the Red

Badmen, but this attitude does not solve the war.

Thus, one part of the argument on
205 which this motion is based is that by ending our shameful association with the United States policy we can freely and independently explain where it is fallacious, but I think it will even more
210 enable the United Kingdom to play a stronger part in the search for peace.

I do not wish to belittle the work being done by the Prime Minister or his colleagues. We admire these initiatives,
215 but how much greater the chances of success if we were seen to be acting independently. I heard George Brown speak on the same platform at Cambridge two weeks ago and I was impressed by
220 his sincerity, but how can his overtures abroad be received with sincerity whilst he is constrained within the policy limits drawn by the White House ? How much more productive would his efforts be if he
225 had not to choose his words with such care so as not to offend President Johnson and his colleagues.

In passing, I think that Conference has the right to know in what other
230 Government departments policy is being followed with this painstaking regard for the feelings of the White House. Had the Home Secretary his own reasons for forbidding North Vietnamese workers to
235 speak to British workers here in

[...]

Scarborough, or was this again so as not to upset the Americans ?

Our support for American policy hampers our efforts to find peace. It is
240 quite intolerable and it is anomalous. We press for peace, yet we send our soldiers and police to train the South Vietnamese. We press for peace, yet we permit our hovercraft to be used in military
245 operations. The longer we support the United States, the more tarnished becomes our reputation and the more suspect becomes our belief in the United Nations.

I see nothing to be lost by a clear break
250 with United States policy. I think that the chances of peace stand to gain if we dissociate from American policy. God knows, we do not seem to achieve much
255 in our present moral posture. Each day the war escalates still further, and each day the world becomes more cynical and nauseated by the lies and hypocrisy which surround every move and every utterance.

You told us in your address on
260 Monday Mr. Chairman, that this Conference was Labour's shop window. Let us remove this piece of soiled and shoddy policy from our shop window,
265 and let us say at last to the world that the British Labour movement has declared that on Vietnam at least, we will not go all the way with L.B.J. (*Applause.*)

Voting on the Resolutions followed and the results were as follows:

Composite Resolution No. 49 was carried.

In the other Resolutions card votes were taken and the results were as follows:

Card Vote No. 7. For Composite Resolution No. 28: 2,752,000. Against: 2,633,000. Composite Resolution No. 28 was carried. (*Cheers and applause from the floor.*)

[...]

Report of the 66th Annual Conference of the Labour Party, Scarborough, 1967, p. 223-4 and 236-7