Bernie Taft

The Leninist concept of the party is increasingly under discussion among revolutionaries. Many who had come to reject the need for a revolutionary political party are having a second look at the problem in the light of recent experiences in the economically advanced countries. As a reaction to Stalinist practices, to bureaucratic control and to manipulative methods many revolutionaries, especially among the young, have searched for more genuinely democratic processes, for direct control of the movement by its participants and for safeguards against manipulation. In doing so they have often tended to discard parties and their structures altogether.

However, the fragmentation and divisions which have been a feature of the left especially in Western countries and the frustrations and set-backs which have flowed from them, have caused many activists to reconsider their attitude to the concept of a revolutionary party which aims to act as a vanguard, to give shape and cohesion to the revolutionary forces, to co-ordinate the diverse streams and the new forces constantly generated which are groping towards fundamental change in our society.

Certainly there are the problems of bureaucracy, of democratic control — how to combine the need for organisation and discipline with safeguards against manipulation, undemocratic control by a small group of leaders, concentration of power and decision making in a few hands and the degeneration and corruption that can result from it.

A serious evaluation of the Leninist party principle based on historical experience of the Bolshevik Party can help to throw some light on the problems that revolutionaries face today, including the problem of how to create a political party able to attract, lead and give shape to the revolutionary forces and at the same time avoid bureaucratic control and degeneration. This is true despite the obvious differences between the tasks that the Bolsheviks faced and those confronting revolutionaries in Western countries today.

In fact a sweeping rejection of all past experience and a refusal to absorb that which is valid and applicable today is as much an expression of dogmatism as the blind copying of the experience of the past. It must be admitted that the left has been guilty of both sins. Oddly, frequently the same people who in the past blindly copied foreign and inapplicable experience, tend to react by in turn rejecting all past experiences indiscriminately.

What is true of individuals is certainly true of social groups. The long period of dominance of Stalinism and its “theories” has often given way to tendencies to reject all theory and to a disdain to creatively examine past experience.

A serious examination of the Leninist conception of the party has been made particularly difficult because of the widespread unclarity and even distortion as to what this concept actually constitutes and how it was applied. There are two main reasons for this.

Firstly, some bourgeois theorists have tended to blame the Leninist theory of the party for the subsequent crimes of the Stalinist era. It is presented as the germ from which arbitrary rule, one-man dictatorship, lack of democratic liberties and freedom of debate etc., was to sprout inevitably. To justify this view Lenin’s theory of the party is presented as authoritarian, undemocratic and restrictive. This is done by confining his views to those which he expressed in What Is To Be Done?, (published in 1902) and the decisions of the 10th Party Congress (March 1921) which outlawed factions and which is presented as the logical outcome and final crystallization of Lenin’s views.

Secondly, Stalinist historiography, for its own reasons, does the same. It too presents the decisions of the 10th Congress — taken under exceptional circumstances and as a specific response to a desperate situation — as the acme of the Leninist view on the party, valid for all situations. Moreover, it presents even these decisions one-sidedly, as will be shown later on.

Here we have a strange meeting ground of different forces. Bourgeois theorists identify the Leninist theory of the party with the decisions of the 10th Congress because they don’t like them and want to discredit the theory by identifying it with these emergency decisions. Stalinist “theorists” have done the same because they do like the 10th Congress decisions and have a vested interest in re-inforcing and institutionalizing them. The coming together of two trends re-inforcing each other, has had a considerable influence. It is little wonder that the Leninist theory of the party has been and continues to be misunderstood by many revolutionaries.

Lenin’s theory of the party

In the first place the Leninist theory of the party was not static. It evolved and adapted to changing conditions. Lenin’s pamphlet What Is To Be Done? is treated to this day as a holy text, containing principles valid for all times by dogmatic and authoritarian forces. What Is To Be Done? for all its remaining value was a response to the particular situation in Russia at the beginning of the century. Its heavy emphasis on a secret organisation of professional revolutionaries corresponded to the exigencies of Russia in 1902. Lenin himself criticised any attempt to hold him to all the views expressed in it. In 1908 he said:

The basic mistake made by those who now criticise What
Is To Be Done? is to treat the pamphlet apart from its connection with the concrete historical situation of a definite, and now long past period (1) in the development of our Party. (Lenin Collected Works Vol. 15 p.101).

And again

What Is To Be Done? is a controversial correction of Economist distortions and it would be wrong to regard the pamphlet in any other light (emphasis added—BT) (Ibid. p.106).

However the most significant feature of the Leninist concept of the party is its deeply democratic character. Significantly it is this feature that has been widely distorted. There was complete freedom of discussion within the Bolshevik party in Lenin’s days. This was regarded as essential — as natural as the air one breathes. It was certainly practiced. Lenin and the Bolsheviks regarded differences in views as a normal natural feature of a viable party. They had plenty of controversies which they treated as a matter of course in accordance with their Marxist conceptions. It would have never occurred to them that active, thinking beings with different experiences could all think alike, or that there is anything wrong about differences. Only when thought stops is there an end to differences of opinion.

It is a fact that up to Lenin’s death and for a little while after there was NEVER unanimity on the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, neither in the voting on resolutions, nor in regard to the election of the leadership. Right through this period there were always minorities in the party, which expressed their views freely and publicly in the press.

These minorities were, after each Congress, represented on the leading bodies of the party, including the Central Committee.

This was quite fundamental in Lenin’s practice. It changed in Stalin’s day, and was distorted and replaced by a false ethos in the working class movement which has survived to this day. It is an ethos which demands a sterile and mechanical “unanimity” and which regards the existence of different views as damaging. It has led to a wide acceptance of the view that you don’t wash your linen in public, that the class enemy will take your Marxist conceptions. It would have never occurred to them that active, thinking beings with different experiences could all think alike, or that there is anything wrong about differences. Only when thought stops is there an end to differences of opinion.

Communists have been conditioned to regard differences as abnormal, as damaging to the organisation, when in fact the end of differences was inevitably synonymous with degeneration. As for the damage of airing differences in public — those who hold that view should look at the public controversies and open discussions of differences among the Bolsheviks on the eve of the October revolution, during the revolution and during the civil war. It is an eye-opener.

One can hardly imagine a time and condition when the argument that public discussion of differences is damaging to the party applied more strongly — yet it did not jeopardise the revolution, nor their victory in the civil war. On the contrary, their democracy, their frank discussion of problems, even the most serious ones was the basis of their strength and mass support. It was also the basis of their real (not formal) unity of action around decisions, democratically arrived at. They took it for granted that in a revolutionary organisation, once decisions have been made and policy decided they would be acted on. As Lenin put it, “Organisation is impossible unless the minority bows to the majority.” (Vol. 20, p.319). This unity and cohesive action on the basis of majority decision distinguished them from Social-Democratic parties.

The Bolsheviks in Lenin’s days guarded the rights of minorities, did not discriminate against them and did not remove them from leading party positions because of differences which arose. All this came only in Stalin’s days. At the same time, they voluntarily accepted in the interest of the movement some limits to differences. It is interesting to note that as far back as Jan. 1904 Lenin wrote that:

... a normal struggle, a struggle of ideas, a struggle carried out within definite bounds is permissible but ... boycotts, refusal to work under the Central Committee direction, refusal of financial support for the central Party treasury, and so on, are not permissible. (Vol. 7 p.159).

It was later when the Stalinist syndrome became dominant that “a normal struggle, a struggle of ideas, a struggle carried out within definite bounds” became impermissible. Differences were polarized, taken to their logical conclusion, rigidly projected to fundamentals to show that they inevitably “by the logic of their position” led to fundamental, unbridgeable differences, or even worse, into the camp of the enemy. It is of course always possible to polarize differences or to try and take them back to their “ideological roots”. But it is mostly wrong to do so. It is part of the Stalinist technique.

The suppression of minority rights allegedly in the interest of the rights of the majority or the movement as a whole has been followed by suppression of the right of the majority as well. This is what happened under Stalin. By contrast Lenin carefully guarded minority rights and freedom of debate, despite his often very sharp polemics. At the same time, Lenin’s attitude and his democratic practices leave no doubt that he would not have tolerated any infringement on the party’s independence and any attempt to interfere with its autonomous democratic processes, if he had faced such a problem. The following is a brief examination of some of the major controversies among the Bolsheviks before and after the October revolution, and the methods used to resolve them.

1. After Lenin’s return to Russia in April 1917 and the publication of his April Theses, serious differences in the party became evident. The Bolsheviks at this time, despite the crucial stage of the struggle, decided unanimously to have an open discussion in the press about the differences. Lenin wrote:

In making my report, I read the theses which were published in No. 26 of Pravda on April 7, 1917. Both the
themselves and the editors of Pravda. After a number of consultations, we unanimously concluded that it would be advisable openly to discuss our differences... (Letter on Tactics, April 17. Vol. 54 p.42).

2. On the eve of the October revolution a meeting of the Central Committee held on October 10, 1917 decided on the uprising. Zinoviev and Kamenev opposed this decision. It is true, contrary to the simplistic black or white nature of Stalinist history, that nearly the whole Bolshevik leadership had been hesitant about the proposal for an armed uprising. In fact, Lenin was getting increasingly impatient in his hideout, and accused the Central Committee of ignoring his previous communications and offered his resignation from the Central Committee in order to regain his freedom to agitate among the rank and file of the Party "for it is my profound conviction that if we 'wait' for the Congress of Soviets and let slip the present moment, we shall ruin the revolution". (quoted from E. H. Carr The Bolshevik Revolution Vol. 1, p.164).

He appeared in disguise at the meeting of the Central Committee on October 10. Reproaching the C.C. for "indifference to the question of insurrection" he received a majority vote of ten to two to prepare for armed insurrection.

It is characteristic of the attitude in the ranks of the Bolsheviks at the time that the Political Bureau elected to put the decision into effect consisted of seven people, namely Lenin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Trotsky, Stalin, Sokolnikov and Bubnov—i.e. it included Kamenev and Zinoviev who had just strongly opposed the decision for armed uprising. When they continued their opposition, first (on October 11) circularising all Bolshevik organisations protesting about the decisions for the armed uprising, then (on October 18) published a letter in the non-Party journal of the Left, Novaya Zhizn, against the decision, Lenin demanded their expulsion from the Party. They were not expelled, in fact they remained in the leadership of the party. Lenin did not renew the demand. Kamenev continued in the leadership of the Bolsheviks. He was elected a full member of the Politburo in 1919 and remained a member till 1926. Zinoviev was elected a full member of the Politburo in 1919 and remained a member till 1926. However strange this may appear in retrospect, it expresses the prevailing attitude and ethos of the Bolshevik party at that time.

3. Serious differences developed among the Bolshevik leaders soon after the October Revolution about the attempts to end the war. After an armistice had been signed with Germany on December 2nd 1917 formal negotiations for a Peace Treaty opened in Brest-Litovsk on December 9th 1917.

At that time the Bolsheviks had high hopes about the revolution spreading quickly through Europe and especially into Germany.

However the German negotiators made tough demands for peace, involving Russian surrender of considerable territories.

When Trotsky returned to Petrograd for discussions on the tactics to be pursued, three trends emerged among the leadership. Lenin, who was in a minority, took the view that the German terms should be accepted, Trotsky's view was for not resuming the war, but also of refusing to sign a treaty on the German terms, whereas Bukharin and Dzerzhinsky favoured a revolutionary war. The decision was to drag out the peace negotiations as long as possible.

After the Germans resumed the offensive the Central Committee, now in almost continuous session, remained divided. At one stage Lenin threatened to resign. Characteristically this was published in Pravda.

Eventually the decision was reached to accept the German terms by seven votes to four, but only after Trotsky, Joffe, Krestinsky and Dzerzhinsky decided to abstain, thus allowing a majority to develop.

It was indeed a very difficult decision to make. That there should have been different evaluations on how the German government would act and how the German working class would respond was natural. According to Lenin's notes on the discussions, Trotsky had conceded that there was a 25% chance that the Germans would attack if no peace treaty was signed.

In fact E. H. Carr records that there was strong pressure within the German side to accept this unusual way of ending the war and that "Trotsky's gesture apparently came nearer to success than was known at the time". The Bolshevik Revolution Vol. 3 p.49.

Even then, the 7th Party Congress held on March 6th 1918 only approved Lenin's motion for ratification of the Peace Treaty by 28 to 9 votes.

4. The next major dispute inside the Bolshevik party occurred towards the end of 1920 and the beginning of 1921. It centred around the role of the Trade Unions in a situation of growing economic disintegration of the country, at the end of the civil war. The debate among the Bolsheviks was vigorous, as was customary among them.

Trotsky called for the militarisation of labor as the only means to get production going. Based on his successful civil war experiences and on his success in getting a Transport system that had almost come to a standstill moving again by drastic military measures (in which he had been fully supported by Lenin and the Central Committee) he now wanted the Trade Unions to be deprived of their autonomy and absorbed into the machinery of government. (I. Deutscher The Prophet Armed p.507).

Flushed with success, he threatened to "shake-up" various trade unions as he had "shaken up" those of the Transport workers. (ibid. p.502).

Lenin came out vigorously against this slogan. The Central Committee openly called on the party to resist energetically "militarized and bureaucratic
forms of work”. In the ensuing discussions Lenin opposed the use of compulsion as the main method of getting industry going. Persuasion must be the first resort. He held that:

The trade unions ought therefore not to be turned into appendages of the State. They must retain a measure of autonomy, they must speak for the workers, if need be against the government.

Ironically while Lenin’s view prevailed in the debate at the time, it was largely Trotsky’s proposal which was subsequently put into effect by Stalin. The trade unions were in fact deprived of their independence and became unable to defend the workers’ interest against the government, when necessary.

The trade union debate was conducted with considerable heat because what was at stake was how to avoid disintegration of the economy effecting the fate of the revolution itself. Yet despite the grave nature of the issues and their crucial importance for the future course of the country, despite all the feeling which this necessarily generated — Trotsky’s “defeat” did not lead to his removal from his leading position. In fact the same 10th Congress which authoritatively rejected his proposals on the trade unions, re-elected him, along with Lenin, Zinoviev, Stalin and Kamenev to constitute the Politburo of the Bolshevik Party.

5. The decisions of the 10th Congress of the R.C.P.(B) in March, 1921, which restricted inner-party democracy, are often evoked against the earlier views and practices of Lenin and the Bolsheviks. It is presented as the real, finally arrived at view of Lenin, based on his bitter experience. In fact the whole process of the gradual destruction of inner party democracy under Stalin and the distorted conception of the Party which was developed alongside it, sought to establish its legitimacy on the basis of the 10th Congress decision.

A whole theoretical and emotional edifice has been erected on the basis of an historical distortion. A generation of communists has grown up whose attitudes have been conditioned by a view of the Leninist party which is a caricature of Lenin’s views. Unfortunately this caricature became the model on which communist parties all over the world patterned themselves. The distortion of history is two-fold.

Firstly, by presenting the 10th Congress decision as Lenin’s final word on the party, the exceptional nature of the decisions, made in response to an emergency situation, is ignored. Secondly, even so the actual decisions made at the 10th Congress have been presented one-sidedly and have been in fact distorted.

Whatever the wisdom and subsequent effect of the 10th Congress decisions — they were certainly followed by a gradual and continuous decline of democratic freedoms and their replacement by control from on top — this was not the intention of the Congress. They were clearly presented and seen as emergency decisions dictated by the dire threat to the regime at its most critical moment.

Lenin put it to the 10th Congress that the present problems present a far greater danger than the Denikins, Kolchaks and Yudeniches put together... The difficulties are enormous... (Vol. 32, p.179).

There were several reasons for the exceptionally critical situation which developed at the end of 1920. The country was in utter devastation as its economy was grinding to a standstill. It had been possible to keep up the pressure and maintain morale during the civil war, but now that it was over, a reaction set in. The people were exceptionally weary. It became increasingly difficult to maintain any discipline. The workers were leaving the remaining factories because they could not be paid and were starving. This is how Lenin described it at the 10th Congress:

Our proletariat has been largely declassed; the terrible crisis and the closing down of the factories have compelled people to flee from starvation. The workers have simply abandoned their factories: they have had to settle down in the country and have ceased to be workers. (Vol. 32, p.199).

Widespread dissatisfaction and growing opposition to the Bolsheviks developed among the peasants of Russia — the real masses. The Kronstadt rebellion in February 1921, on the eve of the 10th Congress, was an expression of it. Lenin at the 10th Congress admitted that the peasant’s dissatisfaction with the proletarian dictatorship is mounting, when the crisis in peasant farming is coming to a head, and when the demobilisation of the peasant army is setting loose hundreds of broken men who have nothing to do, whose only accustomed occupation is war and who breed banditry. (Lenin Vol. 32 p.178).

For the first time since 1917 large sections of the working class, not to speak of the peasantry had turned against the Bolsheviks — something they had never envisaged. In the midst of famine and the threat of peasant revolts, with the spectre of the Kronstadt uprising before them, with a steadily deteriorating political situation, the Bolsheviks saw no alternative but to fall back on their own party as the only reliable force to pull them through. They believed that they were acting as the historical agency of the revolution.

It was in this situation that they took unusual and emergency steps inside their own party to enable it to cope with the threat to the survival of the revolution. Lenin was quite open about it at the 10th Congress.

This undoubtedly demands of the ruling party of Communists and of the leading revolutionary elements of the proletariat a different attitude to the one we have time and again displayed over the past year. (emphasis added— BT). It is a danger that undoubtedly calls for much greater unity and discipline; it undoubtedly requires that we should pull hard together. Otherwise we shall not cope with the dangers that have fallen to our lot. (Vol. 32 p.168).

The Congress decided to tighten up. It took measures which restricted inner-party democracy and increased the disciplinary powers of the Central Committee. In light of the established practices of the Bolsheviks and their prevailing standards, these measures and their implications seemed harsh. It presented them with a dilemma. The
desperate mood of the party in this agonising situation was perhaps expressed most vividly by Karl Radek at the 10th Congress when he uttered these, as it turned out, prophetic words:

In voting for this resolution I feel that it can well be turned against us, and nevertheless I support it . . . . Let the Central Committee in a moment of danger take the severest measures against the best party comrades, if it finds this necessary . . . . Let the Central Committee even be mistaken. This is less dangerous than the wavering which is now observable. (The Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Resolutions and Decisions of Congress. Moscow 1954. Vol. I p.540).

Even so Lenin was self-conscious about what he felt compelled to do. In asking for the adoption of rules under which a meeting of the Central Committee with all the alternate members and the members of the Control Commission were to be given the right by a two-thirds majority to reduce a member of the Central Committee to the status of an alternate member or to expel him from the party.

He said:

This is an extreme measure that is being adopted specially, in view of the dangerous situation. (Vol. 32 p.256).

During the debate he both pleaded and apologised for the proposals.

Comrades this is no time(!) to have an opposition. Either you are on this side, or on the other, but then your weapon must be a gun. This follows from the objective situation and you must not blame us for it(!) Comrades, let's not have an opposition just now! (Vol. 32, p.200).

But in proposing these exceptional measures, Lenin tried to limit their effect and above all to maintain and guarantee freedom of discussion for differing views. This side of the 10th Congress decisions has largely been put aside. The Congress decided

Instructing the C.C. of the Party to enforce these decisions, the Congress at the same time points out that special publications, symposiums, etc., can and should provide space for a most comprehensive exchange of opinions between Party members on all questions herein indicated.

In the course of the debate Lenin kept coming back to this matter.

This, I repeat, does not cut short theoretical discussion. (Vol. 32 p.255).

Lenin was sensitive about any suggestion that he wanted to use administrative measures against the opposition. In reply to such a charge by Shlyapnikov, the leader of the Workers' Opposition, he said:

After all, Comrade Shlyapnikov and I have known each other for many, many years, ever since the period of our underground work and emigration — how can he say that I am trying to intimidate anyone by characterising certain deviations? And when I say that the stand of the Workers' Opposition is wrong, and that it is syndicalism — what has administering got to do with it? (Vol. 32 p.197).

The 10th Congress decided on "the complete prohibition of all factionalism." Factionalism was defined in the resolution as "the formation of groups with separate platforms, striving to a certain degree to segregate and create their own group discipline." E. H. Carr adds, "Thus 'groups' were not in themselves illegitimate: 'factions' were." (The Bolshevik Revolution, Vol. 1, p.207.)

Even so, there was no prohibition on different views and trends. In fact Lenin intervened against an amendment moved by Ryazanov and insisted on the right of party members to submit their platform to the Congress. Rejecting Ryazanov's amendment to prohibit any future elections to the Central Committee based on different platforms, he said:

I do not think we have the power to prohibit this. If we are united by our resolution on unity, and, of course, the development of the revolution, there will be no repetition of elections according to platforms. The lesson we have learned at this Congress will not be forgotten. But if circumstances should give rise to fundamental disagreements, can we prohibit them from being brought before the judgement of the whole Party? No we cannot. This is an excessive desire, which is impracticable, and I move that we reject it. (Vol. 32 p.281).

Nevertheless a distorted version of the 10th Congress decision became the 'norm' later. In Stalin's days, the tendency grew to treat all opposition, all differences of view, all groupings however transitory, fluid and open, as factions.

Another significant feature of the 10th Congress which has been largely hidden by the subsequent presentation, is the treatment of the leaders of the opposition.

After their overwhelming defeat at the Congress, Shlyapnikov and Kollontai, the leaders of the Workers' Opposition were re-elected as full members of the Central Committee. Saponov, the leader of the Democratic Centralism group was elected as an alternate member of the Central Committee. Lenin said, at the Congress:

I, for one, have publicly urged that it would be desirable to have representatives of the Workers' Opposition and the Democratic Centralism groups on the Central Committee. (Vol. 32 p.257).

There is a special need at the present moment to restore historical truths about these aspects of the Leninist concept of the party. In the worldwide upsurge against the capitalist system, the entrenched ruling forces are striving might and main to divert, absorb and frustrate the revolutionary movement. To encourage fragmentation and to prevent the effective organisation of revolutionaries is one of their major objectives. It is in their interest to discredit the Leninist party concept. This is quite vital for their success.

Unfortunately Stalinist 'theory' with its distortions of Lenin and Stalinist practice have helped them. The Leninist concept of the party freed from myths and distortions has much of value for those concerned with revolutionary change of our society. Young revolutionaries, especially those who have become sceptical of any revolutionary party structure ought to look at the example of a disciplined, cohesive party and its role in the revolutionary process. Older revolutionaries, often steeped in the experiences of the Stalinist period, ought to re-examine their views about a revolutionary party in the light of an objective historical assessment of the Bolsheviks and the problems of our time.