

Dressing by the Left

by Professor T.F. Carbery

My parents voted Labour; they took Labour newspapers and magazines and went to Party Whist Drives, but they were not members and did not work for the Party. It was Mrs Dobson who introduced me to the Party.

To the Aid of the Party

When I was nine we had moved from a house in the area of Gorbals/Hutchesontown to the delights of a council – we said Corporation – house in Govanhill. One spring day when I was ten, well maybe eleven, Mrs Dobson, who lived nearby, stopped me in the street. “Tom” she declared “I have a job for you. You could deliver leaflets for me, couldn’t you? Tell your mother I want you to distribute Labour leaflets for me and if she says you can, then come round tomorrow after school and I shall give you the leaflets and tell you what to do!”

And so it came to pass – and for over fifty years I have worked for the Labour Party and for diverse Labour candidates, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

My dealings with Mrs Dobson were never numerous but with others I held her in the highest regard. She was in both the Labour and Co-operative Parties. She was in the Co-op Women’s Guild and served on the Board of the Kinning Park Society which became Glasgow South. She was bright and intelligent. She was sensible and had judgement. She knew her ‘patch’; she was what in New York Democratic Party terms would have been “a precinct captain”. She was compassionate. She knew when to speak and when not to speak – but that there were others who failed in just that!! Moreover, she was always well-dressed.

At the Selection Meeting

The last time I saw her was when Labour selected its Glasgow MEP candidate; the day we gave our political imprimatur to Janey Buchan.

I had brought six ladies from Castlemilk, squeezing them into an estate car and they were on the bench behind me. However, I had spotted Mrs Dobson, elegant as ever, sitting on her own and had slipped in beside her. “Ah – it’s yourself Tom” she observed. She commiserated on the death of my mother, enquired politely about my wife and my children and about the University. We discussed former neighbours. Her dress was in sky blue – with matching hat,

scarf with brooch, light coat, shoes, gloves and handbag. Her hat was one of three or four in the entire hall and two of the others were being worn by a couple of my back-benchers.

Our conversation was broken by mild applause, procedural rather than enthusiastic, as the platform party appeared. The Chairman of the City Labour Party remained standing to address us. Perhaps memory plays tricks but as I recall it he was dressed in an open-necked "bunk-house" shirt and either unbecoming jeans or dark trousers. Mrs Dobson winced visibly. "Tom" she pronounced sadly. "I never thought I would live to see the day a Labour Party meeting of this status would be addressed by a man dressed like that!"

The gentleman concerned did not hear her but some of his friends did. Their glances indicated anger and scorn. Being of not dissimilar attire to that of the Chairman they clearly regarded Mrs Dobson's outfit as outré – not that they would have used that term. To them she was an ancient, muttering élitist nonsense.

Dressed for the Party –

All this occurred of course when the Broad Left was in the ascendancy. Not all were Militants or even Trotskyists but some were. The majority were those who observed that whereas they were not members of Militant they did not believe in witch-hunts. They were not supporters of Militant but supporters of the supporters of Militant.

Not infrequently they were professional people or white collar workers – teachers, local government officers, minor civil servants – yet they had abandoned the uniform of dark suits, white shirts and sober ties but only to replace it by a new uniform of plain shirt, jeans or other dirty trousers, unbrushed shoes and the total abandonment of ties. The feminists had burned their bras and their menfolk were engaging in their gestures. To them Mrs Dobson was an oddity, I was an oddity and my ladies from Castlemilk were oddities.

– And the Conference

These doubtless uncharitable thoughts were provoked by the reports of the October Labour Party Conference. Suits, the tabloids and *The Guardian* reported, were 'in'. The broad sweep of delegates, we were told, had abandoned their T-shirts and open-necked shirts, the medallions and the jeans. They had been to Marks and Spencers for suits reported one tabloid. It was all reminiscent of the time, some years earlier, when Derek Hatton et al had started their identification with suits and Burton shops were credited with having been the suppliers.

The transformation was not as great as the papers suggested (and the change in the Party is not as great as is being suggested). From my television viewing the wardrobe of declared but controlled rebellion was still around, maybe not as prominent as hitherto but still there, as is Militant and its supporters and the supporters of the supporters. Doubtless such faces are not as numerous as hitherto but they are there.

Nevertheless being the old fuddy duddy that I am, the neo-fascist right winger (if Militants in Cathcart are to be believed) that I am, I am grateful for the discrimination; grateful for the restoration of suits.

Sharing Mrs Dobson's Choice

Two last thoughts.

First it would have been better if some of the suits had been bought from the Co-op – given of course that they could find a Co-op which sells suits which is more than I can do in the whole of Gorbals, Hutchesontown, Govanhill, Cathcart, Castlemilk and all the other territory that was Glasgow South.

The second can be expressed more succinctly – I preferred the Labour Party of Mrs Dobson!

The Author

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