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Episodes from the Early Career of François Lafitte

(1931-1945)*

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For the young—or at least the young with a proper share of ambition and energy—the point of understanding the world better has normally been, as Marx’s famous injunction suggests, to change it. And one of the principal obstacles that usually prevent them from doing so has been their elders, squatting there behind their ramparts, complacent and cynical. This is the real enemy, the “Old Gang,” masters of the institutions that they manipulate to serve their own interests, guardians of the military-industrial complex, rejecting reform because they’ve seen it all before and know it won’t work—in short, the kind of people that the young will themselves in due course become.

In some generations, there is widespread agreement about what is to be done, once the opposition of the elders has been thrust aside. At times of war the objectives are usually simple enough—to win it, or else to stop it. But that was not true of the particular group on which I want to focus—those who reached maturity at the beginning of the thirties, what the French would call the class of 1931. In that year the future of liberal democracy even in Britain, a victor nation in 1918, looked precarious, and the spectrum of alternative ways of approaching the crisis that threatening the economic and social order seemed wider than ever before. The Labour Government had collapsed in the face of the crisis. The political party that had presented itself as the vehicle of reform turned out to be, in Oswald Mosley’s cruel phrase, a “Salvation Army that took to its heels on the Day of Judgment.”¹ In its place, the National Government offered the traditional remedies of the Treasury view, cuts in expenditure and benefits, a balanced budget—not exactly a programme

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** This paper draws on the personal papers of François Lafitte, now lodged in the University of Birmingham Archive. Use has also been made of the papers of Richard Titmuss and of Political and Economic Planning (both in LSE Library Archive; and by courtesy of Professor Ann Oakley additional personal papers of Professor Titmuss) and of the Common Wealth archives (University of Sussex). Thanks are due in all cases to the archivists for their help and support—especially Dr C. Penney at the University of Birmingham.

1. R. SKIDELSKY, *Oswald Mosley*, 1975, 271.

to stir the blood of the young. The Liberal party split, and its long decline accelerated. Extremes on both sides began to seem suddenly more attractive—Mosley’s New Party on the right, Soviet Communism (rather than the home grown variety) as an apparently entirely new way of addressing these fundamental problems. Faced with this situation, normally sensible people lost their heads.² So what were the young to think—and do? It was not so much bliss to be alive in that dawn—let alone heavenly to be young—as deeply perplexing.

A little later—not much—a consensus view did begin to emerge in Britain that united much of what came to be known as “middle opinion.”³ This combined a judicious measure of intervention in the economy through state planning (to be accepted by a capitalism chastened by the experience of the slump) with structural reform of public institutions (“A New Deal for Britain”). This approach eventually crystallised in the fabled “New Jerusalem” of the war years, and its advocates were the subjects of the bitterly scornful assault in Corelli Barnett’s three-decker anatomy of the wartime and immediate post-war experience. As he puts it,

Products of the closed loop of British elite education and culture, not so much men of straw as men of paper, the members of the “enlightened” establishment were no better equipped to design a working New Jerusalem than Adolf Hitler, another kind of romantic fantasist, was equipped to run a real war.⁴

New Jerusalem will be part of my story; but because my interest is as much in means as ends, I prefer to portray my case in terms of another biblical city, Jericho. Starting out as an energetic and principled eighteen-year-old to achieve fundamental change, what are the best means to adopt in order to dislodge the enemy from their entrenched positions on the ramparts and deliver the city in your hands?

A variety of possibilities will come to mind, as circumstances and preferences dictate, from dynamite to subterfuge and all points in between. Ends may dictate the solutions adopted; but tactics intervene: timing, feasibility, the need to make tactical alliances (and break them), the choice of vocabulary, the identification of audiences that can be reached and changed, the permeability of institutions—or lack of it.

This perspective gives me my *problématique*. What I propose is a brief review of different ways in which social and economic change can be achieved from a starting point outside the existing centres of power in the political and economic system. I will use as illustration an account of how one particular member of the class of 1931 addressed that task—the ends that he and his immediate colleagues defined for their successive interventions and the means that they deployed to reach them. And I will try to assess how effective those interventions proved to be, over a sequence of contrasting episodes.

I am conscious of the weaknesses of a one case approach as an analytical device; and do not wish to make great claims for my protagonist—this is not an *éloge*. Rather, he is a typical figure of the period who happened to have an unusual combination of experiences over the fifteen years that followed the crisis of 1931—experiences which (I believe) illustrate some of the obstacles and opportunities that

2. R. SKIDELSKY, *Politicians and the Slump*, 1967.

3. Paul ADDISON, *The Road to 1945*, 1975.

4. Correlli BARNETT, *The Audit of War*, 1986, 18.

confronted an intelligent and highly motivated young person at that time. So let me introduce him to you.

Preparing for the Revolution

François Lafitte was born in East London in 1913, the illegitimate child of a young French feminist (more precisely, a continental version of an Edwardian New Woman) and an American anarchist who disappeared from her life even before her son was born.

François' mother Françoise Lafitte was a dominant influence throughout the earlier part of his life. She came from a prosperous middle-class family in Maubeuge, close to the Belgian border. The family had some artistic pretensions, but Françoise left them for London and feminist companionship—and the pursuit of free love. Deserted by her lover, she was cut off from her family by the war (Maubeuge was occupied by the German Army for four years) and made a further false move by marrying a Russian exile, Serge Cyon, who professed to be a former army officer and political refugee from Tsarist oppression and having a second child with him. Deserted in turn by Cyon (who left her only the legacy of his name through the marriage—although that, along with his other claims, turned out to be false, too) she was financially and legally in deep water when she wrote a despairing fan letter to Havelock Ellis, then world famous as the apostle of the doctrines of sexual freedom.

The stages by which she eventually became Ellis's companion are too complex and protracted a process for this paper: sufficient for now to say that Margaret Sanger, the American birth control pioneer made it financially possible for them to live together on the understanding that Françoise fulfilled the duties of the great man's secretary (all that is described in great—even interminable—detail in Françoise's own autobiography and Phyllis Grosskurth's biography of Ellis.⁵ The importance of this development for present purposes is that it brought another powerful influence into François' earlier life in the shape of Ellis himself.

The impact of living with Ellis was recalled subsequently by François in a paper he presented to the Havelock Ellis Society, commenting on his

shyness in personal relations—yet not a shrinking from them—which on acquaintance caused no awkwardness even if we sat through dinner in silence.

He adds,

I can recall none of his small talk. I can well remember, however, feeling how closely he fitted my boyhood concept of God the Father and how natural it seemed to me that God should not wish to engage in small talk with small fry.⁶

But God was prepared to allow the small boy the run of his extensive library—a benefit that François later singled out as particularly influential.

5. Françoise DELISLE, *Friendship's Odyssey*, 1964; Phyllis GROSSKURTH, *Havelock Ellis: a Biography*, 1980.

6. François LAFITTE, Lecture to Havelock Ellis Society, May 20th, 1967.

François actually only lived with him briefly, after he was thirteen. Nevertheless, he subsequently chose to refer to himself as Ellis's "adopted son."⁷ The other major consequence of an upbringing of that kind—or at least so he subsequently claimed—was to leave him free of the inhibitions about sexual behaviour which still crippled so many of the middle-class young in his generation.

His education was certainly not a typical one. It began at an LCC elementary school in Poplar, from which he was abruptly transferred (in consequence of one of his mother's numerous schemes to achieve financial security) to the *Collège Municipal* at Maubeuge. He and his half-brother Paul spent two years there with his maternal family, where he acquired idiomatic French. On return to England in 1924 he went first back to the local elementary school and then on to one of the LCC's excellent grammar schools, St Olave's, Southwark, from which he eventually won a county scholarship—and college exhibition—to Worcester College Oxford.

As a result of these varied experiences, François was an unusually cosmopolitan eighteen-year-old (in the positive sense of that word). To his French he was shortly to add German, learned in two protracted visits there in the summers of 1931 and 1932, just before going up to Oxford. He was also politically sophisticated—a process accelerated by his experience in Paris in 1931. Visiting the offices of *L'Humanité* on May Day, ostensibly to collect some books, he was picked up there by the French police in a *rafle* of foreign left-wingers, thrown in the cells overnight (without his shoelaces) and then accompanied by two inspectors to Dieppe and served with a notice formally expelling him from the country. Whatever he was doing at *L'Huma*—it does seem unlikely that they were running a public library service for passing students—this episode began a process which was sealed by his experiences in Germany, where he had a grandstand view of the approach of the Nazi regime. From that period his papers contain analyses of the current position of the KPD, descriptions of processions, banners and streetfighting and a certain amount of the kind of poetry about comradeship on the left that young men in his position tend to write. He writes rather ominously to his mother that he is "reading diligently," also that he is "not much of a Marxist."⁸ The first statement was true; the second (presumably intended to soothe maternal anxieties) was not. In fact, when he arrived at Worcester in the autumn of 1932 (detained until the last possible day by a love affair in Leipzig) he was in his own subsequent words a fully-formed "Marxist prig."

So his initial answer to the dilemma posed for his age group was quite simple: sweep the whole rotten system away. How, then, was this to be done? François greatly disliked the Oxford College he had joined, writing rather ungraciously many years later in response to an appeal that it seemed to him nothing more than a "finishing school for young gentlemen."⁹ He found more congenial company elsewhere, in Ruskin College and with left-wing dons like G.D.H. Cole and Maurice Bowra [sic]. But the main focus of his life was the University Communist Party. He found "a small group of extremely callow and inexperienced young student communists" and set out to apply the lessons of his wider experience and more sophisticated understanding of Marxism to the task of

7. Not step, because Ellis and Françoise never married; still less "illegitimate" as Asa Briggs suggests in his biography of Michael Young (2001).

8. Letter from François LAFFITE to Françoise, Aug. 15th, 1932: Lafitte papers, Birmingham University Archive.

9. Letter from FL to Worcester College, Oct. 13th, 1995, LP Supplementary Box.

professionalizing them into a group of disciplined and “hardened” communists.¹⁰ By October 1933, he was the leader of the Communist group and liaison with the party’s London based student coordinating group operating under the leadership of the charismatic John Cornford.¹¹ A temporary setback occurred in November when the body that provided the focus for campaigning and agitation and the public face of the party, the October Club, was banned and François rusticated for a term as the ringleader; but on return he resumed full control and his papers testify to the seriousness with which he took the task of political education of his “adolescent and naïve flock.”¹²

François spent the summer vacation of 1934 (July-September) in Vienna—both a powerful reinforcement of his beliefs and introduction to clandestine work. While there, he helped to store false passports for CP members trying to move across the frontier, presumably as part of the ring run by Soviet Military Intelligence, the GRU [Miller, 159]. This is as far into illegal activity as François went, at least as far as I can establish. Rather, Vienna was important to him both for the first-hand experience of the repression of the left (the infamous bombardment of workers’ flats by the regime; then the murder of Dollfuss, the PM, by Austrian Nazis “one hundred yards from my flat”) and for the contacts he made there within the broader left, numbers of whom subsequently took refuge in London after the *Anschluss* in 1938.

François relinquished his public role in the student CP after October 1934 although he remained influential behind the scenes. Peter Wright’s overheated scrapbook of miscellaneous allegations *Spycatcher* contains references to an “Oxford Ring” of Communists—faint echo of the notorious Cambridge Group.¹³ François certainly knew one or two of those that Wright names, but I have no evidence that he was directly implicated in any espionage activity. Rather, he spent the next academic year mainly working for his degree in PPE, in strict accordance with CP doctrine (“Communist students are good students”).¹⁴ Having secured his first, he then stayed on for a further year to read for a diploma in anthropology; but this seems to have been a flag of convenience—rounding off his party work at the University, engaging in a little light infiltration of the University Labour group and coordinating with other student communist groups, so he didn’t get the distinction he clearly expected.

Going down in June 1936, question naturally arose of what to do next, or rather how best to pursue his chosen role of party activist—as he subsequently observed, “I had no idea of a career for myself independently of the party.”¹⁵ A brief interlude followed in Brussels and Paris (entered illegally under a pseudonym, since the banning order was still in force and was not lifted until the following year as a result of the intervention of his French relatives). After which, he used his contacts at the *Daily Worker* to put himself at the disposal of the party, who appointed him as organiser in Stepney under the supervision of Dave Springhall.

10. LP, Memorandum, Feb. 1954, supplementary file.

11. Peter STANSKY and William ABRAHAMS, *Journey to the Frontier*, 1966.

12. LP memorandum, Feb. 1954.

13. Peter WRIGHT, *Spycatcher*, 1987, 264.

14. James KLUGMANN, “The Crisis in the Thirties: A View from the Left” in Jon CLARK *et al.*, *Crisis and Culture in Britain in the 30s*, 1979. But John SAVILLE, *Memoirs from the Left*, 2003 denies that this was ever an official prescription.

15. LP supplementary file.

From this point onwards, it all began to go wrong. He disliked the work and was clearly not much good at it—his papers contain ritual references to the (so-called) battle of Cable Street, source of so much subsequent left-wing triumphalism, but cast in curiously mechanical terms. He also disliked Springhall, who he subsequently described as “brutal and underhand” [LP].¹⁶ Transferred to other duties as translator and researcher at the International Miners’ Federation, François was equally unhappy there, complaining to his mother of discomforts and financial difficulties. There were recurrent health problems. In July 1937 he was sacked and began a year of drifting, filled with occasional part-time jobs and WEA/adult education lecturing—the progressive equivalent of the unemployed thirties poets’ “Rabbitarse and String” jobs in prep schools.¹⁷

There are two mysteries here, which I have not yet managed to resolve. First, why did the party not make better use of such an obviously useful recruit? His commitment, his political sophistication, wide experience (for his age) and even his languages would make him a natural candidate for more strategically significant jobs. He could have been a useful asset on international work (like his future Birmingham University colleague, the Canadian communist Harry Ferns, who worked in Paris as International Brigade dispatcher to Spain).¹⁸ Instead, he was offered unsuitable work and when he failed to measure up, dropped. Second why did François accept his dismissal so meekly? At the very least, he might have volunteered to redeem apparent failure by going to Spain. There is a curious lack of concern about Spain in his papers, given that it was the issue that preoccupied the left for the later thirties (and the East End communists had made a particularly active contribution).¹⁹ True, the party did not encourage their intellectuals to volunteer to fight—they were more useful in other capacities and young working class males made better martyrs [Hyde, 59].²⁰ But a good number succeeded in doing so and several of them famously died. François did not, but spent the next year apparently in a state of indecision, from which he was rescued by two events.

Tunnelling

Early in 1938, the Eugenics Society approached the social research organisation Political and Economic Planning (PEP) with a proposal.

The Eugenics Society had been founded in 1907, broadly to propagate the ideas of Francis Galton about encouraging selective fertility with the objective of “improving the qualities of the race” and developing them in the most advantageous way. By the later nineteen thirties, the Society had accumulated an impressive group of elite supporters but also a number of vocal critics. Catholic polemicists like G.K. Chesterton were concerned about the society’s interest in birth control; left-wing critics with the association of eugenic ideas with the policies of Nazi

16. These qualities might surely have been good qualifications for the job. Springhall subsequently served as political officer with the British battalion of the International Brigade in Spain: during the war he was convicted of espionage and expelled from the party. He subsequently died in Moscow.

17. John Cornford also attempted to follow this course: STANSKY & ABRAHAMS, 245.

18. Personal communication.

19. Douglas HYDE, *I Believed*, 1953, 60.

20. Also V. CUNNINGHAM, *British Writers of the Thirties*, 1988, 455. This assertion has been vigorously contested.

Germany, including compulsory sterilisation of the “unfit.” The nature of the debate had also changed during the inter-war period as a result of changes in fertility: a neo-Malthusian concern with the dangers of over-population had given way to a depopulation scare, as the birth rate began to decline rapidly.²¹

The Society had for some while been anxious to pursue the issue of declining trends in national fertility and had established a committee under the chairmanship of Alexander Carr-Saunders (the Population Investigation Committee), with the demographer David Glass as research secretary. The Society was now anxious to explore some of the policy implications of that topic and suggested that a joint population policies committee should be established for this purpose with the objective of providing a systematic report on the politics of population on the broad lines of the well-known reports that had been produced by PEP on the Health and Social Services.²²

The secretary of the Eugenics Society, Dr. C.P. Blacker, was a remarkable figure. His energy and commitment to the topic of eugenics was sufficiently striking, especially at a period when the concept had come under sustained assault from some left-wing academics, as he recounts in his short history of the Society [Blacker, 11-14]. Blacker, a vigorous and effective propagandist, had also had a distinguished record in First World War and was the author of one of the most remarkable of all memoirs of the experiences of the front-line soldiers (*Have You Forgotten Yet?*, published posthumously). In addition, and most relevant for this purpose, he was a friend of Havelock Ellis, who was able to recommend François Lafitte to him for the job of secretary to the newly-established joint population policy committee.

François was interviewed and appointed in April 1938. From subsequent evidence it is clear that eugenics as a topic or a philosophy in its own right aroused little or no enthusiasm in him, although some of the associated policy issues manifestly did—in particular, the proposals for family endowment associated with the Independent MP Eleanor Rathbone.²³ What the new job did provide, however, was a fresh opportunity to influence the direction of policy and an introduction to new means of doing so. It also connected him up with a series of significant networks, both of influential people and of those struggling, like him, to enter the world of the influential from the outside.

François’ other significant step in 1938 was to get married; of this it is sufficient to say that it gave him the stability and domestic support that he had previously lacked and which he now exploited to the full (and perhaps beyond) [Oakley, 246].

Writing subsequently of the organisation he now joined, PEP, François comments that he

gained a thorough grounding in research methods and values—scholarship, independence, impartiality. More important, research at PEP was infused with an overriding concern for the great policy issues besetting British society, handled in a fashion which afforded me the unforgettable intellectual excitement of involvement in almost daily

21. Ann OAKLEY, *Man and Wife*, 1997, 178.

22. C.P. BLACKER, *Eugenics in Prospect and Retrospect*, 1945, 23.

23. For which see her Penguin Special *The Case for Family Allowances*, 1940.

discussions with some of the finest, most forward-looking minds of the day.²⁴

Of PEP itself he observes that

it was a high-prestige institution *sui generis*—at once a West End club, a standing discussion group (or group of groups) and a research institute, yet not any one of these things as then conventionally understood. Its wide-ranging publications commanded high respect; and they were all anonymous, being the product of many minds.

Politically, PEP was operating in what was perhaps best described as broadly the space that had been occupied by the Liberal Party before its disintegration, but spiced up with the distinctive “modern” feature of the gospel of planning. A principal driving force and promoter of the gospel was the young Max Nicholson, who had helped to launch PEP with his position paper on a national plan for Great Britain, published in 1931 and who was largely responsible for the tone and general approach of the publications that followed, “largely edited, if not written by Max himself. He was younger and even more impatient than some of us; he resigned more than once.”²⁵ These publications characteristically took the form of “Planning Broadsheets,” published in numerical series and invariably anonymously, and longer reports (roughly along the lines of unofficial White Papers but produced to a high standard with statistical material presented in a visually attractive form).

By 1938, PEP was a fixed feature of the policy landscape and formed part of a constellation of broadly progressive groups, sometimes working in collaboration as it had in the Pilgrim Trust report on unemployment promoted by William Temple, then the conspicuously progressive Archbishop of York. Later analysis proposes that this group formed an unofficial opposition, though one that “never formed a base strong enough to challenge the old guard in the House of Commons” [Lindsay, 29]. However, by discreet and unobtrusive lobbying ideas could be put in circulation and policies influenced—as Max Nicholson subsequently put it, “there was no need to indulge in ungentlemanly tactics or drumbeating.”²⁶

This was the world that François Lafitte now entered, initially solely to work in the commissioned work for the collaboration with the Eugenics Society. But this work also brought François new allies outside PEP, in particular Richard Titmuss. Titmuss, another young man trying to break into the charmed circle from outside, was a Liberal and pioneer of statistical analysis of poverty, using techniques based in his work in a Life Insurance firm. He was a member of the Eugenics Society and was already beginning to make a name for himself in writing about population issues, sometimes in association with his wife Kay. His first published book on the subject, *Poverty and Population*, appeared in 1938. It contained a preface by Lord Horder, a powerful player—both in the medical establishment and the Eugenics Society of which he was a vigorous supporter. It was natural for François to turn to Titmuss, and also important that he did so, since Titmuss represented what could be called the progressive element in the Eugenics Society, concerned to make links between environmental factors—diet, poor housing, unemployment—in seeking explanations of fluctuations in the birth rate and levels of mortality. Friendship

24. F. LAFITTE, Introduction to new edition of *The Internment of Aliens*, 1988, xvii-xviii.

25. K. LINDSAY, *Fifty Years of PEP*, 1981, 10.

26. Max NICOLSON, *Fifty Years*, 50.

between Richard and François—and between their wives, who also went on to work together—blossomed; professional collaborations followed.²⁷

The Lafittes (as we must now call them) now set up as tenants in the house vacated by Françoise, who had gone to live with Ellis in Suffolk, François having failed to persuade the Titmusses to rent rooms in it. François proceeded with his work for the Population Policy Committee, advancing in the usual PEP style from discussion papers through the course of 1939 to the preparation of drafts for his steering committee to consider.

All this work was cast into jeopardy by the outbreak of war. The event that had most immediate impact on François personally was the conclusion immediately before, in August 1939, of the Nazi-Soviet pact. This seems, according to his subsequent account, to have been the occasion for his departure from the Communist Party, though there is some confusion here—elsewhere he dates his departure to 1940; and a paper written for private circulation in the following year while firewatching suggests that he was still thinking along classic Marxist lines.²⁸ His membership of the party had apparently been known to PEP before he joined them; he was not the only communist, nor the last one, to become a member of the staff; and it does not seem to have caused them any particular concern,²⁹ but for François at least this meant that one door was now closing. Another had shut in July 1939 with the death of Havelock Ellis.

The war itself, contrary to his subsequent account, did not immediately mean the end of François' work on population issues. Work on chapters for the report continued through early 1940; by March a draft of a Planning Broadsheet (PEP's usual means of disseminating information in easily assimilated form) had been put together. But two new factors prevented the work from developing further, probably to his relief. First, PEP went over straight away to a new wartime footing and began with impressive rapidity to consider what policy priorities should be defined for a post-war Britain. In so doing the group's governing War Committee rejected benevolent proposals from the government that PEP should be absorbed into the official machine and used as a resource for wartime planning. Independence, it was felt, was in these new circumstances even more important than it had been in the past, although PEP did accept the Deputy Prime Minister, Clem Attlee's offer of emergency shelter accommodation in government buildings when the bombs began to fall on London. As Michael Young puts it in his subsequent account:

A new cutting edge was given to what had been said and implied before. Planning was vital now if people were to believe (as many of them did not at first) that the war was worth fighting.³⁰

And, second, PEP rapidly lost staff, some to secondment to government and others through conscription into the armed forces or other essential war work.

One of those who received call-up papers was François Lafitte himself. In his subsequent accounts, he describes himself as having been disqualified from service by reason of health. This is not quite right: in fact, he was graded suitable for clerical service and only heroic efforts by his friend Richard rescued him from an

27. OAKLEY, 182. Rowntree article.

28. LP Box 6 file 4.

29. PEP Executive Committee Minutes, Nov. 12th, 1948, in PEP papers LSE Archive (Box 2).

30. Michael YOUNG, *Fifty Years*, 82.

uncertain future as an Orderly Room clerk, through tactical lobbying of Eugenic Society bigwigs like Horder.³¹ Finally, he was permanently deferred as a “Social Science Research Worker”—magnificent category!

The vacuum created as a result of these developments meant that the range of François’ responsibilities rapidly expanded as new tasks were defined and the means to meet them modified—the relatively leisurely tempo of the working groups and successive drafts no longer fitted the new situation, especially as the Phoney War came to an end in May 1940, with the invasion of the Low Countries and France. Wartime PEP was much smaller, and staff were either very young (François was still only 27; Michael Young when he became acting secretary in 1942 was 26 “but looked about 18”) or past military age. It was to become a time of unique challenges and opportunities: in its extraordinary way, a blissful moment.

But before he could take full advantage of these opportunities, François was entrusted with a different task. PEP’s chairman, the philanthropist Leonard Elmhirst, was outraged to discover that a group of dancers and musicians exiled from Nazi Germany, who had been studying and performing at the Dartington Arts Centre, one of the Elmhirsts’ philanthropic enterprises, were to be interned as enemy aliens because Dartington fell in a “protected coastal district.” At exactly the same time, Alexander Carr Saunders at LSE, now in exile in Cambridge, reported that a precisely similar process had swept up a whole group of distinguished exile academics and students, merely because they happened to be of “enemy origin” and also—bewilderingly—to be found in a coastal area.

Elmhirst wanted something written about it and he wanted it done fast. But as a potentially critical study of a politically sensitive subject, he also wanted it to be done from outside PEP, so the procedure set in motion was for Lafitte to write a *Penguin Special*.³² This meant the waiving of the usual PEP procedures of assembling study groups and consensus drafting. It also meant that anonymity (another strict PEP rule) would be abandoned and Lafitte would publish under his own name.

A Blast on the Trumpet

It is difficult to capture, at this lapse of time, the full funereal impact of the phrase “the fall of France.” The wholly unexpected and complete military defeat of France in May and June 1940 confronted Churchill’s newly formed coalition government with a whole series of strategic and tactical dilemmas. One of them (if by no means the most prominent) was the question of what to do about ‘aliens’ with the citizenship of enemy countries—Germans, Austrians and since Mussolini’s entry into the war in June 1940, Italians—then resident in the British Isles.

Most of these aliens were refugees, perhaps 55,000 in total, mostly opponents of the Nazi or fascist regimes; and the vast majority of the Germans and Austrians, perhaps 80 to 90 percent in all were Jews, most of them from middle class and professional backgrounds. This was not the case with the Italians, most of whom were longstanding residents in Britain and notably more likely to be from the working class—typically, respectable artisans with large families although there

31. OAKLEY, 131, Titmuss papers in LSE Archive.

32. LAFITTE, *Internment of Aliens*, 1988, xix, LP.

were also some political exiles among them. In the initial stages of the war, a categorisation system had been put in place, based on interviews: aliens clearly posing a security risk (category A, mostly convinced Nazis); those on whom there were legitimate grounds for doubt (Category B); and those who posed no evident security threat (C, the category into which the vast majority were placed). Only category A aliens were immediately detained. The evidence suggest that although the procedures were rough and ready and there were clearly some injustices in categorisation and the review procedures were obscure, the outcome was not too grossly distorted. It certainly contrasted sharply with procedures in France, where the government had simply locked up all foreigners without distinction at the beginning of the war and only later allowed a few exceptions—with the result, of course, that many anti-fascists fell straight into the hands of the Gestapo when France capitulated.

The invasion of the Low Countries and then of France changed all that. What amounted to incipient panic on the part of authorities was fed by rumours of fifth columns and the imminent descent of Nazi parachutists in various disguises, a panic shamelessly fed by propaganda in the popular press, notably by the *Daily Mail*. In June the new coalition government decided, in Churchill's unattractive phrase, to "collar the lot"—to intern without discrimination of any kind all enemy aliens, so that those in categories B and C found themselves herded together with the genuinely suspect category As and Nazis and Jews shared the same fate. It was further decided that as many detainees of all kinds as was immediately possible should be sent as far away as possible, to the British Dominions. Those who remained would be moved by stages to internment camps hastily established in the Isle of Man.

The panic was brief but intense; and it led immediately to one major tragedy. A substantial group of aliens, some prisoners of war and seamen, some German political refugees and Italian civilians were despatched to Canada in the liner *Arandora Star*. Despite the fact that the liner was flying the swastika as a signal that she contained prisoners-of-war, the *Arandora Star* was torpedoed by a U-Boat and nearly five hundred Italian detainees and three hundred others (mostly German, but only a few guards or crew) were drowned. Another mixed group of detainees were despatched to Australia on the *Dunera*. This group, which included some survivors from the *Arandora Star*, suffered an appalling voyage under guard of sadistic army NCOs, some of whom were later court-martialled and convicted of theft and maltreatment. The Australian authorities, who had been told to expect a group of fanatical Nazis, behaved hardly any better. In all, eleven thousand detainees were deported overseas, mostly to Canada. Meanwhile, the remainder—who made up the majority of deportees—were processed through camps on the mainland and despatched to the Isle of Man.

Memories of some of the worst excesses of that period seem to have faded from our collective consciousness: the panic may have been intense, but it was brief; by July the worst was over, at least for those fortunate enough to remain in the country. The regime on the Isle of Man rapidly became more benevolent as bewildered army officers installed as commandants discovered that they were dealing not with dangerous agents of the Third Reich but a mixture of distinguished academics, medical men, scientists, artists, musicians, businessmen and other political refugees. The Isle of Man has enjoyed a subsequent reputation as a kind of

accidental University and the birthplace of future glories of the British scientific and cultural scene (like the Amadeus Quartet).

The attitude of most of those detained was also remarkably forbearing, both at the time and subsequently—it had to be done, pity it was so clumsy, but we understood the need.³³ Many of the male detainees quickly found their way into the armed forces, at first through the uninviting route of enlistment in the Pioneer Corps, but subsequently often into front line positions and sometimes holding high rank (while still technically aliens only at liberty on licence). Others were despatched to learn skilled technical jobs in wartime industry.

But this is to be wise after the event. At the time, a small but influential minority, in parliament and the liberal press, were outraged by the affront to civil liberties; and their concern was accentuated by the failure of the government to provide information about what was occurring and deliberate suppression of any news about the most discreditable episodes. Filling this gap was the main service that François Lafitte's investigation performed. Starting with his own contacts in the exiled Austrian community and in the Free German League of Culture and drawing on dossiers provided by friendly Members of Parliament and the PEP network, he was able to begin by building up an accurate picture of who the refugees really were (and how different they were from the fevered imaginings of the *Daily Mail* and its allies).

Next, François set out to establish what was happening in the camps and how the deportations were being managed, using the same networks of contacts. This was how he was able to obtain the first coherent account of the tragedy of the *Arandora Star*, which the government were trying hard to suppress, and could also provide up-to-date accounts of events in the camps at a time when their location was still not public knowledge.

Finally, François set out to provide an analysis of why the panic had arisen and what the alternatives were. In that part of his work, influenced by the conversations he was having with politicians across the political spectrum and other people prominent in the campaign to improve conditions in the camp (notably the indefatigable Eleanor Rathbone). In so doing, he deserted the PEP house style for a more incisive approach, not sparing—to the initial alarm of Penguin's lawyers—the role of the press and some of the prominent campaigners, who had in the recent past been apologists for the Nazi or Fascist regimes and were now (he argued) purging their guilty consciences by a show of patriotic concern.

In sum, *The Internment of Aliens*, written in six weeks and published in November 1940, was a quintessential young man's book, driven by indignation but also informed by the good habits of systematic investigation he had acquired at PEP. By the time the book appeared, the invasion panic had subsided. A new Home Secretary, Herbert Morrison, was already beginning to reverse the worst of the policies. Churchill was in denial about the whole episode: his hasty and sweeping instruction forgotten, at least by him.

The book certainly made a substantial public impact: reviews were copious and favourable and brought in a large fan mail from MPs and others in a position to influence policy—people like George Bell, the Bishop of Chichester, and Josiah

33. R. STENT, *A Bespattered Page?*, 1980, 262.

Wedgwood. Copies were smuggled into the internment camps and produced another round of correspondence, some of which still makes troubling reading.³⁴ To what extent its publication accelerated a change of approach that was already occurring is hard to establish: most subsequent analysis suggests that it may have been a contributory factor, not more. What later analysts found impressive was the range of information that Lafitte had been able to assemble and the speed with which he did so;³⁵ his analysis of the reasoning (if it can be dignified by that term) behind the detention also stands up well, although he obviously did not enjoy the access that subsequent writers have enjoyed, which helps to explain the highly dubious role of the security services and above all the Prime Minister himself.

Lafitte himself would accept that relatively modest verdict. He retained an interest in the subject to the end of his life and kept in touch with more recent work on the topic. The association of *Dunera* deportees invited him to speak—he found them astonishingly tolerant of their ghastly experience. He also attended and spoke at a conference on the subject summoned by younger historians concerned to use the episode to demonstrate the extent of anti-Semitism in the British wartime state; his uneasiness with that theme—his own interest was in political refugees; the experience of the Italians clearly did not fit that mould—is evident in his papers.³⁶

But from François' own point of view the episode had two important consequences. Now confident of his ability to communicate with wider audience in his own voice, so to speak, rather than through PEP's anonymous processes of networking and refining through committee drafting. That voice could be polemical, as well as analytical and it was confident. It is true that he describes himself in his brief biography in the Penguin Special as a "young man of no importance:" but that, I would guess, was a tip of the hat to his past loyalties, not sincerely meant. And he had a taste of direct access to the political scene, mediated not through one party but a variety of individual politicians, particularly but not exclusively from the remnants of the Liberal party. Both experiences helped to shape his course over the next couple of years.

But meanwhile it was back to PEP, who had docked the £50 advance he received from Penguin from his salary and now waited to welcome him back to new duties.

Laying New Jerusalem's Foundations?

The PEP to which François Lafitte returned was now mainly the preserve of the younger generation and the agenda that the organisation was being invited to address was essentially one of defining priorities for post-war reconstruction. The special issue of *Picture Post* entitled "A Plan for Britain" (January 4th, 1941) had set up a benchmark against which progress towards the elusive goal of comprehensive planning could be judged. Planning Broadsheets were continued again after February 1941; "The New Pattern" (178) offered reflections on possible structures of government for the post-war period, based on experience in emergency planning. Studies like "London Under Bombing" (Aug. 12th, 1941) continued a

34. LP Box 11, file 3.

35. See Peter and Leni GILLMAN, *Collar the Lot*, 1980, especially the introduction.

36. LP Box 11 file 4.

sequence of publications in which lessons were drawn—essentially about collective responses and mobilisation of resources—that could be applied in planning for the future.

Progress in one particular sector became François' responsibility when he returned from his work on internment of aliens. He was put in charge of a working group to review issues of social security and as a result, as he later wrote, became himself an expert on the subject.³⁷ The War Cabinet Offices had specifically asked PEP to work in this area; the letter inviting their interest ends "Do it as you will and don't be afraid of being revolutionary."³⁸ The group began meeting in July 1941, shortly after the end of the worst phase of the Blitz.

Lafitte himself certainly initially intended to be revolutionary. In an early memorandum to the group, typed with many corrections and not in the normal roneoed format he asked for responses to four key propositions:

- 1) whether there is an answer to the challenge of political and economic insecurity and of totalitarianism?
- 2) should the objective be to provide a larger and larger cake of which all may enjoy a larger absolute share?
- 3) whether there is a post-war possibility of economic planning to iron out fluctuations, ensure steady growth and more even distribution of national income?
- 4) whether social security planning can proceed on the assumption that there can be a higher level, a much more constructive type and much more complete coverage of social services for all?³⁹

Without clear commitments to these principles (all of them taken from earlier PEP publications), François asserts, "it is doubtful whether the group, as at present constituted, can be a source of fruitful work, though it has great value for consultative purposes." And four days earlier, in capitals:

WE HAVE EMBARKED ON THIS WORK WITHOUT ANY
UNDERSTANDING AS TO THE BIG ECONOMIC ASSUMPTIONS WE
ARE TO MAKE: WHAT ARE THEY TO BE?⁴⁰

Whether this attempt by the secretary to read the riot act to the group ostensibly steering his work had any substantial impact is not clear (Titmuss' copy is not marked up); but in any event François proceeded down the usual path of circulating drafts of what had become formalised as evidence to Sir William Beveridge's Committee on Social Insurance.

The final version of the memorandum was circulated outside before submission, the Chief of the Social Insurance Section of the International Labour

37. I. MCDONALD, Memo for historian of the *Times*, Nov. 1978, LP supplementary file.

38. Letter from C.V. Davidge, War Cabinet Secretariat (March 24th, 41) roneo, in LP Box 2 file 3 (where see also first outline for study, March 31st, 41). This proposal apparently predates the setting up of William Beveridge's Inter-departmental Committee on Social Insurance which became at Arthur Greenwood's suggestion the focus for this work from the summer of 1941 onwards (see Harris's biography of Beveridge, 368). [Members of the group included Eva Hubback, Kenneth Lindsay, S.K. Ruck, and Richard Titmuss].

39. Memorandum of Nov. 4th, 1941, TS, LP Box 2, file 2.

40. Memorandum of Oct. 31st, 1941, TS, (copy in the Titmuss papers file 4/533).

Organisation commented that he welcomed the revolutionary spirit of the memorandum and wished that the form in which it was cast was as revolutionary.⁴¹

The final version is measured and if not revolutionary certainly radical. The preamble states,

We regard reconstruction in the field of income maintenance as part of the much wider problem of general economic and social reconstruction. We are concerned with social security planning to provide a higher level, more constructive type and much more complete coverage of social services for all, rather than piecemeal provision for a depressed class excessively swollen by failure to plan industry and secure full employment.⁴²

The effects of insecurity, the paper then proclaims, can be as deadly as the effects of “unbroken security in a Santa Claus state.” Mass unemployment can and should be prevented; there should be national minimum standards for goods, services and opportunities for every citizen. A new Ministry of Social Security should be set up. The cost of the new system should be met directly from taxation. Above all, there should be a complete and comprehensive system of social services for all to replace the current piecemeal provision.

François Lafitte and the chair of the social security group, the retired civil servant Sir Ronald Davison, were called in almost immediately by Beveridge to discuss this memorandum. Davison, having set out the stall—stressing that what was being proposed was “not ad hoc and piecemeal”—then retired to the sidelines, professing himself not able to deal with the detail. Lafitte had no such inhibitions and engaged in vigorous debate with Beveridge, who had declared himself at the outset “very much obliged to you for not having tinkered but taken a broad sweep on this matter.”⁴³ Lafitte then declared PEP unconvinced that any distinctive role remained for approved societies, and expressed agreement with Beveridge’s assertion that there should be a general review of the role of the friendly societies analogous to the work of the Webbs on trades unions. PEP, he reiterated, was opposed in principle to a “Santa Claus State.” Instead, “we are trying to suggest a system by which every citizen does pay a little and those who have greater means pay more.”⁴⁴ There should be no illusions about a self-supporting system, under which recipients “just get and expect to get.”⁴⁵ This was all cool and considered stuff, very much in the normal PEP vein.

The evidence was then adapted as a Planning Broadsheet—one of the longest yet produced by PEP—and in this form won warm approval from Keynes who described it as “a particularly good piece of work, one of the best the organisation has ever produced.”⁴⁶

41. In LP Box 2 file 3.

42. Memorandum of evidence to the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance, June 2nd, 1942 LP Box 2 file 3.

43. Transcript of evidence before Inter-Departmental Committee (June 17th, 42) LP Box 2 file 3.

44. *Ibid.* [A 4720].

45. *Ibid.* [A 4722].

46. “Planning for Social Security”(PEP Broadsheet 190). Keynes’ comment in *Fifty Years*, 92. [François Lafitte’s own copy in his archive has an inscription to his wife: “Dear Eileen: I hope you get a nice job in my new Ministry,” LP Box 1 file 1]

Lafitte had not yet finished with social security and with the implications of Beveridge's own report, which eventually appeared on 1st December, to immediate acclaim from the press and public. In making his proposals and through the form in which he cast them Beveridge had with unerring political instinct placed his report at the cutting edge of social reform and made implementing them into a litmus test of the coalition government's sincerity in their commitment to post-war reconstruction. For some time past a head of steam had been building up behind demands that the government should pay more attention to issues of post-war planning. Beveridge's report provided the ideal opportunity to force home these concerns; especially after debate in the House of Commons on the report at the beginning of 1943 showed widespread dissatisfaction with the government's position of waiting before making any binding undertakings. Victory at El Alamein in November, followed shortly after by the Red Army's success at Stalingrad, lightened the immediate military pressures and made the contemplation of victory and what would follow from it a realistic proposition, rather than mere wishful speculation. Planning for the post-war period was in turn no longer a merely hypothetical exercise, as it had been when PEP began its own work in this area in 1940. These developments were at the root of what Correlli Barnett denounces in his polemic as "New Jerusalem"—a wave with "Beveridge at the frothing crest" [Barnett, 28].

But the pressures that came to a head at the beginning of 1943 had been accumulating steadily over the previous two years in a number of different ways, in different contexts and through different forms of organisations and gatherings, formal and informal. François Lafitte had been taking a very active part in that process.

Seven League Boots

Much of the thinking and talking about post-war issues took place informally, in places like PEP where like-minded people gathered and had the opportunity to share ideas. Fire watching (a regular overnight duty for those civilians working in large office blocks) became proverbially one of the key opportunities for such exchanges. François Lafitte had numerous chances to share views both in that sort of way and in PEP settings (the organisation had its own social club) but also in different groupings that began to assemble to discuss such issues, at first not always formally but eventually in an organised form.

Input came from a number of different sources. From the radio and J.B. Priestley's broadcasts—their popularity reflected his evident success in persuading a wide public to think about formulating wartime objectives and post-war agendas. From the press, still publishing relatively freely, despite paper shortages—with the eventual exception of the *Daily Worker*, banned in January 1941 for promoting the "imperialist war" line imposed on the CPGB by the Comintern. From the *Times*: radicalised by war and the conscious decision of its new editor Robin Barrington-Ward, to the point where it had come to be referred to only semi-jocularly as the "Threepenny Daily Worker," the *News Chronicle*, and in a different key the *Daily Mirror*. From illustrated papers like Edward Hulton's *Picture Post* and small magazines of all kinds... From the tracts for times put out in large numbers, despite the shortage of paper: Harold Laski; the ubiquitous John Strachey and Keynes (a weightier analysis in his *How to Pay for the War*). And the orange-jacketed Penguin Specials (of which François Lafitte's *Internment of Aliens* had been one).

Two of these Penguin Specials were of particular significance. First, the publication by the Liberal MP Sir Richard Acland, *Unser Kampf* (1940), punning on the title of Hitler's manifesto, with evangelical chapter titles ("What shall we do to be saved?") accurately reflecting Acland's recent personal conversion to religious belief. This was followed a year later by Archbishop William Temple's *Christianity and Social Order*, summing up and promoting a series of discussions that had taken place in the Church of England over the previous year, culminating in the Malvern Conference at New Year 1941, at which Acland had been one of the speakers. The programme that emerged—or rather that Temple imposed—was socialist in the general sense ("in one sense we are committed to socialism already") and was specifically devoted to the notion of communal ownership of the assets of society, much of this deriving from advice given to Temple by R.H. Tawney [Addison, 186].

From this varied mixture, new organisations emerged. Richard Titmuss had been engaged in these developments from the beginning through Richard Acland and subsequently drew François into a variety of activities [Oakley, 155]. One of these groups, convened by Edward Hulton, the owner of *Picture Post*, was the 1941 Committee, which met under the chairmanship of J.B. Priestley. Both François and Richard Titmuss were members of this Committee; the totality of that enterprise has been described with a touch of satire by Paul Addison as "a perfect snapshot of the progressive establishment" [Addison, 189].

Richard Acland had more ambitious plans. Under the agreement reached by the main political parties when entering into coalition in 1940, all by-elections would be contested only by the party which had previously held the seat and the other coalition parties pledged not to put up candidates of their own. This left a space for independents and members of parties not represented in the coalition. An initial attempt by the CPGB to exploit this opportunity ended in embarrassing fiasco—even so persuasive a candidate as Harry Pollitt could not sell the party's anti-war line to the electorate. But as the numbers of by-elections increased (through natural wastage and then deaths on active service) a few eccentric individuals seized the opportunity offered for self-publicising and sometimes did surprisingly well, tapping into discontent with the management of the war and the manifest unpopularity of the Conservative party. Acland, whose group had mutated from "Our Struggle" to a new title, "Forward March" (a phrase taken this time from one of Churchill's speeches) began to explore the possibility of putting up candidates on a systematic basis to promote the progressive agenda that was emerging.

In March 1942, the Conservatives suffered their first defeat at Grantham, immediately followed by two further by-election losses to independents. In April 1942, W.H. Brown (once a Labour MP) won Rugby and a local councillor named George Reakes captured Wallasey. Reakes' campaign was materially assisted by Acland, who used the occasion as the opportunity to try out on the stump the effectiveness of the ideas that he had put forward in his book *Unser Kampf* and its successors, *Forward March* and *What it Will be Like*. The result convinced him and his allies that there was now an opening for a new formal progressive movement.

In May 1942, the 1941 Committee issued a nine-point declaration to serve as a common basis for left-wing candidates [Addison, 159] and next month the journalist Tom Driberg was put up to fight the by-election on Maldon on that platform. Driberg was supported by a miscellany of figures from the progressive

movement, including Acland—Driberg subsequently commented that “despite his almost George Washington reputation for Christian integrity,” he was a master of electoral tactics. The fall of Tobruk coincided with the last week of the election campaign and Driberg (not himself exactly a figure of Christian integrity) was swept to victory. Whereupon *Forward March* and the 1941 Committee announced that they would merge into a new political movement, to be called Common Wealth.

François Lafitte had been a participant from the outset. As well as being a committee member of the 1941 Committee, he was especially active in drafting position papers for *Forward March* for which he, Titmuss and Acland functioned as the policy committee. Then as the campaign gathered momentum, he began to play a public role. His papers contain his speaking notes for the Wallasey by-election. He wrote articles for the left-wing press and began the process of constructing a programme that went beyond the headline points for electoral use. The February 1942 conference of *Forward March* had formulated aims that François summarised as a desire

to see a new way of life infused with moral principles and political values that are frustrated by capitalism. It would still want common ownership even if it would bring no economic improvements whatever.

The struggle “is a struggle of the whole people versus the monopolists not a struggle of workers versus the Rest” And, François adds, “we are using the English language in our work, not the misleading catchphrases favoured by most socialist propaganda.”⁴⁷

Lafitte’s contributions to the debate (in reasonably plain English) included pamphlets on the key issue of common ownership (“nationalisation without tears”—or “Christian communism” according to *Common Wealth*’s critics) and a programme for 1942 which optimistically asserted that victory was possible that year. In May 1942, he attended a conference called by Victor Gollancz of the Left Book Club to clarify the position that had arisen. Acland opened the conference by making what reads like a rousing revivalist speech, strongly repudiating any suggestion of personal ambition, merely an intention to get the job, in default of others working towards their common objectives. He was vigorously attacked by Harold Laski (then not yet chairman of the Labour party) who exhorted him and his colleagues to join Labour and concentrate on urging the ending of the electoral truce. Acland responded,

if it remains clear that the centre of gravity of the organised working class movement [presumably, the Labour Party] is not making the full propaganda for the new morality as well as for the new economics or the common ownership community, if they are going to pursue what is virtually indistinguishable from a PEP policy then my answer is “God help us!”

Following him, Lafitte argued that,

eight million people who have never voted for the Labour party and who still today do not trust the Labour party are rapidly going radical [and it is] hanging in the balance whether they go fascist or socialist.

47. LP Box 13, file 3.

What they required, he declared, was a bridge to cross into the camp of socialism. Why, asked Flight Lieutenant John Strachey from the floor, should we in the Labour party work with you to make socialists when you are determined to set up “a large-scale rival organisation?” Because, Lafitte retorted, these people are the technicians, the air force pilots whom we can reach from outside the Labour party: they are not yet ready for socialism and need persuading. We are not a Liberal Trojan horse with a collectivist programme, but we can agree never to oppose a Labour candidate in a seat previously held by Labour.⁴⁸

Two months later the merger conference of Forward March and the 1941 Committee consummated their union into Common Wealth and François Lafitte was elected on to the Executive Committee. The merger was an uncomfortable business, despite the existence of a fair amount of ideological common ground. Collaboration between the participants coming from disparate backgrounds became easier as the principal protagonists “found that [they] were all more or less socialists”⁴⁹—including Acland, who was still nominally a Liberal MP. But personalities intruded: and arguments about management led to the early departure of Priestley and several other members of the original 1941 Committee.

Lafitte himself weighed in vigorously on Acland’s side. He began as a conscientious attender at National Committee meetings; but his main contribution was in December as author of the new party’s policy statement on the Beveridge report, based on a resolution that he had successfully moved at the Committee.

Gone are the careful qualifications of his PEP broadsheet. The position paper calls for “support without illusions” for the report, commenting that

The Beveridge Plan is a necessary part of vital democracy and common ownership—though in the long run a Socialist community would considerably modify it in some respects—but vital democracy and common ownership are together far wider and higher issues than the Beveridge Plan.

So Common Wealth, without illusions, must fight with other progressives for full acceptance of its principles and fight for nationalisation “of all life assurance and all other types of commercial insurance companies.” The paper concludes, under the ominous heading “The Trap:”

The Beveridge plan is not a revolution. It would not by itself alter fundamentally the structure of British society, nor make any serious breach in the private ownership system [...] and might also be twisted into one of the instruments necessary to a corporate state so [...] do not walk into the reactionary trap, but insist that instead of taking one halting step forward Britain should be advancing with seven league boots towards vital democracy and common ownership and the building up of a people’s world.⁵⁰

And this, as far as I can trace, is the last service that François Lafitte performed for Common Wealth. In April 1943, he was interviewed for and appointed to a job as leader writer and correspondent on social policy on the *Times* that required him to

48. Left Book Club Conference Report, May 30th and 31st, 1942.

49. F. Lafitte to Ann Oakley, tape recorded interview, March 7th, 1989.

50. Common Wealth National Committee paper, Jan. 1943, Copy in Titmuss papers (2/83) is annotated by Brian Abel-Smith—“well really! remembrance of things past”

leave the public arena. This change of direction proved long lasting: Lafitte served on the paper until 1959. But he did not abandon all past interests and commitments—rather the opposite, as we shall see.

Common Wealth went on without him, repeating their earlier by-election successes by defeating Conservative candidates at Eddisbury (April 1943), Skipton (January 1944) and eventually Chelmsford (April 1945). There were other near misses. But the movement gradually lost momentum—key members peeled off, mostly to join the Labour party—as many of them had intended to do from the start. It would probably have declined anyway—there was no real space on the left for two small left-wing parties, let alone three (the ILP and CPGB were already in occupation, though the Communists strictly observed the terms of the party truce after June 1941 and ran no more by-election candidates).

But Common Wealth's curious mixture of Christian morality and simplified socialist economics without tears did hold a certain appeal to a distinctive group—the technicians and middle class professionals rightly identified by François in his Left Book Club conference speech [Addison, 160].⁵¹

There is one possible situation in which Common Wealth might have amounted to more than a temporary blip and that would have been if the party truce had been carried over into the General Election, which would then have become a version of the Lloyd George coupon election of 1918 (and in modified form MacDonald's in 1931). In those circumstances an independent party of the left outside the coalition might have had some limited hope of success or could at least have perished gloriously at the polls, carrying the torch for socialism. But that situation never arose, despite Churchill's own anxiety to continue the coalition and the willingness of some Labour leaders to consider it [Addison, 234-235]. Instead, the Labour party, in great trepidation and most of its leaders expecting defeat, broke up the coalition by withdrawing in June 1945 and fought the election by itself, with the result that we all know. All but one of Common Wealth's candidates went down to defeat.

Through the side door

It is difficult now to recapture the significance of the *Times* newspaper for an earlier generation. From the start of the twentieth century it served not merely as the journal of record but the magisterial voice of the establishment in full flow. Pronouncements in the *Times* had an authority which no other paper, past or present, could hope to match. Compare that with the current wretched production from the Murdoch stable—a tabloid in all but format (and now—2004—a tabloid in fact).

But without losing its authoritative tone, the *Times* had after the beginning of the war begun to change its tune. At the end of Geoffrey Dawson's editorship—during which the paper's full weight had been thrown behind the Munich agreement

51. Quoting Angus CALDER'S research. [Common Wealth also attracted the violent hostility of Friedrich von Hayek—something about Acland's appeal drove the sage of Mt Pelerin into excesses of vituperation. Barnett is calmer, for once, but equally dismissive.]

and the Chamberlain government's appeasement policy generally—the new editor Robin Barrington-Ward had determined upon a complete change of direction.⁵²

This change reflected in his policy on appointments to the senior staff. Most notoriously, E.H. Carr as Assistant Editor (he joined in January 1941 but wrote several leaders under the previous editor in 1940—and mostly famously the post-Dunkirk editorial and “The Two Scourges,” Dec. 5th, 1940). This new line (which earned the paper the “Threepenny Daily Worker” nickname) is presented by the ever-conspiratorial Barnett as something put across Barrington-Ward by the New Jerusalemites; but his diary shows that he was himself a fully paid-up member and entirely conscious of what he was doing—seeking to move away from a “gazette of the ruling classes” to a paper that reflected the broader concerns of a wider spectrum of opinion.

In a diary entry (July 31st, 1940) before he took on the editorship Barrington-Ward comments,

I wholly agree with Carr: planned consumption, abolition of unemployment and poverty, drastic educational reform, family allowances, economic reorganisation of the Continent etc, but all this needs the right presentation. [McDonald, 39]

The right presentation meant having the right members of staff and by the beginning of 1942 Barrington-Ward was looking for a new team—as he expressed it a kind of “college of experts” who could be trained to be journalists, rather than the opposite. Thus his eye fell upon François Lafitte and after the customary trial run writing leaders he was duly appointed to the staff early in 1943. There, he had responsibilities for drafting leader, news stories in the general area of social policy and “turnovers”—The *Times*' speciality: longer articles over two columns on the right hand side of the leader page.

On arrival at the newspaper François' immediate reaction, PEP style, was to try to lay down some priorities for subject matter that could suitably be covered on his beat. With a self-confidence that was striking even for him, François produced a six-page memorandum for the Assistant Editor (Carr) outlining the four major themes that should run through “all our writing:”

the democratic approach
the consumer approach
the full employment approach and
the population approach

all of which needed “persistent” leader, turnover and news attention. Under each heading François identifies a set of “coming subjects” and “targets of opportunity.” At the end of this exhaustive list he concludes, “I know nothing about education and say no more about it.”⁵³

As he subsequently commented, “I did not continue in this way as I found it was not appropriate for a daily paper, especially in wartime.”⁵⁴ Presumably, his seniors' response to this and other memoranda—or rather the lack of it—told him all that he needed to know.

52. Iverach McDONALD, *The History of the Times*, Vol. V, 1984, 3.

53. LP Box 5, file 3.

54. Memo for historian of Times, Nov. 1978, LP supplementary file.

The complete list of François Lafitte's published writings for the next two years preserved in his personal archive (31 items for 1943 alone) shows his range steadily expanding; but he did not neglect his past interests. Sometimes, his involvement was so close as to be almost incestuous. For example, he had retained his engagement with PEP in a practical form by agreeing to act as chair of the health services policy group. This was served by a secretary who was a refugee and lacked a fluent command of English, so François, at least according to his own account, "wrote the bulk of the publication [him]self." This study, *Medical Care for Citizens*, was a thorough review of the coalition's plans for the creation of a National Health Service "which I had the pleasure of commenting on in the *Times* of June 20th, 1944" (anonymously, of course, as was standard *Times* practice in those days).⁵⁵

Health services became gradually one of François' chief preoccupations in his *Times* writings but he did not neglect other past interests. On leaving PEP he had rashly promised to try to help move on the long-postponed work on population for the Eugenics Society—an undertaking on which he did not deliver, much to the annoyance of C.P. Blacker.⁵⁶ But he made up for it, to some extent, by putting the *Times*' weight behind the campaign for a Royal Commission on population and attempts to make the timing of the Commission's appointment coincide with the availability of relevant data. Then when the Commission was set up—not at the time of Lafitte and his allies' choosing—he helped to move it along with constant reminders of the importance of the theme. When Lady Allen of Hurtwood raised the issue of care of children at risk, Lafitte orchestrated through the *Times* letters page positive responses to her call for an official inquiry to which the government eventually responded positively with the Curtis Committee.⁵⁷

Similarly with social security, using the work that he had done for PEP on the Beveridge report as a foundation, François kept up continuous pressure on the government for implementation of the Beveridge proposals—though the language he employed was perhaps not surprisingly not that of his Common Wealth period. His first leader on slow progress (Oct. 9th, 1944) had the distinction of being immediately attacked by government ministers in the House. At the end of the war, François drew on the material he had assembled both at PEP and his *Times* years to publish his second (and as it turned out last) book, *Britain's Way to Social Security*. This was produced by the Pilot Press (another outcrop of the progressive movement) and published in July 1945 on the unspoken assumption that a change of government was not very likely and that the coalition policies would continue. Lafitte concentrates on machinery and costs; his review is very much an accounting exercise but concludes with a brief rhetorical flourish,

The political target for those who earnestly wanted social security was a new Government after Germany's defeat to lead the nation in a new kind of warfare: the war to build a new Britain by an organised peace effort. History will record what choice the people made in the election that followed VE Day and historians will discuss the wisdom of their choice.⁵⁸

Indeed they have.

55. 1978, memorandum, LP.

56. PEP papers Dec. 13th, 1945.

57. These examples from 1978 memorandum LP supplementary file.

58. F. LAFITTE, *Britain's Way to Social Security*, 1945, 107.

But François' main preoccupation continued to be health policy and this is the area where he himself made the strongest subsequent claims for the influence of his work. He wrote to the *Times*' historian in 1978 that his engagement in this area over time

ended up in a running fight with the BMA [British Medical Association] in the immediate post-war years, reaching crescendo in the first half of 1948. In those six months I wrote 2 turnovers, 8 first leaders and 7 others. I am in no doubt that the *Times*' strong and consistently maintained attitude was very influential.⁵⁹

But that story belongs to a later era and a different government (one that electorate had chosen, to general astonishment, in July 1945). As far as the coalition period is concerned, Barrington-Ward's diaries show how much continued irritation his paper's line caused Churchill, whom he saw frequently in private. Churchill's close personal ally, the newspaper owner Lord Beaverbrook, had given his advice to the Prime Minister for dealing with his critics in the press in pithy terms: "square or squash." Churchill was eventually driven by his exasperation to deliver himself of a strong public assault in the House of Commons on the *Times* (Jan. 18th, 1945), to accompaniment of "loud and prolonged cheers from the Tory benches" [McDonald, 114]. This was, in its way, as striking a tribute to the effectiveness of the *Times*' critique as Barrington-Ward and his colleagues in the "college of experts," neither squashed nor squared, could have wished to have.

Joshua's Choices

I proposed at the outset a review of different ways of achieving social and economic change from a position initially outside the centres of power and influence, using one particular member of the Class of 1931 to provide my illustrations.

Much of the effectiveness of François Lafitte's interventions clearly depended on character and circumstance. The character, first, of the individual concerned, François himself, marked by his varied experiences in childhood and adolescence, his education and by the skills he developed early in adult life—his capacity to make an effective case based on the analytical skills he had acquired and the ability to deploy complex arguments with high statistical context in clear prose. Other qualities included confidence in the public arena—public speaking and making an argument under interrogation (*cf.* Beveridge evidence)—and finally some networking skills (both as a researcher and later as a journalist). On the other side of the ledger, a dogmatic mind-set—although the content of the dogma varied over time—and some prickliness in personal relations.

Circumstances, secondly, offered different sorts of openings at different times for his successive approaches. What might have seemed a plausible course of action in 1931 had ceased to be so convincing by the middle thirties. Extraordinary things became briefly possible in the quite exceptional circumstances of 1940; and later and through a slower but surer evolution they could be turned into reality as the war came to an end and after the 1945 election.

59. 1978 memorandum LP.

I do not want to suggest that François Lafitte's early career trajectory was the result of deliberate planning—as for most careers, there was a strong element of chance, even accident. But I do want to argue that his experience helps to illuminate a range of possibilities (or lack of them).

In the first case study, the period of his active membership of the CPGB (1931-37), it is easier now to see that there was never a serious possibility of achieving fundamental change—in the Joshua image, blowing up the walls and the elderly reactionaries sheltering behind them. Although the party that rejected him had recovered from the depths of the “class against class” period, recruited significant numbers of new members and achieved significant success in electing officials in key unions,⁶⁰ the party was clearly not going to make much more progress in the electoral arena while Labour held it at arms' length. François as a communist active in the public arena could not realistically hope for clandestine duties, especially after his public failures as a field worker.⁶¹ If he had remained in the party on a clandestine but inactive basis, he might have been recruited into the civil service after 1940, like some PEP colleagues and then formed part of the informal networks of communist civil servants, like the one rather implausibly convened by Iris Murdoch.⁶² A real sleeper might have gone on to achieve significant intelligence successes, as John Cairncross did; but François by record and temperament could never have been one of those—after Oxford and Stepney even the laxest security check should have picked him up.⁶³

In retrospect, the only moment when the communists might have had a really significant impact on the future of British society would have been in the event of successful German invasion in 1940, at which point Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were still bound together by their non-aggression treaty. Whether the Palme Dutts and Spinghalls would have emulated their French colleagues and called in at the London *Kommandantur* to ask permission to resume publication of the *Daily Worker*, as the French CP did, successfully, for *L'Humanité*, we shall (fortunately for us) never know.

Another likely direction for an active Communist to follow would have been to academe: the record there shows that many academics who did not leave the party had distinguished careers. Some have subsequently complained that their beliefs led to career blockages⁶⁴ but this did not prevent several of them from reaching the very top. However, as a technique for overthrowing the state, penetration of academe does not rate very high, whatever students may have believed in 1968.

The change of direction François Lafitte made in 1938 when he joined PEP opened up a new range of possibilities. Historians who have considered the record have not on the whole endorsed the most optimistic claims made on its own behalf by PEP/PSI in their fiftieth anniversary volume for the influence that organisation had in the pre-war period. However, it can certainly be maintained that PEP helped

60. W. THOMPSON, *The Good Old Cause*, 1992, 63; Kevin MORGAN, *Against Fascism and War*, 1989.

61. C. ANDREWS, *The Mitrokhin Archive*, 1999.

62. P. CONRADI, *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, 2001.

63. Though Jenifer Hart, another “sleeper,” was able from the office of the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Home Office, whose private secretary she then was, to secure her own future husband Herbert Hart's entry to MI5 (*Ask Me No More*, 1998). Also but unreliably (as always) Wright's *Spycatcher*.

64. E. HOBSBAWM, *Interesting Times*, 2002; SAVILLE too.

to put ideas in circulation in a palatable form and set an agenda for action subsequently followed through in the period after the publication of the Beveridge report. Planning as a concept undoubtedly owed much to PEP's early advocacy (especially the indefatigable Max Nicholson and his TECPLAN group).⁶⁵

What it did give François (as his subsequent comments indicate) was a whole range of new contacts and a continuous master class in networking. The style of working in PEP required young researchers to be able to satisfy the demands of working groups of real experts and produce work that would stand the test of their reviews before being issued as publications. Those who succeeded accumulated a stock of good will and supporters that could be very valuable in career terms. The spectacular progress of the young Michael Young after leaving PEP and the support he obtained during his subsequent career as he gave birth to a bewildering succession of new initiatives was the most spectacular examples: but several other successful careers were also made in the same way, both at the time and subsequently.⁶⁶ Lafitte's decision to keep working on PEP projects after joining the *Times*—and indeed to serve on its executive committee—underlines the importance that he attached to the connexion.

As a means of tunnelling under those restricting walls, the PEP episode shows both the extent of the possibilities and their limitations—no direct credit for work done, compulsory anonymity; working at one remove through groups and possible distortions in transmission. The *Internment of Aliens* episode is the exception; here François worked in a much more open way and made his attack on the institutions of the state in a much more direct and public way. Whether his blast of the trumpet for civil liberties actually did more than shame those responsible and encourage those working to change policy is not clear; but from his own point of view it was an exhilarating demonstration of the impact that a different style of working could achieve.

The Eugenics Society was also an organisation which could command a surprisingly wide range of active supporters in the twenties and thirties—though it also had powerful enemies. Lafitte's disengagement from the mainstream of the Society's activity meant that he did not depend on the status of the Society for support—he never, as far as I know, use it as a means of identification (he always preferred the PEP label). But the link gave him a powerful ally and intellectual partner in Richard Titmuss—also a friend in need at the time of his call-up, when Eugenics Society contacts did the trick.

The Common Wealth episode and what led up to it was from Lafitte's perspective an opportunity to try a more direct way of influencing events: constructing a party platform around the once famous eight (or nine points) and the drafting of policy documents (he wrote most of the Forward March policy documents in addition to Common Wealth's Beveridge position paper). In doing so, he was arguing the case in public and campaigning for an idea (common ownership) which bridged a number of positions and—I suspect—also gave him the opportunity to disinfect himself of some of the ideas he had held when still a “Marxist prig” without abandoning the comfort blanket of being able to call himself

65. “Techniques of Planning”

66. Asa BRIGGS, *Michael Young: Social Entrepreneur*, 2001. Another contemporaneous example that comes to mind is the network of those who served at Bletchley in the government decoding centre—Asa Briggs was himself one of them.

a “socialist.” Had he not moved on to journalism he might well have been a plausible by-election candidate for Common Wealth, at least once the supply of glamorous fighter pilots had run dry. Tom Driberg, who succeeded at Maldon, as a journalist on the Beaverbrook papers, had not been exactly an obvious choice. Driberg subsequently built a successful political career on that victory and died Lord Bradwell, the former chairman of the Labour Party.⁶⁷ If he could do it, surely François could have done so too.

The *Times* period was an episode I have not covered in full—this is a work in progress. Appointment to the *Times* meant receiving the key to the side door: no need to climb the walls or dig tunnels once you were working at the heart of the establishment and speaking in its voice to the outside world. Ambitious claims have been made both for the *Times* in its radical period and François Lafitte himself and his social policy writings as sources of influence on politicians, which I am still in the course of evaluating. But it is perhaps worth commenting now that the extent of the influence of the press on public events is a vexed question, bedevilled by many rash claims.

So in the absence of hard evidence it is probably best to leave a question mark for now alongside many of those claims. Most forms of white-collar journalism depend on networking and the product is shaped by as much as helping to shape current debates. François did a good deal of this, though most of it has inevitably left no traces. Journalists and their editors do have a demonstrated ability to annoy politicians, which is perhaps worth celebrating and also to intimidate them, which is less admirable.

There is also a career issue: what happens to distinguished journalists as they grow older if they don't want to become editors? Experience suggests that they can too easily end by being read, esteemed and largely ignored. His feeling that a fate of that kind might be in store for him led François to leave journalism in 1959 and apply successfully (after some delicate manoeuvres) for the newly-established chair in social policy and administration at Birmingham University.

And what happened to him in the end...

The rest of the story can be simply told. François Lafitte remained at Birmingham for the rest of his career—twenty-one years. He played an active role in the management of his new University, serving a term as Dean of the then-powerful Faculty of Commerce and Social Science. Outside it, he began energetically, being mainly involved with campaigning for abortion law reform, preparing a comprehensive report on family planning policy (1964) and subsequently helping to set up the British Pregnancy Advisory Service.⁶⁸ He served on Redditch New Town Development Corporation. He kept up links with PEP and with former colleagues. One of them, Michael Young, ensured that he was on the key committees of the newly-established Social Science Research Council. But he did not write another book and his other contributions to public debate were very limited. He defended

67. See Francis WHEEN's entertaining biography, *Tom Driberg: His Life and Indiscretions*, 1990. Driberg had also been a Communist in the 1930s but had been expelled, apparently because he had struck up a social acquaintance with “M,” the head of security services.

68. Audrey LEATHARD, *The Fight for Family Planning*, 1980.

this to former colleagues as a refusal to add unnecessarily to the vastly increased volume of work in British social science.

But the sad truth was simpler. At the end of the sixties, he had had ambitious plans for a wide ranging review of social change for which he had promised of funding. But the mental illness and subsequent suicide of his only child, Nicholas, inflicted a blow from which neither he nor his wife Eileen fully recovered. He remained head of the Department of Social Administration that he had helped to found until retiring in 1980 at the age of sixty-seven, and then departed to his home close to the University where he stayed for the rest of his life. Eileen died in 1996 and he followed her in 2002 at the age of eighty-nine.

His *Times* obituary ended, “he had the satisfaction of knowing that in those policy areas with which he had been chiefly concerned, his impact on public affairs had been substantial” (Nov. 29th, 2002). It would certainly have pleased him to believe so. This paper has—I hope—helped to establish how far that ambitious claim was justified.

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