William Morris and Socialism
Address to be Delivered for the William Morris Centenary Celebrations of the National Gallery of Victoria by the Honourable Race Mathews, Senior Research Fellow, Graduate School of Government, Monash University, 1pm, Wednesday, 25 September, 1996.

What comes through most forcibly on re-visiting William Morris is that much of his thinking remains as relevant today as when it was originated a century and more ago. Morris, more perhaps than any of his fellow socialists of the Victorian era in Britain, addressed himself in many instances to precisely the same problems that are troubling us today. More perhaps than any of his contemporaries he did so in terms which are as readily accessible today as when he first uttered them. He spoke from principles which are as valid today as when he first evoked them. Those who may doubt his on-going relevance should consider passages such as the following from the first of the magisterial series of lectures on socialism which he commenced in 1883. The title of the lecture - delivered for the Russell Club at University College in Oxford on 14 November, 1883 - was "Art and Democracy". It reads in part:

To keep the air pure and the rivers clean, to take some pains to keep the meadows and tillage as pleasant as reasonable use will allow them to be; to allow peacable citizens freedom to wander where they will, so they do no hurt to garden or cornfield; nay, even to leave here and there some piece of waste or mountain sacredly free from fence or tillage as a memory of man's ruder struggles with nature in his earlier days: is it too much to ask civilisation to be so far thoughtful of man's pleasure and rest, and to help so far as this her children to whom she has most often set such heavy tasks of grinding labour? Surely not an unreasonable asking. But not a whit of it shall we get under the present system of society. That loss of the instinct for beauty which has involved us in the loss of popular art is also busy in depriving us of the only compensation possible for that loss, by surely and not slowly destroying the beauty of the very face of the earth.

Let me reiterate those concluding words ... "by surely and not slowly destroying the beauty the beauty of the very face of the earth". Does not this passage precisely express the deepest anxieties and darkest nightmares of our world today - of in particular the rising generation who must shortly begin to make what they may of the debauched biosphere and depleted resources which are our legacy to them? Could not these same words from Morris have equally well been spoken by any one of a range of contemporary environmental analysts, from Rachael Carson to David Suzuki?
Nor has Morris any doubt about the causes of the situation he so deeply and eloquently deplores. The lecture continues:

I tell you the very essence of competitive commerce is waste; the waste that comes of the anarchy of war. Do not be deceived by the outside appearance of order in our plutocratic society. It fares with it as it does with the older forms of war, that there is an outside look of quite wonderful order about it; how neat and comforting the steady march of the regiment; how quiet and respectable the sergeants look; how clean the polished cannon; neat as a pin are the storehouses of murder; the books of the adjutant and sergeant as innocent-looking as may be; nay the very orders for destruction and plunder are given with a quiet precision which seems the very token of good conscience; this is the mask that lies before the ruined cornfield and the burning cottage, the mangled bodies, the untimely death of worthy men, the desolated home.

Let me again repeat the final words: "This is the mask that lies before the ruined cornfield and the burning cottage, the mangled bodies, the untimely death of worthy men, the desolated home". Could not these words from Morris have equally well been spoken by Hugh Stretton in his recent Sambell Oration for the Brotherhood of St Laurence? Does not Morris' image vividly evoke the inevitable outcome of the managed reduction in living standards which developed countries such as our own are having inflicted on them in the name of globalisation, the market economy and economic rationalism? Do not comparable contemporary images - the closed factory, the ruined farmer, the long-term unemployed urban worker and the depopulated country town - readily spring to mind? Is not the under-class which we are seeing emerge in most of the countries with which we compare ourselves the exact counterpart of those of the most desperately poor and indigent our Victorian forebears referred to as the "residuum" or residue of society?

Even so, none of this should be taken as meaning that Morris lacked hope. On the contrary, the lecture concluded:

One man with an idea in his head is in danger of being considered a madman; two men with the same idea in common may be foolish, but can hardly be mad; ten men sharing an idea begin to act, a hundred draw attention as fanatics, a thousand and society begins to tremble, a hundred thousand and there is war abroad, and

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the cause has victories tangible and real; and why only a hundred thousand? Why not a hundred million and peace upon earth? You and I who agree together, it is we who have to answer that question.²

Is it not men and women of this stamp that we need to revive us as a community, restore vitality to our democratic institutions, renew the active memberships and electoral followings of our political parties and reinstate principle as the basis for our public life?

What I have to say today falls into four parts. I review in the first instance the revulsion against poverty which caused Morris and so many of his contemporaries to embrace socialism and establish socialist organisations in the closing years of the nineteenth century. I review secondly what socialism was understood to mean by its often fractious and divided advocates. I review thirdly what Morris meant by socialism, the development of his thinking as a socialist and his legacy to those of us who profoundly doubt that the end of history has been reached or that the socialist values for which he stood are in any less valid in the aftermath of the collapse of the command economies of eastern Europe or the statutory corporation model of socialism. I conclude with some speculations about what Morris might have made of the situation in which the world finds itself and the remedies he might have favoured.

Poverty

That Morris became a socialist was due in part to the widespread revulsion against poverty in late-Victorian England. As the late, great English labour historian, E.P. Thompson, has pointed out, middle-class England "re-discovered" the problem of poverty in the eighteen-eighties.³ That there was massive cause for concern was confirmed by the ground-breaking research of Charles and Mary Booth. The Booths demonstrated that one in every three of the people of London were living below the poverty line. Taking the inquiries of the Booths in conjunction with those of Seebohm Rowntree in York, the proportion of working-class people living in poverty is closer to forty percent. A third of the poor were so much in "chronic want" as to be truly destitute - to lack even the most basic necessities of life such as food, clothing and shelter. The massive insidence of poverty in part resulted from - and was reflective of - the wider, grossly disproportionate distribution of property. While only six percent of

the population of Britain had any property to leave behind them when they died - and only 4% left behind estates of more than £300 - nearly 4000 estates proved for estate duty in 1901-1902 of not less than £19 million and 149 of not less than £62.5 million.4

The meaning of poverty was exemplified by the physical condition of the nation's children. In the eighteen-seventies, the height of eleven to twelve year old public school boys was on the average five inches greater than of boys from industrial schools. Public school boys at all stages of their adolescence were three inches taller than boys from working-class families5. Statistics compiled by the newly-formed school medical service in 1908 reveal that:

Out of 1000 girls in a country area, some 600 would have hair infested with nits.
Out of 1000 children 700-800 would have decayed teeth, 150-200 diseases of the nose and throat, 100-130 with malnutrition, 26-80 with diseases of the heart and circulation and 10-30 with diseases of the lung.

Of every 1000 children attending elementary schools, between 700 and 970 were "dirty", including at one extreme 100 who were "very dirty" and at the other extreme 270 who were no more than "somewhat dirty"6. The high cost of the nation's neglect of its children became evident with the introduction of universal medical screening for military service in 1917. Ten percent of the young men examined were totally unfit for service, 41.5% had "marked disabilities" and 22% had "partial disabilities". In all, only marginally more than a third of the potential recruits for the armed forces were in sufficiently sound physical condition to be acceptable7.

For Morris, the social order which gave rise to poverty - "its mastery of and its waste of mechanical power, its commonwealth so poor, its enemies of the commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organisation - for the misery of life" was open to further objection. He likewise condemned "Its eyeless vulgarity which has destroyed art, the one certain solace of labour". "The study of history and the practice of art", he wrote, "forced me into a hatred of the civilisation, which, if things stay as they are, would turn history into inconsequent nonsense, and make art a collection of curiosities of the past, which would have no serious relation to the life of the present"8.

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As will be seen, Morris' thinking about poverty in these latter respects was to become a key element of the socialist case against capitalism. Not even the Fabian socialists whose outlook and activities Morris so often and deeply deprecated were immune from his influence. For example, the Fabian essayist and long-term member of the Fabian "Old Gang", Sydney Olivier, wrote in 1934 in regard to his debt to Morris:

Morris, having received his most stimulating clue from Ruskin's chapter on "The Nature of Gothic", and having improved on Ruskin's formulation of it - broadening it from the insistence that Art must copy Nature to the perception that art is actually the expression of Nature through the temperament of a human producer - was able to amplify give profounder significance than even Ruskin did to the relevance of this clue to the ghastly scene of modern commercial and industrial society. It became obvious why it was that capitalist civilisation should have been making the whole world hideous First, the mechanisation of industry ... simply gutted the production of all vital ingredients whatever ... and, secondly the capitalist purpose of profit-making superseding the purpose of production for use ... had converted the workers into undifferentiated batches of "labour force", making they know not what for they know not whom, and ...

"working" ... for their employer's rent, interest and profits.9

A second Essayist, Annie Besant, attributed her socialist faith in part to her realisation that the social order of the day afforded one section of society access to "art, beauty refinement - all that makes life fair and gracious" while the lot of the rest was "drudgery, misery, degradation". Besant wrote in regard to the workers that "The culture of their superiors is paid for with their ignorance; the graceful leisure of the aristocrat is purchased by the rough toil of the plebian ... Such is modern civilisation. Brilliant and beautiful where it rises into the sunlight, its foundation is of human lives made rotten with suffering"10. Beatrice Webb records in her diary Sidney reading to her aloud from Morris' A Dream of John Ball in a late express train from Sheffield in the course of their courtship. Sidney Webb was to later recall Morris as "the greatest socialist he had known"11.

The "re-discovery" of poverty coincided with the freeing up of social reform of energies previously absorbed by religion. "The passion for religion", writes the American historian Gertrude Himelfarb, "was transmuted into the compassion for humanity"12.

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10 Quoted in Britain, 1982. p. 93.
11 Quoted in Britain, 1982. p. 69.
As Beatrice Webb confided to her diary in 1884, "Social questions are the vital questions of today. They take the place of religion"\textsuperscript{13}.

The new awareness of poverty had rapid results. "In a massive surge of social consciousness", writes Himmelfarb, "respectable middle-class people pronounced themselves socialists, and socialist organisations vied for membership and recognition with each other and with a multitude of other causes and societies - land reform leagues, charitable associations, settlement houses, model building projects, children's homes, 'missions' to the poor"\textsuperscript{14}. What emerged was in effect a dual response to poverty. On the one hand, bodies such as the Charity Organisation Society tried to help out of poverty those of the poor who were also able and willing to help themselves. That "the poor are always with us" was in their view axiomatic. The debate was confined to which of the poor should rightly be assisted and by what means\textsuperscript{15}. The political reformers, on the other hand, advocated that poverty should be eradicated. Where they differed among themselves was over whether doing so should be accomplished, as the New Liberals believed, through collectivist measures taken within the framework of the existing social order, or whether, as in the view of the socialists, a totally new social order was required.

**Socialist Bodies**

What the various schools of socialist thought had in common with one another, where they differed and how their thinking evolved over time was reflected in the remarkable proliferation of new socialist-minded or explicitly socialist bodies which occurred in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. To name only those that are better known, the Anglican Guild of St Matthew was formed in 1877, as were the Progressive Association and the Democratic Federation - later the Social-Democratic Federation - in 1881, the Land Reform Union in 1883, the Fellowship of the New Life, the Fabian Society and the Socialist League in 1884, the Christian Social Union in 1889 and the Independent Labour Party in 1893. The proliferation of socialist journals was no less remarkable. Harry Champion was editor successively of the \textit{Christian Socialist, Today}, and the \textit{Labour Elector}, as was the Reverend Stewart Headlam of the \textit{Church Reformer, H.R.}

\textsuperscript{14} Himmelfarb, 1991. p. 71.
\textsuperscript{15} For a comprehensive account of the differences between the Charity Organisation Society and socialists such as Beatrice and Sidney Webb, see McBriar A.M. 1987. \textit{An Edwardian Mixed Double - the Bosanquets versus the Webbs: A Study in British Social Policy 1890-1929}. Oxford. Clarendon Press.
Hyndman of Justice, Morris of Commonweal, Charlotte Wilson of Freedom, Annie Besant of Our Corner and Thomas Bolam of The Practical Socialist which preceded the long-running Fabian News. The extremes of the socialist spectrum were marked respectively by the patient evolutionary socialist reformism of the Fabian Society and the revolutionary socialism of the Social-Democratic Federation.

So conditioned have we become to understanding revolution is its narrow sense of the overthrow of an established social order by insurrectionary violence that an important qualification must at this point be made. Hannah Arendt reminds us in her important book On Revolution that there is a key difference between what revolution properly understood means and what is meant by rebellion. As the neo-conservative American writer, Irving Kristol, points out in regard to Arendt's work, a revolution is in her terms a political phenomenon, undertaken "to revise and reorder the political arrangements of a society" by what may or may not be violent means. By contrast, Kristol continues, a rebellion in Arendt's terms "is a meta-political event, emerging out of a radical dissatisfaction with the human condition as experienced by the mass of the people, demanding instant 'liberation' from this condition, an immediate transformation of all social and economic circumstance, a prompt achievement of an altogether 'better life' in an altogether 'better world'". Kristol concludes:

The modern world knows many such rebellions, and all end up as one version or another of 'a revolution betrayed'. The so-called betrayal is, in fact, nothing but the necessary conclusion of a rebellion. Since its impossible intentions are unrealisable and since its intense desperation will not be satisfied with anything less than impossible intentions, the end result is always a regime which pretends to embody these intentions and which enforced such false pretensions by terror". Kristol concludes:

What must be appreciated at this point is that for socialists even such as the members of the Social-Democratic Federation in the eighteen-eighties to advocate revolution did not mean that they also necessarily or at all times and in all circumstances favoured rebellion. Moreover - as will be seen - some key figures in the movement who did advocate rebellion in the early eighteen-eighties had had second thoughts by the end of the decade, and instead opted - often grudgingly - for the bringing about of revolutionary change by parliamentary means.

The Social Democratic-Federation

The Social-Democratic Federation was linked inseparably in the public mind with the paradoxically bourgeois appearance and insurrectionary utterances of its founder and most prominent member, Henry Myers Hyndman. Hyndman - a frock-coated, high-hatted, cricket-playing, Eton-educated, Cambridge-trained stockbroker and journalist whose book *England for All* is credited with having introduced Marxism to English readers\(^\text{17}\) - proclaimed in January, 1891 that "There must be a great social re-organisation to secure for all the same happiness and enjoyment of life that now belong to the few"\(^\text{18}\). The inaugural meeting of the Democratic Federation, as the new body was initially known, followed on 8 June, 1881. What was initially a moderate platform designed to attract radical opinion then gave way in 1893 to a full-blooded advocacy of Marxist "scientific socialism". The change of direction was accompanied by the renaming of the organisation as the Social-Democratic Federation. As Harry Champion - a general's son who had been educated at Marlborough and seen active service as a Royal Artillery officer in Afghanistan - later recalled: "On Whit-Monday, 1883, a memorable meeting was held in an underground room at Palace Chambers ... before we left the room we were the Social-Democratic Federation, and I was the hon. sec."\(^\text{19}\).

Champion had earlier on been recruited to the SDF from the position of secretary of the Land Reform Union and editor of the *Christian Socialist* which was the official journal of the Land Reform Union and the socialist-minded Anglican Guild of St Matthew. Other notable recruits from the same source included Champion's former Marlborough schoolfellow R.P.B. Frost, the Eton schoolmasters J.L. Joynes and H.S. Salt and the future leading Fabians Bernard Shaw, Sidney Olivier, Graham Wallas, Frederick Keddell, Edward Pease Hubert Bland and Bland's wife, Edith Nesbit. Joynes, Champion and Frost were in Hyndman's view "as promising and capable a set of men as ever threw in their lot with an advanced movement"\(^\text{20}\). Perhaps the single most memorable of all the SDF's recruits was William Morris, whose membership card was signed for him by Champion on 17 January, 1883.

Morris' decision was not taken lightly. He had for some years been experiencing an increasing disillusionment with his former radical Liberal affiliations. The Liberals, he

\(^{17}\) Characteristically Hyndman omitted to include any acknowledgement of his debt to Marx, and so estranged himself from both Marx and Marx's most important disciple, Engels, in a long-running feud which the nascent socialist movement could ill-afford.


\(^{19}\) A biography of Champion is currently being prepared by Professor John Barnes of the School of English at La Trobe University in Melbourne.

now believed, were no more likely than the Tories to tackle seriously the poverty whose prevalence and corrosive influence so passionately outraged him. It troubled him deeply that his successful creation of the Firm had served simply to bring about a situation where as he saw it "I spend my life in ministering to the swinish rich". He was dismayed by the on-going advance of a British imperialism whereby for example "Englishmen in India are ... actively destroying the very sources of that education - jewellery, metal-work, pottery, calico-printing, brocade-weaving, carpet-making - all the famous and historical arts of the great peninsula have been ... thrust aside for the advantage of any paltry scrap of so-called commerce". "I begin to doubt", he declared, "if civilisation itself may not be sometimes so much adulterated as scarcely to be worth the carrying - anyhow it cannot be worth much, when it is necessary to kill a man in order to make him accept it".

His deepening doubts were in no way assuaged by his active involvements in radical bodies such as the Eastern Questions Association and the National Liberal League. The goal of which he dreamed increasingly was "... of a country where every man has work enough to do, and no one has too much: where no man has to work himself stupid in order to be just able to live: where on the contrary it will be easy for a man to live if he will but work, impossible if he will not ... where every man's work would be pleasant to himself and helpful to his neighbour; and then his leisure ... (of which he ought to have plenty) would be thoughtful and rational...", Even so, few socialists were personally known to him. He was by his own admission "blankly ignorant of economics". As he later recalled, "I had never so much as opened Adam Smith, or heard of Ricardo, or of Karl Marx". What was clear to him was that "between us and that which is to be, if art is not to perish utterly, there something alive and devouring; something as if it were a river of fire that will put all that tries to swim across to a hard proof indeed, and scare from the plunge every soul that is not made fearless by desire for truth and insight of the happy days to come beyond". It was in order to cross this "river of fire" that his lot was now thrown in wholeheartedly with the SDF.

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The energies of the SDF focussed largely on militant socialist agitation and consciousness-raising "I was constantly engaged", writes Hyndman, "in speaking at public meetings in halls and in the open air:

The open air work was to me the most trying of all. I began it too late in life thoroughly to understand how to take it easy. At first I had also a strong prejudice against addressing the hopeless sort of audiences we had to deal with at the beginning of our propaganda. I always consider I first stripped myself of my class prejudices when I addressed a gathering of rather debauched-looking persons round the old pump at Clerkenwell Green. I laughed a little at myself standing there in the full rig-out of the well-to-do fashionable, holding forth to these manifest degenerates on the curse of capitalism and the glories of the coming time.25

A similar incongruity characterised the selling of the fire-breathing weekly paper Justice which the SDF started in January 1884, and which Hyndman edited. Morris, Shaw, Hubert Bland, Edith Nesbit, Joynes, Salt and Champion were the staff. Hyndman and his SDF associates sold the paper publicly in Fleet Street and the Strand: "Morris in his soft hat and blue suit, Champion, Frost and Joynes in the morning garments of the well-to-do, several workingmen comrades, and I myself wearing the new frock-coat in which Shaw said I was born, with a tall hat and good gloves, all earnestly engaged in selling a penny Socialist paper during the busiest time of day in London's busiest thoroughfare.26

"Morris" it has been said, "laid his many talents on the socialist altar"27. The depth of his commitment to his socialist faith was evident in his willingness to turn his hand to whatever activities the SDF might be undertaking. "Morris", as Hyndman later wryly recalled: "was even too eager to take his full share in the unpleasant part of our public work, and speedily showed that he meant to work in grim earnest on the same level as the rank and file of our party":

That was Morris' way from the first. He was never satisfied unless he was doing things which, to say the truth, he was little fitted for, and others of coarser fibre could do much better than he.28

Morris now spoke regularly - often in the company of Shaw - at the open-air propaganda meeting the SDF was holding on Sunday mornings. He was also lecturing formally on socialism at venues throughout Britain. The SDF now had a membership card designed by him. His Socialist poetry and prose featured prominently in the pages

26 Hyndman. 1911. p. 334.
28 Hyndman, 1911. pp. 350-351.
of the SDF weekly *Justice*. He participated in great marches and demonstrations such as
the commemoration of the Paris Commune on 18 March, 1884. "I trudged", Morris
wrote of the occasion, "all the way from Tottenham Court Road up to Highgate
Cemetery (with a red-ribbon in my button-hole) at the tail of various banners and a very
bad band to do honour to the memory of Karl Marx and the Commune"29.

Not all demonstrations could be counted on to pass off so peacefully. An attempt by
the SDF to take over a Liberal meeting in Hyde Park on 21 July, 1884, caused sections
of the crowd to turn on the SDF members, destroying their banners and threatening to
duck their leaders in the Serpentine. "Morris", one of the SDF members present has
recalled, "fought like a man with the rest of us"30. Hyndman's admiration for - and
gratitude to - Morris was unbounded. "Here, obviously", Hyndman wrote, "was no
needy and greedy proletarian, no embittered revolutionist, no disappointed politician or
cynical publicist. Morris was a University man who had achieved of himself a European
fame, and was universally regarded as one of the few living Englishmen who would be
 accorded willingly a leading position among the most celebrated men of his time"31.

The Socialist League.

Even so, Morris' friendship with Hyndman was short-lived. An enigmatic passage in
Hyndman's memoirs attributes their falling-out to "the malignant lying of a despicable
married woman, whom none of us knew well, on a purely domestic matter"32. The
reality was that Morris was troubled increasingly by Hyndman's over-bearing ways,
insatiable appetite for self-promotion and proclivity for predicting uprisings which
failed to eventuate. Vacillation by Hyndman as to whether socialism required
insurrectionary violence or could be achieved through parliament clashed with Morris'
firm adherence to long-term education and social agitation as the means of securing
revolutionary change. Hyndman's foreign policy was in Morris' view tainted with an
offensive jingoism and "tendency to National assertion"33. By March, 1884, it has been
said, "Morris' suspicions of Hyndman had developed into hatred of his
sanctimoniousness". He now saw Hyndman as "all hollow to the last degree"34.
"Hyndman", Morris wrote in December, "had been behaving so atrociously, that I was

31 Hyndman, 1911. p. 350.
32 Hyndman, 1911. p. 358.
determined to stand it no longer"\textsuperscript{35}. The parting of the ways was reached finally on 27 December, when Morris and a group of his closest associates - most notably Belford Bax, Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx Aveling - turned their backs on the SDF and moved - as Edward Carpenter put it - "out into the wilderness". They then formed the Socialist League, with a new Manifesto drafted for it by Bax and Morris and a new journal - \textit{Commonweal} - which Bax and Morris edited. Additionally, Morris was the Treasurer of the League - "in much more than name" as some have seen it, since he was also a principal source of its funds\textsuperscript{36}.

Morris threw himself into the new venture with his customary vigour. As before, there were outdoor rallies to be addressed and lectures to be delivered at widely separated venues, often with intervals of only a few days between them. In a single year - 1887 - he spoke at, lectured for or chaired no fewer than 105 meetings. "If there was such a thing as a general strike", Morris told an audience of 6000 striking miners in Northumberland in 1887, "he thought it was possible that the masters of society would attack them violently - he meant with hot shot, cold steel, and the rest of it"

But let them remember that they (the men) were many and the masters were few. Masters could only attack with a certain instrument and what was that instrument? A part of the working classes themselves.

Turning at this point towards the policemen at the meeting, Morris then continued:

Even those men that were dressed in blue with bright buttons upon them and white gloves - (voices: "Out with them") - and those other men dressed in red and also sometimes with gloves on their fingers, what were they? Simply working men, very hard up, driven into a corner and compelled to put on livery of a set of masters. ("Hear, Hear" and prolonged hooting). What would happen when they saw the workers were in earnest? The cannon would be turned round, the butts of the muskets would go up, and the swords and bayonets be sheathed, and these men would say, "give us work; let us all be honest men like yourselves"\textsuperscript{37}.

That no such happy outcome to a confrontation with the authorities could necessarily be counted upon was made apparent on "Black Sunday", 13 November, 1887 and its aftermath a week later. The carnage inflicted on the unarmed demonstrators on these unhappy occasions by the police and cavalry caused Morris to revise his opinion. "These gorgeous gentry" he noted in respect to the Life Guards, "are just the helmeted flunkies of the rich and would act on their orders just as their butlers or footmen"\textsuperscript{38}.

\textsuperscript{35} Quoted in MacCarthy, 1994. p. 500.
\textsuperscript{36} MacCarthy, 1994. p. 506.
\textsuperscript{37} Quoted in MacCarthy, 1994. p. 561.
\textsuperscript{38} Quoted in MacCarthy, 1994. p. 570.
What stands out in hindsight about the Socialist League was the opportunity it gave Morris to develop his thinking about socialism free of the stultifying presence of Hyndman. What then was the nature of socialism as Morris in his maturity came finally to espouse it? Like Marx, Morris believed that working people were poor because the value they created through their labour was then taken away from them by their employers. In this way an insufficiency of demand was brought about in the economy, resulting in unemployment and further impoverishment. The competition between workers and employers for the surplus value the workers created was of such fundamental as to properly be referred to as a war between them or class war. It was inevitable that the workers would at some point take a stand against the loss of the value which properly belonged to them and was the means of their livelihoods, and the coercive power of the state as exemplified by the police and the armed forces might at that point be used against them. It was possible at this point for a change in the social order from capitalism to socialism to be brought about if a widespread demand for and understanding of socialism had previously been created. The proper business of bodies such as the SDF and the Socialist League was to painstakingly create this mass socialist consciousness among the workers through education and social agitation. To the extent that the socialist bodies allowed their attention and energies to be diverted to parliament, or engaged in gradualist reforms such as those advocated by the Fabians, there was a danger that they would arouse false hopes and so unnecessarily put off the moment for the transformation of the social order on so radical and far-reaching a basis as to referred to properly as a revolution. There was a further reason for rejecting gradualist measures, in that employers and the ruling class might under pressure grant even quite substantial concessions and improvements, but these would always be withdrawn when the whatever temporary advantage the workers had possessed had passed and they were once again in a position of disadvantage.

While Morris referred to himself as a Marxist and a communist, he used the words in a rather special way, and they in any case now carry too heavy a burden of historical baggage to be of much use to us. He was also in his own eyes as well as those of others a romantic for whom romance meant "the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present". He was able to draw imaginatively on his practical knowledge of the role and status of the craftsman in medieval society, in thinking imaginatively about what the transformation to socialism might involve and the nature of a socialist social order. The special quality his moral sense and empathy with the past imparted to his Marxism was reflected in great works of the imagination such

as *The Dream of John Ball* and *News From Nowhere*. In this way a nerve was struck with socialists of a wide range of persuasions which to this day continues to resonate. The effect of *News Such As Nowhere* is, in the view of Morris' most recent biographer, "as a catalyst":

Morris releases the imagination by suggesting that another form of society is *possible*. For people suffering political stagnation - then and now - it points a way out. By 1898 *News From Nowhere* had been translated into French, Italian and German, and this "slightly constructed and essentially insular romance" was being read in many more countries than his "more important works of prose" to the disapproval of his first biographer, Mackail. It was widely distributed in Russia in the years before the Revolution. It was also the Socialist Bible of the supposedly dyspeptic politicians who built the post-war British Welfare State: G.D.H. Cole, Clement Attlee and the rest.  

Meanwhile, the decision by the SDF and the Socialist League to go their separate ways was ultimately disastrous for both. The League failed to either hold on to the more able of its original members or recruit able new ones in adequate numbers. Bax and the Avelings ultimately defected, leaving Morris to cope largely single-handed with an influx of anarchists whose unruly ways and advocacy of violence brought the League into disrepute and exposed its members to prosecution. Several of the anarchists were given prison sentences for their alleged involvement in a projected anarchist bombing, and the *Commonweal* was suppressed. Morris interceded for the accused men, but his involvement in any wider sense was over. By the middle nineteen-nineties the League had for all practical purposes ceased to exist.

The SDF was likewise unsuccessful in retaining its most effective members. Shaw and his associates migrated at an early stage to the Fabian Society. Champion in his turn was to leave after falling-out with Hyndman. His energies were henceforward devoted to the establishment of a Labour Party, in alliance with the trade unions and the Labour Electoral Committee which the Trade Union Congress established in 1886. He served briefly as the Metropolitan Section Organiser for the predominantly Labour Electoral Association which replaced the Committee. He then struck out with Keir Hardie and others to form a self-styled National Labour Party, which shortly became the Independent Labour Party. Earlier on, Shaw had noted in regard to Champion and Frost that "But for Frost and Champion, who though nominally Hyndmanites practically boss the whole Federation between them by sticking together and working, the whole

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body would have gone to pieces long ago". The SDF was wantonly haemorrhaging away the able organisers and activists it could least afford to lose. It also largely remained aloof from the trade union movement and the nascent Labour Party to which the future of British socialism was now so overwhelmingly to be entrusted. Well before the turn of the century, the SDF and the Marxism it espoused had effectively been marginalised. While the organisation lingered on, it was a shadow of its former self and the high hopes of its founders. It remained for the Communist Party of Great Britain to inherit - and ultimately betray - the mantle of the SDF and such of its surviving members as stuck to their Marxist faith.

The Fabian Society

The beneficiaries of the failure of the League and the SDF were the Fabians. The Fabian Society was formed in London in 1884. Its aim was to bring about a reconstruction of the social order along socialist lines. Notable early Fabians included the sociologists Beatrice and Sidney Webb, the political scientist Graham Wallas, the Colonial Office civil servant and future colonial governor Sydney Olivier and the dramatist and polemicist George Bernard Shaw. The name Fabian was derived from the Roman General, Quintus Fabius Cunctator, whose delaying tactics and guerilla warfare enabled him to turn back Hannibal's invasion of Italy in the Third Century BC. The Society's motto reads: "For the right moment you must wait, as Fabius did patiently, when warring against Hannibal, though many censured his delays, but when the time comes you must strike hard, as Fabius did, or you waiting will be in vain and fruitless". Sidney Webb summarised the Fabian approach in succinct and memorable terms as "the inevitability of gradualness". The Society's emblem is a tortoise with its right paw raised, over the inscription "When I strike, I strike hard".

The aims of the Fabian Society were socialist, but its methods were evolutionary and reformist. The strength of the Fabians stemmed from their insistence on painstaking research and reasoned argument. Beatrice Webb saw clearly that social reform would not be brought about by "shouting". "What is needed", Beatrice said, "is hard thinking". "Above all", the historian Ben Pimlott points out, "the Fabians believed in the power of

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ideas". The Society adopted the tradition of social investigation which Charles and Mary Booth exemplified with their *Life and Labour of the People in London*. It was axiomatic for the Fabians that careful examination of social problems would provide the basis for their solutions. The solutions, in turn, could be counted on to be along socialist lines. In the view of the Webbs, it was from the actual facts and coldly impassive arguments that socialism drew its irresistible energy. A list of key Fabian achievements drawn up by Margaret Cole - chairman of the Fabian Society 1955-56 and president 1962-80 - includes "having insisted on laying a foundation of facts for all assertions".

Once facts had been accumulated and ideas and policies developed, the Society had the further task of publicising and disseminating them. The Fabian *Basis* - a statement of objectives adopted in 1887 - in part commits the Society to further its objectives "by the general dissemination of knowledge as to the relation between the individual and society in its economic, ethical and political aspects". *Fabian Essays in Socialism* - the Society's first book - sold 46,000 copies prior to the First World War, and is still in print. Shaw's preface to the 1931 edition describes the collection as "inextinguishable". The establishment of the London School of Economics in 1895 and the launching of the *New Statesman* - a weekly journal of fact and discussion - in 1912 were further Fabian initiatives, instigated by the Webbs in order to gain converts for socialism. A diary entry by Beatrice Webb in 1898 reads in part: "No young man or woman who is anxious to study or to work in public affairs can fail to come under our influence".

In the absence of a Labour Party - which was not formed until 1900 - the Fabians used their facts and arguments to induce the Liberal Party and the Tories to adopt socialist ideas without recognising their socialist implications. The tactic was known to the Society as "permeation". As Shaw recalled in his *The Fabian Society: Its Early History*: "We permeated the party organisations and pulled all the wires we could lay our hands on with our utmost adroitness and energy". G.D.H. Cole - chairman of the Society 1939-46 and president 1952-59 - saw the Fabians as having managed in this spirit "to express an essentially Socialist philosophy in terms of immediate proposals which made

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a strong appeal to many reformers who were by no means Socialists"\textsuperscript{51}. Permeation gained the Society a number of notable successes, such as the adoption of Fabian policies by the Liberal-dominated Progressive Party in the London County Council in the eighteen-nineties, and the enactment by Balfour's Tories in 1902 and 1903 of Education Acts which were recognised widely as "very nearly the dream of Fabian 'permeators' come to life - proposals drafted by intelligent and hard-working Fabians, conveyed to puzzled or sympathetic administrators and carried into effect by a Conservative Government"\textsuperscript{52}. Well before the turn of the century, the Fabian Society had acquired both within Britain and internationally a reputation for offering a philosophy, a process and a capacity for getting results. Overseas Fabian Societies were formed, most notably in Australia\textsuperscript{53}.

How the Fabian Society worked in practice is illustrated by its enduring campaign against poverty. The commitment of the original Fabians to overcoming poverty was manifest in the choice of the title for the first Fabian tract as \textit{Why are the Many Poor?}. Tract five - \textit{Facts for Socialists} - followed shortly, devoted in part to a statistical comparison of the conditions of the "Two Nations" within British society. More Fabian publications - and more Fabian energy - have been devoted to poverty than to any other topic. The outcome of the Society's concern was in part the proposals for a "National Minimum" which Beatrice and Sidney Webb put forward in 1897 in their book \textit{Industrial Democracy}. The appointment of Beatrice Webb to the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws by Balfour in 1905 was a further Fabian milestone, enabling Beatrice to produce a \textit{Minority Report} which is seen by Margaret Cole in her \textit{The Story of Fabian Socialism} (1961) as "one of the greatest State papers of the century". Margaret Cole concludes: "All that is implied in the later phrase 'Social Security', including some things not yet put into effect, is to be found in essence in the \textit{Minority Report} of fifty years ago"\textsuperscript{54}.

Following the rejection of the \textit{Minority Report} by the Liberal government in 1909, the Fabians launched a National Committee for the Breakup of the Poor Law - later the National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution - which rapidly attracted over 16,000 members. The \textit{Minority Report} and the activities of the National Committee failed in their objective of securing an immediate implementation of Beatrice Webb's recommendations, but contributed massively to a climate of opinion in which change

\textsuperscript{54} Cole M. 1961. p. 139.
was inevitable. Forty years later, the Poor Laws were finally abolished - and the modern welfare state finally put in place - by Clement Attlee's predominantly Fabian government, on the basis of the wartime Beveridge Report. Beveridge - a Liberal - described his work as having "stemmed from what all of us have imbibed from the Webbs". Subsequent Fabian experts such as Richard Titmuss, Brian Abel-Smith, Peter Townsend and David Donnison have written widely about ways of further strengthening the welfare state and harnessing it more closely to the core Fabian value of a more equal society.

The First World War gave rise to an historic friendship between Sidney Webb and the secretary of the Labour Party, Arthur Henderson. Webb and Henderson were brought together in the War Emergency Workers' National Committee, which Henderson chaired. Webb was the driving force behind the committee, and did most of its creative work. Joint action by Webb and Henderson gave the Labour Party a new constitution, which Margaret Cole describes as "a very 'Fabian' compromise" between the party's socialist and trade unionist adherents. Webb and Henderson were also the co-authors of a new party program - Labour and the New Social Order (1918) - which represented in Margaret Cole's view "as nearly as possible the purest milk of the Fabian word". The upshot was an enduring partnership between the Fabian Society and the Labour Party which outlived the vicissitudes of economic slump, party schism and war to emerge triumphantly in Attlee's Labour government. The partnership remains in force, and had its most recent manifestation in the policy taken to the 1992 elections by the then Labour leader - and sometime Fabian Society Executive member - Neil Kinnock.

An amendment to the Fabian Society rules in 1939 - known widely as the Society's "self-denying ordinance" - reads: "No resolution of a political character, expressing an opinion or calling for action, other than in relation to the running of the Society itself, shall be put forward in the name of the Society. Delegates to conferences of the Labour Party, or to any other conference, shall be appointed by the Executive Committee without any mandatory instructions". A further amendment requires that: "All publications sponsored by the Society should bear a clear indication that they do not commit the Society, but only those responsible for preparing them". The changes marked the culmination of a process by which the Society had ceased increasingly to be a body advocating specific policies as had been the case at its inception, and instead devoted itself to researching and publicising ideas within a broad framework of democratic socialism and parliamentary democracy. In so doing, Fabianism was re-

invented as being primarily about the method and process for social reform, and the Society re-affirmed its identity as the original political think-tank.

Conclusion

Even so, with the ending of the Cold War, Morris is seen to have been the truer prophet. The modern welfare state - the supreme achievement of the Fabians - is now seen to have been a short-lived phenomenon, born of the passing need of the West to outbid its Cold War adversaries for the loyalties of its workers. The collapse of communism has cleared the way for the managed reduction in living standards which working people throughout the developed world are currently experiencing. High levels of unemployment, under-employment and widespread job insecurity are once again fixtures of our economic environment. What the Victorians called the residuum - and we today call the underclass - is once again present, on the increase and assumed to be always with us. With the comprehensive discrediting of the command economy and statutory corporation models of socialism, socialism itself is widely seen to have been discredited.

If Morris has been in these respects the prophet of our present discontents, he has also been in part the inspirer of such by-our-bootstraps remedies as may remain open to us. Morris was a major influence not only as has been seen on socialists as widely separated on the ideological spectrum as the Fabians and communists but also in quarters as unlikely and indirect as the Distributist thinking which British Catholics such as Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton derived from the great papal encyclical of 1891, De Rerum Novarum. Belloc's politics, in the view of his most recent biographer, A.N. Wilson, "owed much to the William Morris socialism of News from Nowhere". Much of what Morris most profoundly objected to in capitalism was also objected to by Belloc in the seminal critique of the capitalist social order which he published in 1912 as The Servile State. Morris' influence was again apparent in the crafts community settlement which the Distributists Eric Gill and Hilary Pepler established at Ditchling. Distributism was re-invented with partial success in the Antigonish Movement in Canada and has now been fully brought to flower in an evolved form in the Mondragon Co-operative Corporation in the Basque region of Spain. "Our form of socialism works", writes the now recently retired chairman of the MCC, Janvier Mongelos, "The workers who own this co-operative know their future depends on making profits". Were Morris to be with us today and able to visit Mondragon he might well be

59 Parry J.N. "Mondragon Pushed to the Peak of Success" in the European, 28/10/94.
perplexed by the idea that socialism could be achieved by making the ownership of property more widespread rather than by making it more concentrated. He would not necessarily be displeased, or dismissive of the potential of Mondragon to re-ignite what Ben Chifley - Labor Party Prime Minister of Australia from 1945 until 1949 - has so movingly characterised for us as our "light on the hill"60.

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