

What's Wrong with Using Parliament?

The cases for and against the revolutionary use of parliament

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Introduction

What distinguishes us, amongst those who want a classless, stateless, wageless, moneyless society based on the common ownership and democratic control of the means of life, is our view that parliament can, and should, be used in the course of establishing such a socialist society.

This position is based on our understanding that before socialism can be established there has to be a majority actively in favour of this, and that it is essential for this majority to win control over the machinery of government (political power, the state) before trying to establish socialism. In developed capitalist countries, it is control of the law-making assembly (parliament) that is the way to the control of the machinery of government. Since control of parliament is obtained via elections based on universal suffrage, a socialist majority can win control of the machinery of government through winning a parliamentary majority via the ballot box.

The reason why we say it is essential to win control of the machinery of government is that the state is both the historically-evolved centre of social administration and, in class-divided societies like capitalism, the institution with the power to employ socially-sanctioned physical force. The state is an expression of and enforcer of class society. Intrinsically it is a coercive institution.

Capitalist limited democracy

Parliament is now a capitalist institution. It originally served the monarchy under feudalism and went on to be used by the up-and-coming capitalist class (in Britain from the 17th century onwards) to wrest political control from backward-looking landed elements left over from feudalism. It was never intended to represent all the people, but only those who owned some property. However, over time, as a result of rivalries within the owning class and pressure from the disfranchised propertyless majority, the right to vote was extended until universal male and female suffrage is now the norm.

Today the capitalist class as a whole own the means of production. Control of the state is operated by those who hold political power as a result of being elected via universal suffrage (the vote). This means they have to get the formal agreement, at election times, of the majority of the people. This is not too difficult since most people are imbued with capitalist ideas and see no alternative to present-day, capitalist society with its class ownership, production for profit, working for wages and rationing by money. What is required is to mobilise people to go and vote into parliament some pro-capitalist politician. This is the job of political parties – in Britain, the main ones being Labour, Tory, the Lib-Dems, and the Nationalists and the Greens – which are groups of professional politicians who seek support on the basis of “vote for me and my party and we’ll do this and this and this for you”. In other words, an elitist, paternalist approach where there is no element of popular participation.

This kind of politics rests on a number of assumptions and has a number of consequences. It accepts the capitalist status quo and seeks merely to work within it. Politics becomes a question of choosing the best capitalism-management team from amongst competing groups of politicians. Politics becomes an activity in which only a minority – the professional politicians – participate. Most people’s only involvement in politics is, literally, once every few years when they go and put an X on a ballot paper. Then they go home and let the person elected get on with the job. But that’s enough for the capitalist class. Their continuing rule has been endorsed. The state will continue to grant them the legal rights to own the means of production and to exploit the working class for profit.

This – where the only choice is between rival groups of professional politicians, all standing for basically the same thing (capitalism) – is a very weak form of democracy and we are not defending it or saying that people should take part in it by choosing between Tweedledum and Tweedledee (we don’t). But it is still the case that the way to political power lies through elections and parliament and that this is a way that can be used by a socialist majority once it has emerged.

Parliament inside capitalism is representative of a democratic process in that ‘parties’ can enter the field and be able to express any manner of views legitimately.

The strength that capitalism has over people in countries that could be described as

liberal democratic is that capitalist politicians, organisations and businesses with all the tools at their disposal have been able to foster a belief or at the very least an acquiescence in, the ideas that capitalism encourages us to believe in.

Two ideas prominent to *liberal democratic* political ideology are that we live in a society which is both democratic and free. If this is not the case but if we live in a society where there is a semblance of democracy and freedom, what better way is there to challenge that 'democracy and freedom' than by using the accepted legitimate channels and thereby being able to call its bluff.

Majority action

When a majority, actively demanding and working for socialism, emerges it would be folly for them to leave control of the state – and its “armed bodies of men” – in the hands of supporters of capitalism. That would be to leave a potential weapon in the hands of the opponents of socialism. Certainly, with the spread of socialist ideas even amongst members of the armed forces, it would be a somewhat blunted weapon, but one still capable of inflicting some harm. So, it would be dangerous to take the risk. Better to use the fact of being the majority to take control of the state via elections and parliament, if only to neutralise it.

But there is a more positive reason for winning control of political power. The state is an instrument of coercion, but it has assumed social functions that have to exist in any society and which have nothing to do with its coercive nature: it has taken over the role of being society's central organ of administration and co-ordination. Gaining control of the state will at the same time give control of this social organ which can be used to co-ordinate the changeover from capitalism to socialism. Of course, it couldn't be used in the form inherited from capitalism; it would have to be reorganised on a thoroughly democratic basis, with mandated and recallable delegates and popular participation replacing the unaccountable professional politicians and unelected top civil servants of today.

Nor should it be overlooked that, if some pro-capitalist minority should be so unwise as to resort to violence to resist the establishment of socialism, it will be an immense advantage to have control of the social institution with the power to employ socially-sanctioned force. Once any threat of this sort has disappeared (fairly rapidly, we would think), then the state can be dismantled. The armed forces can be completely disbanded and the centre of social administration and coordination can be thoroughly democratised. The state will have ceased to exist and a stateless society – an aim of socialists as well as anarchists – achieved.

Reformist parliamentarism

Our stance in favour of the socialist majority using parliament in the course of the changeover to socialism has often been misunderstood. It has been said, for instance, that we wish to form a “socialist government” and that what we are saying is “vote for us and we’ll introduce socialism for you”. Neither is the case.

There have indeed been people calling themselves socialists who have taken this position: For example, the Marxist-influenced Social Democratic parties of continental Europe and elements within the British Labour Party. They envisaged socialism being introduced gradually through a series of social reforms enacted by parliament, and they sought election to parliament on the basis of such a programme. We have always opposed such reformism.

Capitalism cannot be gradually reformed into socialism. It is an economic system governed by uncontrollable economic forces which favour the accumulation of capital out of profits resulting from the unpaid labour of those forced by economic necessity to sell their working skills, whether manual or intellectual, for a wage or a salary (the working class, the vast majority of the population in the developed capitalist parts of the world).

When such reformist parties have come to power, they have introduced some social reforms but at the same time have had to accept the continuation of capitalism. As capitalism can only function as a profit-making system in the interests of those living off profits and to the detriment of the working class, they have ended up governing in the interest of the capitalist class. Over time they have become more and more reconciled to the “economic reality” of the need to allow profits to be made, so that, instead of them gradually changing capitalism into socialism, it is them who have been gradually changed into openly pro-capitalist parties, an alternative management team for capitalism to the traditional upholders of the status quo.

There is no gradual parliamentary road to socialism through a series of piecemeal reform measures introduced by a reformist government. Anarchists are right to say this. We say it too, but it is not to try to introduce socialism gradually that we advocate socialists should use parliament. Nor are we offering ourselves, as if we were a conventional political party, to introduce socialism for people, not even in one fell swoop.

Participatory revolution

The only people who can introduce socialism are the great majority of men and women. Socialism is a democratic society that can only function with the active participation of its members. It will be a participatory democracy, quite different from what passes for democracy under capitalism where people only get to choose between rival bands of professional politicians. For this reason it can only be introduced democratically, with the active participation of the majority. The socialist revolution – the more or less rapid changeover from capitalism to socialism – can only be a participatory, majority revolution.

The socialist political party (of which we are just a potential embryo) will not be something separate from the socialist majority. It will be the socialist majority self-organised politically, an instrument they have formed to use to achieve a socialist society. The structure of the future mass socialist party will have to reflect – to prefigure – the democratic nature of the society it is seeking to establish. It must be democratic, without leaders, with major decisions made by conferences of mandated and recallable delegates or by referendum, and other decisions made by accountable individuals and committees. It won't have a leadership with the power to make decisions and tell the general membership what to do. In other words, it will be quite different both from the parties of professional politicians that stand for election today and from the vanguard parties of the Leninists.

This is not to say that the socialist majority only needs to organise itself politically. It does need to organise politically so as to be able to win control of political power. But it also needs to organise economically to take over and keep production going immediately after the winning of political control. We can't anticipate how such socialist workplace organisations will emerge, whether from the reform of the existing trade unions, from breakaways from them or from the formation of completely new organisations. All we can say now is that such workplace organisations will arise and that they too, like the socialist political party, will have to organise themselves on a democratic basis, with mandated delegates instead of leaders.

With the spread of socialist ideas all organisations will change and take on a participatory democratic and socialist character, so that the majority's organisation for socialism will not be just political and economic, but will also embrace schools and universities, television, film-making, plays and the like as well as inter-personal relationships. We're talking about a radical social revolution involving all aspects of social life.

Anti-Parliamentarian and Anarchist Objections

Anti-Parliamentarians and Anarchists advance a number of arguments against the use of parliament by socialists now and by the time of the socialist revolution.

- (a) that mandating MPs as socialist delegates is unconstitutional;
- (b) that any socialist delegate sent to parliament would get corrupted and sell out;
- (c) that parliament does not control the government;
- (d) that the election of a socialist majority in parliament would provoke a coup.

Unconstitutional

Members of Parliament are controlled by their party's use of the three-line whip and other devices and are committed in theory to carrying out the promises made in their election manifestos. However, the argument here is that under capitalist parliamentary democracy those elected to central legislative assemblies are not bound, constitutionally or legally, to follow the instructions of those who elected them.

The Dublin-based Workers Solidarity Movement put it this way:

“...while politicians do stand at election time for various policies and positions, and the voters cast their ballots on the basis of these policies, *an elected politician* is not bound by any law to follow these previously proclaimed policies and positions. Indeed, once elected and a member of Government, a politician is entirely within his or her rights to jettison any promises s/he may have made at the election. The politician in question is quite entitled (legally) to say: ‘Having examined the state of the public finances I have changed my mind about what I previously said - I now think the opposite!’ It is through this notion that an elected parliament is able to discard ‘the wishes’ of the electorate” (Kevin Doyle, *Parliament or Democracy?*, Workers Solidarity Movement pamphlet, second edition, 1997, page 24).

It is true that in Britain, Ireland and other places with the ‘Westminster’ parliamentary model, MPs, once elected, are regarded as being entirely free to do as they want and are not supposed to be instructed by any outside body as to how to vote. Indeed, if any outside body attempts to instruct an MP they could be held in “contempt of parliament” and, in theory, jailed. It is also true that this constitutional arrangement was retained, after workers got the vote, as a useful way of allowing MPs to promise one thing to get elected and, later once elected, to vote for the inevitably unpopular, anti-working class measures governments have to impose under capitalism. This is not just a useful convention but a necessary one since, even if MPs were instructed by the electorate to make capitalism work in the common interest, they wouldn’t be able to carry out such an instruction as it would be incompatible with the way capitalism operates.

In other words, capitalist democracy can function on no other basis than allowing MPs a

free hand. This being so, the anarchist argument goes, workers should have nothing to do with it and should abstain from voting, otherwise they will be abdicating their power to act for themselves to someone who cannot be controlled or made accountable to them.

Because MPs themselves say they are representatives and not delegates, some anarchists have felt compelled to draw a rigid distinction between “representation” and “delegation”:

“In a democracy it is natural that we will appoint people to do certain things – this is a vital division of labour that must be used. But this appointment should be on the basis of delegation *not* representation. Delegates unlike representatives are subject to recall (if they don’t do what they were asked to do by the assembly, they can be relieved of their mandate and their actions reversed)” (*Parliament or Democracy?*, p. 41).

“...delegate democracy . . . strongly contrasts with representative democracy (such as Parliament) where, an MP having been elected, he/she then takes decisions on personal, party and ultimately ruling-class grounds, with little reference to the working-class part of the electorate” (Anarchist Federation, *Against Parliament. For Anarchism*, 2000 edition, p. 54).

This is broadly a valid distinction, but it is a distinction rather between accountable and non-accountable representatives. It seems an over-narrow definition of “delegate” to say it is someone given a single specific mandate; this may be the case in some instances but we don’t see why delegates need to refer back to those who mandated them for every decision – that would be as unworkable as direct democracy without any delegation.

We can agree that workers should not vote for anyone seeking election to parliament as an unaccountable representative. Faced with a choice merely of candidates all seeking election on this basis, abstention is the best course of action. That’s what our members do. But it does not follow from the fact that capitalist political democracy is seriously flawed from the point of view of democratic theory that the vote cannot be used against the system.

There is nothing to prevent workers who want socialism selecting one of their number to stand as a candidate to go to parliament as a socialist delegate, pledged to take instructions from socialists voting for them organised in the socialist political party. This might well strictly speaking be unconstitutional in terms of the state not wanting rebels in parliament, but it would be the height of irony for anti-parliamentarians and anarchists to object to some proposed course of action on the ground of its being against the state sanctioned constitution. In any event, a constitution is just a piece of paper; what is important is how it is interpreted which is a reflection of political reality including the balance of forces between the ruling class and the working class. So-called “people’s power” is not just a myth.

“Power corrupts”

Many anarchists go on to argue that, while it might be possible for socialist-minded workers to send a mandated delegate to parliament, this delegate will soon be corrupted and assimilated into the circle of pro-capitalist politicians:

“Supposedly working-class MPs lose touch with their original background, just as do those elected primarily as women or black; and for the same reasons. What is it that makes such attitudes easy to adopt? It stems from the fact that, once existing in a world of large salaries, consultancies and bribes, chauffeurs and private secretaries, politicians become largely divorced from life as most of us experience it” (Anarchist Federation, *Against Parliament. For Anarchism*, p. 5).

This may be an argument based on the experience of a long list of leftwing firebrands who have ended up accepting the capitalist status-quo. But these ‘sell-outs’ were not elected in the first place as the socialist delegates of organised socialists outside parliament, but as reformist politicians by workers who themselves basically accepted capitalism even if dissatisfied with some of its effects. However, we neither support the capitalist system nor believe that we can bring about socialism by reforming it and as socialists the methodology of our Party can only be based on accountable democracy rather than so-called representative democracy.

We recognise that it is not enough to say simply that corruption would not happen because the candidate was a ‘true’ socialist. Experience of the behaviour of others in their groups or organisations have led some anarchists and socialists to believe that, because a person appears to understand and endorse certain revolutionary principles, they may still be subject to corrupt behaviour or open to manipulation through an enjoyment of being in a position of power. Incidentally, if it were true that ‘power corrupts’ then it would apply equally to the non-parliamentary councils and committees that anarchists advocate as instruments of social revolution.

In order that a socialist delegate, backed up by and accountable to socialists outside parliament would not be open to corruption, we would need to ensure that certain mechanisms are in place. This might involve recallable delegates, rotating delegates, rotating positions and regular meetings of an overseeing body to make sure that delegate’s behaviour is kept in check. Perhaps, in order to ensure that the person who is the delegate act at all times at the behest of the Party and is not corrupted through financial gain, the money that a socialist delegate would get could automatically belong to the Party (while their living expenses could be provided by the Party).

In *Against Parliament. For Anarchism*, (p. 53) The Anarchist Federation pamphlet concedes that

“Through all the problems involved in carrying through the revolution, any temptations towards authoritarian or exploitative behaviour would face an alert, energised populace

working through a very different social framework”

We agree, but also think that this same “alert, energised populace” would also be able to deal with any such behaviour in those it chose to send to parliament as its mandated delegates. Furthermore, some anarchists have the view that recallable delegates should be used as a way of carrying out functions in their own organizations and in a future society, so what’s wrong with applying this principle to sending socialist delegates to parliament?

Conspiracy

In any event, anti-parliamentarianists and anarchists move on to say, there is no point in sending delegates to parliament since this is not where power really lies; real power is not exercised by elected MPs, not even by those of them who form the government:

“The British State is supposed to be controlled by the politicians and the politicians elected by us. This, we are told, allows us through the ballot box to change things. So why does the State act in the interests of the ruling class regardless of whoever is in power – Labour, Tory or Liberal? It is because the function and success of politicians and their parties are ultimately controlled by the capitalists and the State’s own permanent unelected officials” (Class War, *Unfinished Business*, 1992, p. 45).

“In Britain we are given the ‘choice’, every five years or so, of what Party we’d like to govern us. This, like many other ‘choices’ is a false one, a con trick to fool us into thinking things can change through the vote. It also gives us politicians, as figureheads, to blame for our difficulties. But the reality is that the power of the State lies with the capitalists, and the State’s own officials - they pull the strings” (Class War, *This is Class War*, 1991 edition, p. 9).

Two different things are being claimed here: that parliament does not control the government and that the apparent government is not the real government. Both are empirical claims which it should be possible to verify on the basis of the evidence of the facts observed.

The first thing to note is that even in constitutional theory parliament is not supposed to take governmental decisions, but rather to hold the government accountable for the decisions it takes. While it is true that the government – at ministerial as well as civil service level – has to make so many decisions that parliamentary control of most of them can be little more than formal, it is still true that the members of the government are chosen from the group in parliament that has the support of a majority of MPs. In other words, parliament does possess the key power to decide who the government is.

But is the government that is chosen by parliament the real government or is this some shadowy committee of capitalists? There is not the slightest evidence for the existence of such a parallel government. The idea that it exists is pure conspiracy theory. If it did exist, it is difficult to see how its existence could be kept secret. The ministers of the government we can all see and know about would mention it in their memoirs. None ever

has. There are other problems with this conspiracy theory. How would the members of this supposed secret committee of capitalist puppet-masters be chosen? What mechanisms would they have to settle policy differences between different capitalist groups (since the capitalist class is not a monolith with a single obvious common interest)? There certainly exist capitalist pressure groups, such as the European Round Table of Industrialists, but these endeavour to influence governments, rather than themselves being a kind of power behind the throne.

The whole theory is absurd. The fact is that the government is the government we see and which (in 'Westminster model' type countries) emanates from parliament, which is elected by all the people. It is quite true that they govern in the general overall interest of the capitalist class, but this is not because they are taking direct orders from some committee of capitalists. It is because the government operates within the framework of the capitalist economic system and because this system can only operate as a profit-making system in the interest of the capitalist class. All governments have to take this into account. This is why they all end up (if they don't start off) governing in the interest of the capitalist class. It happens spontaneously and as a matter of course. There is no need to have recourse to any conspiracy theory to explain it.

It can be noted in passing that even if parliament were a mere talking-shop (which it isn't) then it might still be worth the socialist movement sending delegates there just to use it as a tribune from which to spread socialist ideas.

Coup

Even if anti parliamentarians and anarchists can be convinced that the government we see actually is the real government and that who controls it depends on who holds a majority of the seats in parliament, they still have another objection: that even if the socialist movement wins an election and secures a majority in parliament this wouldn't give it control of the government because the capitalist class would then stage a coup d'état:

“Socialism cannot come through the Parliament. If we look at a country like Chile we can see why. In 1973 the people elected a moderate socialist government led by President Allende. This democratically-elected government was toppled by a CIA backed military coup. Repression followed in which the workers movement was smashed and thousands of militants lost their lives” (“What is Anarchism?”, www.struggle.ws/pdfs/whatis.pdf).

The example given is quite irrelevant to the claim that “socialism cannot come through parliament” (or rather that parliament cannot be used in the course of establishing socialism). Allende was not a socialist, did not command a majority in congress (parliament) or enjoy majority popular support. Nor was he overthrown immediately on assuming office in 1970 but three years later (by which time he had failed to reform capitalism in the worker's interests).

Imagine a different situation, on the eve of a socialist election victory. Most workers would already be convinced of the need for socialism and would have organised

themselves in unions and other bodies ready to keep production and administration going after the election victory. Socialist ideas would also have penetrated into the armed forces.

Given this situation it would be a bold group of plotters who would attempt a coup, which would have no chance of success. There is in fact no example in the historical record of any government trying to continue when faced with the hostility of the population: when they see the balance of forces is decisively against them they give up. The example of the collapse of the state-capitalist dictatorships in Eastern Europe in 1989-90 is a case in point. Not even the hard-line dictatorships in Czechoslovakia and East Germany sent out the elements of the armed forces still loyal to them (the secret police) to shoot down the people demonstrating against them in the streets. Ceausescu in Romania did try this, but within a few days he was facing a firing squad.

In the unlikely event of hard-line pro-capitalist elements staging a coup against a socialist majority this couldn't last. Strikes, demonstrations and army mutinies would immediately break out and the whole thing would be over in a day or two.

The authors of the 'What is Anarchism?' web-page leaflet mentioned above, which claims that "socialism cannot come through parliament", agree with us that the revolution against capitalism must be a majority, participatory revolution:

"Central to our politics is the belief that ordinary people must make the revolution. Every member of the working class (workers, unemployed, housewives, etc.) has a role to play".

The trouble is they don't seem to have thought through the implications of this. If on the eve of the revolution a majority of the population are in favour of it and are organised to participate in it, why should they not demonstrate this by putting up their own candidates to oppose and beat those who do support the continuation of the capitalist system? Naturally, these candidates would stand as mandated delegates not as unaccountable representatives. Being the majority, this would be reflected in a majority of seats in parliament. And if some pro-capitalists in the boardrooms, the armed forces or the police attempted a coup, what, as already pointed out, could they do against a participating majority committed to establishing socialism?

Once there is an organised, determined majority the success of the socialist revolution is assured, one way or the other. It is then a question of the best tactic to pursue to try to ensure that this takes place as rapidly and as smoothly as possible. In our view, the best way to proceed is to start by obtaining a democratic mandate via the ballot box for the changeover to socialism. The tactical advantage of doing this is that, when obtained, it deprives the supporters of capitalism of any legitimacy for the continuation of their rule. This could be important should some of the pro-capitalists think of staging a coup: any wavering elements, especially in the armed forces, would tend to side with those who have the undisputed democratic legitimacy, i.e. in this instance those who want socialism.

Unrealistic alternatives

On the other hand, as is theoretically possible as an alternative tactic, the majority could decide to ignore elections and proceed directly to trying to take over the means of production, along the lines envisaged by the anarcho-syndicalist Robert Lynn:

“...imagine a people realising the necessity of a revolt for fundamental change. They vote with their feet by marching into the factories and commandeering the means of production. They seize the land, the yards, the mines, depots, the armaments factories, all means of communications; the radio, the press, the T.V.” (Robert Lynn, *Vote: What For?*, p. 17).

This is imaginable but it would surrender to the constituted authorities the legitimacy that could deter any wavering elements in the armed forces from carrying out orders to stop this. It would thus unnecessarily increase the chances of the changeover being violent and more disruptive than it need be. Much more sensible, if there is already a majority in favour of “fundamental change”, for them to first try the ballot box.

The Anarchist Federation offer an even more unrealistic tactic than just marching into the factories and taking them over while still leaving pro-capitalist elements in control of the state. They reject people voting with their feet as well as just voting and envisage civil and international war:

“Because the ruling class will not relinquish power without the use of armed force, this revolution will be violent as well as liberatory” (Anarchist Federation’s Aims and Principles).

In their “revolutionary manifesto for the millennium”, *Beyond Resistance* (1996), they talk of “violent conflict” and “revolutionary war” and boast:

“...our organisation must be prepared from the outset to use force against counter-revolutionary groupings as readily as we would against capital or the state” (p. 18).

This is in relation to unreconstructed “Leninists, Trotskyists, Maoists and other such authoritarian groups” (the feeling is mutual and these groups declare that they wouldn’t hesitate to use violence against counter-revolutionary anarchists). But the Anarchist Federation envisages these groups, as well as social democrats and fascists, being around in significant numbers at a time when a majority of the working class is supposed to have evolved an understanding of the need for a fundamental change in the basis of society, and this must cast doubt on whether the Anarchist Federation is committed to a majority revolution. This suggests rather that they see the revolution as one sparked off by minority anarchist action in which rival armed struggles then vie with each other for influence, power and control of territory.

To be fair, they (or some of them) can envisage the possibility of “something quite different” from a “revolutionary war” as an alternative revolutionary scenario:

“ The majority of military personnel are working class, and however indoctrinated they are, we doubt that they will be prepared on the whole to shoot down their friends, neighbours and relatives. Examples from the Russian Revolution of 1917 to the Rumania of 1990 show that the army will switch sides when it becomes clear that the people will no longer tolerate their government and are prepared to take to the streets to prove it” (*Beyond Resistance*, p. 19).

Quite. That’s what we’ve been saying all along. We would only add the people could also prove it by sending a majority of socialist delegates to parliament.