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Vic Midgley Writes Home: A Letter from New Zealand, 1939

Jeremy Mouat

IN FEBRUARY 1939, Victor Midgley wrote from New Zealand to his old friend Angus MacInnis in Canada. Midgley's analysis of contemporary events in New Zealand in the letter is a fascinating one, and his experiences prior to departing for New Zealand meant that he was a particularly well-qualified observer of union and political affairs.

Midgley had been an important figure in western Canada's labour movement from the 1910s through to the Depression. He also was active politically, running as a socialist candidate in the 1912 provincial election.¹ Like other members of the Socialist Party of Canada, he worked within the labour movement, serving as secretary for both the Vancouver Trades and Labour Council and the B.C. Federation of Labour. He paid a price for this: during the 1918 general strike in Vancouver commemorating Ginger Goodwin's murder, angry veterans beat him and attempted to throw him out of a second floor window of the Labour Temple. They eventually settled for forcing him to kiss the Union Jack.²

The event had little impact on Midgley's commitment to labour. In 1919 he played a key role in the Western Labour Conference in Calgary and subsequently in the formation of the One Big Union. He was on the OBU's central committee and acted as its national secretary. In this capacity he is perhaps best remembered for a key disagreement with Ernest Winch. At the 1920 Port Arthur convention of the OBU, Midgley was instrumental in preventing Winch and other members of the

¹Elections British Columbia, *Electoral History of British Columbia 1871-1986* (Victoria 1988), 119. Midgley ran in the City of Victoria, and polled just over 4 per cent of the vote.

²For general comments on Midgley, see David J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union* (Toronto 1978), 105-7; other accounts of the 1918 Labour Temple episode may be found in Martin Robin, *Radical Politics and Canadian Labour 1880-1930* (Kingston 1968), 152; Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1967), 73-4.

Lumber Workers Industrial Union from being seated. As a result the Lumber Workers withdrew from the OBU.³

Midgley's differences with Winch surfaced again in the mid 1930s, when both men were involved in the CCF's acrimonious dispute, known as the Connell affair. The two men had come to the CCF via different routes: Winch through his membership in the Socialist Party of Party, Midgley via the League for Social Reconstruction (he had helped organize a Victoria branch of the LSR in 1932). The dispute centred on Reverend Connell, the party's leader in the B.C. legislature and a man better known for his nature columns in a Victoria paper than for his commitment to socialism. Some of his colleagues in the Legislature, especially Ernest Winch and Lyle Telford, were unimpressed by Connell's moderate reformism. Matters came to a head in 1936, when the annual CCF convention — dominated by Winch and Telford — passed a number of resolutions which Connell could not support. After meeting with Midgley and others, Connell publicly disavowed the new platform, evidently hoping that this would rally support around him. It did not, and the provincial executive moved quickly to expel him from the party. Dorothy Steeves remembered it as a "sorry affair" and went on to observe that

"the Connell split" was not simply the result of differences of opinion between a right and left wing in the CCF. It was a clash between personalities, a matter of ancient rivalries, of bitter words written and spoken which had rankled throughout the years. Mr. Connell was the figurehead; he was in the shrill limelight of press publicity. Behind him stood his secretary, Victor Midgley, former dominion secretary of the One Big Union, and William A. Pritchard, the editor of the "Commonwealth", but sixteen years ago the revolutionary hero of the Winnipeg trials. . . .

The pity of it all was that Mr. Connell dragged with him into the wilderness people who bore honorable scars in the service of the socialist movement. Convinced socialists, gifted with brilliant powers of expression or organizing ability, Pritchard, Midgley and others — these were lost to the CCF.⁴

Midgley was not simply lost to the CCF, he was lost to the province as well, immigrating to New Zealand. Just why Midgley left British Columbia is unclear,

³See Gordon Hak, "British Columbia Loggers and the Lumber Workers Industrial Union, 1919-1922," *Labour/Le Travail* 23 (Spring 1989), 80, and Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men*, 165-9.

⁴Dorothy G. Steeves, *The Compassionate Rebel: Ernest Winch and the Growth of Socialism in Western Canada* (Vancouver 1977), 107 and 111-2. See also Walter D. Young, "Ideology, Personality and the Origin of the CCF in British Columbia," *BC Studies*, 32 (Winter 1976-77): 139-62; Gordon Wickerson, "Conflict in the British Columbia Cooperative Commonwealth Federation and the 'Connell Affair'," unpublished MA thesis, University of British Columbia, 1973; and Dorothy June Roberts, "Doctrine and Disunity in the British Columbia Section of the CCF, 1932-1956," unpublished MA thesis, University of Victoria, 1972, especially 30-52. The account here is based largely on these last two works.

but the Connell affair was likely a factor. New Zealand had its attractions, of course. The country's innovative social policies introduced at the turn of the century had attracted considerable attention in British Columbia,⁵ and the election in 1935 of a Labour government probably piqued the curiosity of a longtime activist such as Midgley.

Midgley was not the first left-wing migrant to leave the west coast for New Zealand or Australia. Jack Kavanagh had gone to Australia in the mid 1920s,⁶ and before the First World War two other more shadowy but fascinating characters also travelled to those distant southern shores. The first, William Fenton, had been an active unionist as well as a political candidate in Nanaimo.⁷ The second, J. B. King, was a copper miner at Greenwood in the province's Interior. His dismissal from the mine in 1909 caused a strike and subsequently an "investigation" under the provisions of the 1907 I.D.I Act.⁸ From Greenwood, King went on to play an active role in the IWW's activities on the coast, and then in 1911 decided to visit New Zealand. As Erik Olssen noted, "If God had been a Wobbly he could not have timed King's advent better."⁹ King quickly assumed an important role as a left critic in New Zealand, and was active in the Waihi strike of 1912, an industrial dispute which had a profound impact on that country's labour movement. Following the collapse of the strike, King moved across the Tasman to Australia. He was not destined for obscurity, however. Still an active wobbly, King was arrested for his activities during the First World War, one of Sydney's famous "IWW twelve," and served four and a half years in an Australian prison for forgery and sedition.¹⁰

Although Midgley did not have the same impact as King, he was soon active in New Zealand's union movement. In addition to the various endeavours described in the following letter to Angus MacInnis, he went on (in September 1939) to become editor-manager of an Auckland labour paper, the *Union Record*. Although

⁵For a brief discussion of BC interest in NZ, see Mouat, "The Genesis of Western Exceptionalism: British Columbia's Hard Rock Miners, 1895-1903," *Canadian Historical Review*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (September 1990): 339-40.

⁶See David Akers, "'Kavanagh Bolshevism': The Early Years of the Communist Movement in Vancouver (1920-1925)," paper presented to the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, Queen's University, 4 June, 1991, 34 and 41-2.

⁷The only detail I have uncovered on Fenton in New Zealand is his letter to the *Western Clarion*, 28 April 1906, 4.

⁸See *Labour Gazette*, (July 1909): 52-66.

⁹Erik Olssen, *The Red Feds: Revolutionary Unionism and the New Zealand Federation of Labour 1908-1913* (Auckland 1988), 128. For further evidence of King's importance, see T.W.F., "Some Marxist Pioneers in New Zealand," *New Zealand Labour Review*, Vol. 9, (March 1956): 16-21. This very interesting article also acknowledges a considerable debt to both the *Western Clarion* and the Socialist Party of Canada in the formation of a theoretically-informed left in New Zealand.

¹⁰For a somewhat chaotic history of the IWW twelve and their trial, see Ian Turner's *Sydney's Burning* (Sydney 1969), revised edition.

his efforts seem to have caused the journal to expand considerably, in December 1940 he was replaced as editor, likely as a result of a major disagreement. His subsequent fate is obscure.¹¹

The introductory comments in the letter reveal that Midgley was writing to thank MacInnis for providing a letter of reference on his behalf. Midgley then offers a portrait of the New Zealand labour movement in 1939. One important qualification: Midgley's observation that "the same degree of bitterness and personal abuse [is not] indulged in here" should probably be read more as a comment on his experiences in B.C. than as a wholly accurate view of a harmonious and united left in New Zealand. Some important divisions existed in the Labour Party, a party which at this point had been in power for some four years. Less than a month after Midgley's letter, these divisions became public when a "private" letter found its way into the newspapers. Written by a prominent Labour politician, the document attacked the government's record on a number of key issues. A month later the annual convention expelled its author, John A. Lee, from the Labour Party.¹² As may be imagined, a considerable degree of bitterness and personal abuse accompanied these actions, described by one historian as "the most dramatic personal confrontation in New Zealand political history."¹³ Despite this caveat, however, the letter is a vivid and insightful document.

62 Symonds St.
Auckland
21 — 2 — 39

Dear Angus,

Was pleasantly surprised to get your letter. It is some time since I mentioned your name to the Insurance Company when applying for a job. Hardly thought that they would take the trouble to write to Canada, but they are more fussy about references here than employers are in Canada.

¹¹I am very grateful to Bert Roth for the detail in this paragraph on Midgley's New Zealand career. Unfortunately I have discovered nothing of Midgley's later life. John Sidaway thought that Midgley "died in Australia some years ago," evidently in the late 1950s. (Box 52, file 13, Angus MacInnis Collection, University of British Columbia Library, Special Collections Division.) According to a telephone conversation with Midgley's daughter-in-law, however, he died in New Zealand, although Mrs. Midgley did not recall the exact year. Her husband had remained in British Columbia when Midgley senior had gone to New Zealand; he too was named Victor and was active in the union movement.

¹²For a highly readable though partisan account of this event, see John A. Lee, *Simple On a Soap-Box* (Auckland 1963). See also Erik Olssen, *John A. Lee* (Dunedin 1977), especially 114-60.

¹³Keith Sinclair, *Walter Nash* (Auckland and Oxford 1976), 193.

62 Symonds St
Auckland

21-2-39

Dear Angus, Was pleasantly surprised to get your letter. It is some time since I mentioned your name to the Insurance Company when applying for a job. Hardly thought they would take the trouble to write to Canada, but they are more fussy about references here than employers are in Canada.

I find the movement here very interesting and the endeavours of the Government to 'build Socialism within the shell of Capitalism' very instructive.

Am a member of the Educators of the Auckland Corporation Union and a delegate to the Trades Council.

Sunday evenings I conduct a class in Fabian Economics, which I vary with instruction in public speaking and play reading.

Am a member of the Labor Party and the Fabian Club. The latter, despite its name is the best socialist forum I have found here.

Also take an interest in the Workers Educational

I find the movement here very interesting and the endeavours of the Government to 'build Socialism within the shell of Capitalism' very instructive.

Am a member of the Executive of the Auckland Carpenters Union and a delegate to the Trades Council. Sunday evenings I conduct a class in Marxian economics, which I vary with instruction in public speaking and play reading. Am a member of the Labor Party and the Fabian Club. The latter, despite its name, is the best socialist forum I have found here. Also take an interest in the Workers Educational Association, with which there is nothing comparable in Canada.

Last May I was a delegate from the Wellington Carpenters Union to the Annual Conference of the Federation of Labor and sat through the Labor Party's Annual Conference as a visitor. So you can judge that I am not only keeping active but am getting a good insight into the New Zealand movement.

There is not as much class-consciousness manifest here as in Western Canada, but that is accounted for by forty years of compulsory arbitration.

Neither is there the same degree of bitterness and personal abuse indulged in here. Even when there is a marked difference of opinion and policy or where personal hostility does exist there is usually a noticable [sic] restraint exercised in debate. Because their advocates before the Arbitration Court and in the Conciliation Councils have to be well informed in the Statute & Case Law the Trade Unions have developed quite a group of professional organizers and secretaries. Some of them are retained by and receive salaries from several unions, one I know is Secretary of six organizations, and some of them are actually elected for life! On the office door, and in at least one case on the office window overlooking the main street, will be painted not the name of the union but:—

'John Doe'
'Trade Union Secretary.'

Despite, or because of, the Compulsory Trade Union Membership Act, there is great apathy on the part of the workers towards their trade union affairs, and a tendency to leave everything to the Secretary. There is however a great loyalty to the Labor Party, and an absence [sic] of carping criticism towards their representatives, that is a refreshing contrast to B.C.

There is a lamentable lack of knowledge of scientific socialism. Some cynic might suggest a connection between these two facts, certainly some of our B.C. Pseudo-Marxists are unscrupulous critics. About the Governments Legislative accomplishments you are no doubt fully informed.

At the Fabian Club last Saturday night, after an address by one of the local Members of Parliament¹⁴ I expressed my misgivings based on the following points:—

¹⁴The subsequent reference to this person as the Chairman of the House Committee on Defense identifies the speaker as Jack Lyon, MHR for Waitamata. He was a veteran of the

1. The governments endeavours to graft an era of 'Plenty for All' into a system based upon Scarcity.
2. The governments endeavour to establish joint councils of employers and employees with the object of increasing production and recommending legislation.
3. The possibility of establishing Socialism in a country whose economy is based upon the sale of primary products in the worlds capitalist markets.
4. A workers government has been in control for over three years but they have rejected all proposals to give the workers even a measure of control in industry.
5. That the tempo of Socialization would have to be accelerated if the rate of production were to be increased or even maintained. (Because the tendency would be for production motivated by profit, to shrink in the face of reduced hours, increased wages, and the greatly increased burden of the Social Security Legislation.)

In connection with the last point the speaker in reply stated that he thought I would be satisfied after the forthcoming session of Parliament, as the Government proposed to extend greatly their present authority & powers. The extension would be such that he intimated the danger of civil war, if it were not for the fact that the British interests who might give support to the reactionary elements in New Zealand were too preoccupied with the danger of war in Europe.

In reply to #4 he showed a lack of faith in, or understanding of the possibility of workers participating in the management of industry. If Socialism does not mean just that what the Hell does it mean? Something like Huxley's cynical concept of a 'Brave New World' perhaps!

On the question of Defence the speaker was more realistic. He definately [sic] stated that the army & navy could *not* be depended upon to support the Labor Government in the event of trouble from reactionaries. The air force, which has been almost entirely developed since the advent of Labor to power could be relied upon, and five hundred of the latest bombing machines are being imported this year.

A few days earlier the same Speaker, who is incidentally Chairman of the 'House Committee on Defence', had proposed to the Auckland Trades Council that they should organize a company in each battalion to be composed of and officered by trade unionists, with the object of permeating & educating the troops generally.

The proposal was accepted and I understand the same idea will be pushed in the other cities.¹⁵

First World War, and according to Olssen "one of the most aggressive members of the 'left'" in the Parliamentary caucus of the Labour Party. (Erik Olssen, *John A. Lee*, 171.) Lyon stayed in the party after Lee's expulsion, however.

¹⁵Several months later the Auckland District Council of the Federation of Labour did sponsor the formation of a Trade Union Company as part of the Auckland battalion, although the Labour Government subsequently refused permission for its establishment. Again, I am grateful to Bert Roth for this information.

Aerodromes are being built all over the country, highways straightened and improved and railways built, all being part of the defence program.

There is little unemployment among the able bodied young men. There are a number of unemployed among the older men particularly the unskilled. There is a demand for carpenters and some other building trade workers, also a demand for juvenile & women workers.

There appears to be almost an entire absence of 'commercialised vice'. Hope you can read this scrawl and that it will be of interest to you. The control of imports and the reduction of the quantity, has not noticeably increased prices yet, though the daily press is screaming Red Ruin every day.

The Communist organ 'Workers Weekly' is much more accurate and fair in its criticism of the government, than is the Labor Party's official organ the 'Standard' in its criticism of the Communists or other friendly critics of the government.

The best informed and edited publication in New Zealand on politics & economics is 'Tomorrow' published at Christchurch. It is a fortnightly independent magazine with a socialist bias. I commend it, but cannot afford to send it to you. Its subscription rate is about \$5.00 a year.

Best wishes to Mrs Mac & yourself & thanks for the reference.

Yours sincerely

Vic Midgley

Source:
Box 54A — file 11,
Angus MacInnis Collection,
University of British Columbia Library,
Special Collections Division.