

BRITAIN : PROSPECTS FOR THE SEVENTIES

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UNTIL the last three months before the General Election of June 1970 most observers would have predicted, without much hesitation, a defeat for the Labour Government. It is, after all, normal for reforming Governments in Britain, actual or self-styled, to refuse to satisfy their own supporters because of a too tender susceptibility towards the claims of property; they find themselves overtaken by feelings of popular revulsion and are succeeded by solidly based Tory administrations. The shift to the Right among sections of the population has been widely observed in the last few years : it has been much encouraged, among a variety of reasons, by the issues of racialism as well as by the anti-trade union attitudes of the Labour Government. Yet at the same time there is a good deal of radical thinking of a general and often very diffuse kind, and among some groups of the younger generations there is, in varying degree, a rejection of the values and the institutions of bourgeois society. It is, of course, easy to exaggerate the extent of these radical positions and attitudes, and historical experience strongly suggests that the processes of containment and adaptation are very powerful once a living has to be earned and family responsibilities come to be assumed. But whatever the future holds in this regard for the present generations of radical youth, at the present time these radical attitudes co-exist with a marked feebleness of aim and purpose among the political groupings of the Left in terms of any significant impact upon the political scene. One of the most striking, and damning, features of the past few years has been the inability of the Left to sustain a continuous campaign on the Vietnam war; another example is the way in which the practical concern on matters of poverty has been left largely to such organizations as the Child Poverty Action group. Indeed the most obvious characteristic of British politics in this context has been not the vigour of the Left in recent years but its decline : a decline which is especially marked in an enfeeblement of socialist consciousness among many sections which have traditionally provided the rank and file of socialist movements. There is today an almost total absence of any creative thinking about a socialist future, and there is an equally remarkable lack of discussion about the realities of the movement in Britain. Let us begin by attempting to estimate in as frank a way as possible what our present forces are, and where we stand in historical terms.

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We must begin with the Labour Party : it is the movement that commands the allegiance of the great majority of politically motivated people, and given the parliamentarianism which is deeply embedded in all political thinking in Britain, it is the only party with progressive intentions capable of achieving office. There can be no serious discussion about the future of the socialist movement in this country without a clear understanding of the role of the Labour Party in British politics, and our estimate of its future sets inexorable limits upon our political perspectives of the years to come.

The myths and illusions concerning the Labour Party have an extraordinary tenacity. The first is the conviction that a numerical majority in Parliament is all that is needed, given good-will and political purpose, to shift the direction in which society is travelling towards socialist goals; a belief based upon the assumption, whether explicit or not, that the owners of property will allow themselves to be legislated out of existence without a major struggle. The second is the belief of left wing activists, ever since the establishment of the Labour Party, that the Party can be transformed into an instrument of socialist purpose which, on achieving office, could set about the structural alterations in British society necessary to realize a socialist commonwealth. Party militants have always appreciated the non-socialist origins of the Labour Party, but this has never altered their conviction that continuous effort would bring about the conversion of the Labour Party to a firm socialist commitment. What was needed was more intensive work at constituency level : the winning of positions in the local hierarchies : the acceptance by local parties of socialist aims : the victory of socialist resolutions at national conferences; and above all, since the Parliamentary Labour Party was to be the main vehicle for socialist advance, the acceptance of left wing candidates for parliamentary elections. Despite betrayals by its leaders, the electoral disasters of 1931 and the 1950s, the permanent minority of the Left on the national executive, it has been the renewed confidence of each generation of Labour militants that has kept the Party alive all these years. The facts of life have been against them but their self-sacrificing work has ensured the continuation of the party as a major force in local and national politics. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that faith in the parliamentary road to socialism occupies a central position in the collective consciousness of the British labour movement; and as an acceptable strategy it has survived, and is surviving, all demonstrations of its irrelevance.

Those who continue to believe in the viability of the Labour Party as a political force for the achievement of socialism are today confronted with more serious questions than ever before. Evidence of Labour Governments being weak, timid and wholly reformist is hardly

new; but today, after six years of the Wilson Government with an unbeatable majority, it ought to be more difficult than ever before to concede that policies will really be different next time. Since 1964 the Wilson administration has operated upon conservative lines: being unrelievedly reactionary in foreign politics; cautiously conservative in its domestic policies; and a great deal more hostile to the trade union movement than many Tories would have thought possible. If the Wilson Government has achieved anything — and the matter is by no means certain — it will only have been in the direction of improving the industrial efficiency of capitalist enterprise: an epitaph that not even every member of the Wilson Government will altogether relish, to say nothing of the admiring troops outside.

There have always existed, at any one point of time, some trends in the general situation to bolster the hopes of the left-wing activists in their self-appointed sisyphian task of turning the Labour Party into a fighting socialist body; and today their hopes are centred on the trade unions, even, for some, upon the TUC. It is, of course, always possible that some future Labour administration will act as the Attlee Government of 1945 did for the first two and a half years of its life: as a vigorous reforming Government within the liberal-collectivist tradition. But this had nothing to do with socialism, for there were no basic changes of a fundamental kind, and the most important single achievement of the Attlee Government was the very smooth transition from a war to a peace economy, thereby preparing the way, against the background of a dynamic world economy, for a decade of money making in the 1950s unprecedented in the twentieth century save for the profiteering of world war one. At their reformist best, and we have only this short period after 1945 as a single example, Labour governments fall a very long way behind the socialist initiatives as understood by most socialists. But if not the Labour Party, what then?



Since its inception the Labour Party has been basically an electoral organization, concerned with winning seats at local and national levels; but the constituency members of the Labour Party in its early days were more often than not inheritors of the traditions of the ILP or the BSP, and local Labour Parties carried on a good deal of socialist agitation and propaganda. There were street corner meetings, literature sales, support of local and national campaigns, and in undertaking these activities the local socialists were sustained by a vision of a new kind of society to replace the money grubbing and the poverty they saw around them. A seat won on the local council was an important victory: the capture of a parliamentary constituency was evidence that the new Jerusalem was on the way. But for many years now local

Labour Parties have been less and less involved in political debate and controversy: their missionary zeal has long since evaporated and they undertake little or no political agitation. Where Labour has won control of local councils, the absence of grass roots activity is usually the more pronounced. The local labour leadership is now the Borough Council establishment. Strikes are mostly unofficial and therefore irresponsible, and the work of tenants associations is now against "us" and not "them", led by the ignorant who do not understand the complexities of real life.

The need to make socialists who can change the indecent society around them, the agitation against injustice, the burning hatred of poverty: these things no longer encourage local political activity. Up to three decades ago all biggish towns had their own socialist or labour paper, produced variously by the constituency Party, or the Trades Council or an ad *hoc* group of socialists who could count on a wide support. How many of such papers exist today? And are there energetic socialist groups in these towns, active in day to day propaganda, persistent in circulating Left literature, concerned with improving their own level of political understanding as well as those outside the movement? Is there at the present time any town in the country that could fill two theatres every Sunday night for socialist education and politics as happened in Glasgow before the first world war? Is there a town today which could organize a political meeting, with half a dozen of the best known names of the Left and expect the two or three thousand audience that Aneurin Bevan was achieving in the 1950s? At least until he made his peace with the Labour leadership. There is a political vacuum here, created by the declining role of the Labour Party as a vehicle for socialist propaganda which has not been filled by the smaller organizations of the Left. Naturally, the larger the town the greater the likelihood that some activity will still be carried on by one or more groups of the Left; but mostly it will be small-time, and a visit to any of the great industrial towns of Britain will reveal the meagre and skimpy nature of political activity.

Of the groups on the Left of the Labour Party the Communist Party is by far the largest in nominal and actual strength. Given the miserable recent history and performance of the Labour Party, in opposition from 1951 and in office since 1964, it is indeed a remarkable phenomenon that the CP has failed, to a quite extraordinary degree, to benefit significantly in political terms. The reasons are not, of course, difficult to uncover. In an old country such as Britain the struggle for elementary political rights was long and bitter, and the equation between a better kind of society and individual liberty has long been a central assumption of the ordinary member of the political Left. Despite, therefore, the energy and devotion to the cause of

socialism which many individual Communists have always displayed, the undeviating support of the Communist Party for the Soviet Union before 1956, and its refusal after the Twentieth Congress to examine seriously its uncritical acceptance of so many lies and half-truths, has effectively repelled those who on other grounds often show sympathy and general support. The recent example of the large minority inside the British Communist Party supporting the Russian action in Czechoslovakia is one of all too many examples which underline the unprogressive nature of the Party; and for the greater part of the radical younger generation, the C.P. stands for much that is backward looking. Its pathetic commitment to a parliamentarianism that is little different from that of the Labour Party, and the coolness towards the movement for worker's control are part of the attitudes and policies that give the Communist Party a remarkably conservative look. As a Party it is no longer interesting or exciting: membership no longer confers the sense of being outside bourgeois society and that rejection of bourgeois ideas and institutions that is the badge of a revolutionary socialist. The continued presence in its councils of the old Bourbon, *Palme Dutt*, is one more indication of the ways in which a good deal of history has washed past the C.P. and left it half-stranded on the beach of its own illusions and traditions.

But this is not the whole story and political life on the Left would be different if it was. For one thing the Communist Party has by far the largest number of organized socialists in Britain today, and among them are many hard-working and committed people who, if ever *a* revolutionary party—as against the revolutionary sects—comes into being, will find their proper place in its ranks. On most issues of general politics, and not least on questions of race and racial prejudice, the Communist Party takes its stand on arguments of socialist principle. Moreover, and of crucial importance for any discussion of the future, the Communist Party organizes the only large number of industrial workers in the country; and it is the only body capable of giving political education of a systematic kind on the factory floor. For many militant workers the Communist Party is the obvious organization to join or with which to work in close association: its contacts are national, its experience is much greater than any comparable body, and it has some outstanding personalities among its shop floor leaders. Once the shop floor is left then the political influence of Communist shop stewards and organizers is sharply reduced, but for the explanation of this phenomenon we come back to the analysis developed briefly above.

When one turns to consider the other organized groups on the Left there is little to be said except in terms of possible future potential. The Socialist Labour League reproduces all the faults of the Com-

unist Party of the late 1920s without the latter's strength in terms of personalities. The League exhibits a stridency of political tone and an unpleasant sectarianism that not only keeps its numbers small but ensures a high rate of turnover of its own members. It has, without doubt, a viable base and it may grow slowly in the future largely because of the utter dedication of its cadres; but it is unlikely in the foreseeable future to be anything more than it is at the present time, of marginal significance. The group around the journal *International Socialism*, on the other hand, shows more interesting possibilities. The journal itself is lively and the group, less tightly organized than the Socialist Labour League, is making strenuous efforts to widen its present base from the over-concentration of its members among student groups and young intellectuals: so far without much success, but these are early days. It would seem to have sufficient flexibility for the aims it has set itself, although one crucial test will be its ability to make the transition from a fairly open sect to something approaching a small party. Of the other small groups almost all, including the Fourth International, are London based: their memberships are small, limited in the main to student and post-student generations; and their future growth rates uncertain to dubious.



No survey of the Left in Britain outside the Labour Party can offer anything but a grim commentary on political failure. The combined political impact of these groups is very limited, except in those situations where the mainstream of the labour movement is also moving in their direction. Set against a background of declining socialist consciousness in general, together with the political vacuum on the Left of the Labour Party, it is not at all surprising that the Left inside the Labour Party — the focus of which is the Parliamentary Left — continues to be able to appeal, more or less successfully, for continued support. Nor is this support given only because there is no immediate or obvious political alternative. There is a deep seated aversion in British radical politics to anything that smacks of a "talking shop" in contrast with the practical possibilities of the here and now, and it leads many to accept limited aims capable of being realized in the not too distant future. This a-theoretical pragmatism has for many decades been a central tradition of the practice of labourism. It is, of course, true that "something" can always be done within the political system of Britain. As George Eliot wrote somewhat despairingly in 1848 of the prospects of genuine radical reform in Britain: "And there is nothing in our Constitution to obstruct the slow progress of political reform". Democratic procedures and structures have always remained flexible within the limits set by the relations of private property. They can be bent

one way or another; and within the boundaries of the Conservative-Labour consensus, adjustments can be made to the social policies affecting the lives of ordinary people. Such adjustments, in rent policies, education and general welfare services may be marginal in global terms but they are far from unimportant for those groups of the population who benefit from them; and it has always been the observable differences between Tory and Labour administrations, especially in local government, that provide the most powerful argument for continuing in Labour politics. At the national level the argument is less clear-cut, but even in the House of Commons, where the left-wing backbencher soon learns the meaning of political impotence, it has always been possible to effect some improvement here, some adjustment there, to Government legislation. "Without us" the Parliamentary Left argue, "the Labour Government in the last six years would have legislated almost entirely in right wing terms. While we have not been able to persuade them to accept our position, at the very least we have pulled them to the centre of the political spectrum. Indeed, it may be said that this has traditionally been the function of the Left wing in Parliament; and without us the Labour leadership would always have offered, and will always offer, policies which are basically conservative. We live in an imperfect world; and those who dislike the prospect should take the advice that Aneurin Bevan once offered to Jennie Lee in her I.L.P. days : to remain simon-pure in her nunnery."

Even if the arguments were true, which they are not, the position would be quite unacceptable. Centre policies make some difference in practice, although succeeding Tory administrations can be relied upon to make the necessary corrections. But of greater moment, in all fundamental matters, notably foreign policy and social questions, the Wilson Government has pursued conservative policies. The only major defeat of the Wilson administration over a social issue, that on trade union legislation and wages control, was the result of the combined pressure of the trade union movement, without which the protests of the Parliamentary Left would once again have shown themselves to be ineffective. Since it must be accepted that the Parliamentary Left has achieved nothing but marginal adjustments to Government policy over the past six years, the prospects for the future can hardly be reckoned in optimistic terms. It is unlikely that the Parliamentary Left will have larger numbers in the future than it has had since the election of 1966, and it is wholly unreasonable for the rest of us to be asked to believe that future influence will be greater than it has been over the past four years; and that, as has been made plain by political commentators of all opinions, has been little better than negligible on any issue of importance. No doubt as individual M.P.s the members of the Parliamentary Left have been most helpful to their

constituents; but the work of would-be socialist militants must surely be distinguished from that of a Parliamentary Citizens Advice Bureau? In the present political situation the need for good constituency M.P.s will remain, but the aims and purposes of left-wing socialists ought to be conceived on quite a different plane of action. So long as the Parliamentary Left see their fight as mainly within the confines of Westminster, they are accepting as part of their own tactics and strategy one of the crucial weaknesses of social democracy in general: the exclusion of all forms of action except those of parliamentary debate and protest. There is one question, and one question only, by which the Parliamentary Left should be judged: have they contributed, in any significant way, to the growth of the socialist movement in the country at large? The answer is: not at all.

If the Labour Party is a massive institutional obstacle to the achievement of socialism in Britain, then the Parliamentary Left and their many supporters outside the Commons, storing up as they do the greater part of the reserves of the Left within the labour movement as a whole, are the major stumbling block in the way of a serious re-assessment of the means towards a socialist future. So long as the Parliamentary Left proceed along their present paths they will continue to encapsulate a large number of socialists within the politics of frenzied impotence; and the fetish of parliamentarianism, the belief that socialism as well as social reform can come through a bourgeois Parliament, will exercise in the future as in the past its paralysing fascination over the minds of the majority of British socialists. *Mutatis mutandis*, there are some instructive parallels between our situation today and that of the working class movement a century ago. Then the problem was to break the hold of the Liberal Party over the working class, or those sections that were politically articulate; and the history of these past hundred years has been the chronicle of how this break was painfully and slowly achieved: by adopting, to put the matter at its simplest, the same types of political activity but with different labels and with a different set of ideas on the part of the rank and file. As the processes of change worked their way through to our own day, the labour movement in all its aspects has become increasingly enmeshed within the state apparatus.

What we need are new styles of work as socialists: new methods of organization: new forms of socialist agitation; but how and in what ways the old techniques and organizational forms can be supplanted are not easy questions to answer.



Part of our troubles stems from the intellectual weaknesses of the Left in Britain: the absence of hard line theoreticians capable of

confronting bourgeois ideas at their strongest rather than at their weakest points. We are beginning to learn, all too slowly, Gramsci's lesson that what matters are not the marginal issues or the second rate writers but the big questions and the important publicists and ideologists. It has, for instance, been one of the strengths of *New Left Review* under the editorship of Perry Anderson that some at least of the central problems of theory have not been shirked; and were it not for the unreadable jargon that afflicts so much of each number the contribution of the journal to the discussion of our basic problems would be more helpful than in fact it is. We have a not inconsiderable number of socialist intellectuals and at their best they offer a sophistication that has long by-passed the simplified crudities of thirty years ago. But thirty years ago the polemics were vigorous and lively, albeit rough and crude, while today the tone is too often muted and all too gentlemanly. Much of what is being done by way of socialist commentary is patchy and unco-ordinated. We are in Britain in a position to organize an annual socialist scholars conference, and such a gathering could have many useful results, not least the beginnings of co-operative effort between those who work within the same field; but the attempts which have been made so far to organize conferences, have largely foundered upon a mixture of indolence and individualist unconcern. Most socialist intellectuals at the present time do not appear to work in conditions that demand any kind of self-discipline and personal commitment to a common cause: their socialism is still too much in terms of a narrow personal discretion rather than a firm social enfranchisement. While these attitudes last and are not overcome, the movement is being deprived of a considerable body of potential strength.

As much as any other social group, socialist intellectuals are subject to myth and mystification concerning their socialist beliefs; and nothing is more striking than the romantic illusions which have enveloped so much of the socialist movement since its earliest days. It can, of course, be argued that a millennial strand is a necessary part of the intellectual philosophy of the radical-revolutionary: that without it contact with unpromising reality is too harsh to be endured. It is an argument that must be taken seriously, since the pressures to conform in an affluent capitalist society are exceedingly powerful. But it is likely that the kind of illusions and mystification of the past three decades—the devotion to the ideal society that was supposedly being built in the Soviet Union: the belief in the automatic collapse of capitalism under the weight of its contradictions: the idealization of the working class as instant revolutionaries—have performed negative functions in the long run. If we cannot, in the conditions of today, build a socialist movement without illusions, one that is able to confront the gritty facts of social and political life without falling into despair and

cynicism, we shall collectively suffer the fate of fundamentalist religious sects whose beliefs are unable to withstand the light of a clear day. It is necessary to add that this will be no easy task: scepticism or at best an open-mindedness are not the obvious starting points for most people to engage in a passionate commitment to a political cause; and it will require among other things a much more vigorous intellectual life within our movements than exists at the present time.

A new direction to our intellectual life as socialists is a necessary condition for future growth; but it is far from being sufficient. A new socialist party, without which the movement is likely to continue to decline, is not yet even on the horizon, and it will take much more than intellectual conviction to bring it into existence. Only a practical demonstration of a viable alternative will convince large numbers of people of the possibilities of supplanting the Labour Party; and the first thing that has to be grasped is that to encourage new currents of action and to develop new forms of organization will take us much further in time than the 1970s. It is always possible, of course, that events in the underdeveloped countries of the world will set in motion a revolutionary upsurge that will spill over into the mature industrialized societies; or that a world economic crisis will transform the political situation. We are always being surprised and overtaken, as it were, by the twists and turns of history, as with the May 1968 events in France; but while none of these developments are impossible one can only say that at the moment they appear improbable, and clearly one cannot base a whole strategy upon what for Britain would be adventitious events. It must also be said that the labour movement here is quite unprepared to take advantage of any such developments, and although in revolutionary periods political attitudes mature and harden with extraordinary rapidity, calculations of this kind must be left for the future. At present our estimates of the future must be based upon a sober, and sobering, analysis of the general weakness of the Left, and the slow uphill struggle that must be anticipated if new directions are to be achieved. The likelihood of achieving socialism in Britain in the next two or three decades is remote; and many of us will have to accept, what nineteenth century revolutionaries so often emphasized, that the fundamental changes they were working for would not come about in their lifetime.

To establish any sort of base for a new trend in left-wing politics in Britain would be difficult at any time, and the early 1970s offer no prospects of an easy way forward. In the past the political Left of the Labour Party has usually been stronger when the Labour Party has been in opposition, whether at local or national level. At the time of writing the outcome of the General Election of June 1970 is uncertain, but its result will have a profound effect upon tactics and strategy.

If Labour is returned to power this will create in a number of ways a new and very interesting historical situation in that never before has a reforming Government (with the exception of the Liberal Party before 1914) been returned to office for three consecutive Parliaments. If Labour is defeated then the political treadmill for the Labour Left begins once again with the prospect of a Labour Government at some point of time in the future, and the usual gap opening up between policy statements in opposition and Government practice in office. One obvious new feature of the next few years is likely to be renewed Labour vigour in local political activity. The Tories, at the end of 1969, controlled almost every large town in the country; and their policies, as they have been unfolding, are encouraging political revival in many a moribund constituency Labour Party. As the practical experience of Tory local administrations makes its impact, it is not at all difficult to convince large numbers of former Labour supporters that the Tories must be ousted, and it is usually the more committed socialists among them who can be relied on to undertake the political chores required.

A third Labour administration in the first half of the 1970s may well encourage recruits to the idea of an independent Left outside the Labour Party, but whatever the results of the General Election it must be recognized that working outside the Labour Party must involve for many a considerable degree of political isolation. Much will depend, of course, on the particular local situation, but let me illustrate some of the dilemmas with a practical example. A fair sized industrial town of the North will have a population between 100,000 and three or four hundred thousand. This leaves on one side the biggest towns like Leeds, Sheffield and Manchester. Our industrial town, largely proletarian, has a technical college but no university. The politically minded and active people on the Left form a wide range of opinions. They are the Labour councillors and aldermen, the paid and unpaid officials of the Labour Party, some but not all the officials of trade unions, members of ward and constituency Labour Parties and probably the majority of the industrial militants in the factories. In addition there will be a small C.P., a few members of one or more of the sects to the left of the C.P. and a larger number of unorganized socialists, some of whom may be found in the local branch of the W.E.A. The leadership of the Labour Party is right wing; it has controlled the local council for over a decade until two years ago, and it is reasonable to expect it to win power once again within the next three years. The Trades Council is more militant but its active cadres are wholly involved in union business. Let us look now at the problems of Comrade X, who is an industrial worker or a school teacher. Comrade X is fully convinced of the error of the proposition that the Labour Party

will ever become an effective vehicle for the achievement of socialism, but he cannot bring himself to join either the C.P. or one of the smaller sects because that too would immure him in the isolation he wishes at all costs to avoid. If an industrial worker, he will be active in trade union affairs at the shop floor level, in branch activity and within the trades council; but he is also a socialist and recognizes that only in political action can a new kind of society be achieved. There are perhaps, in his personal knowledge, a sprinkling of people in the town who think like himself, but almost all are deeply involved in the day to day work that keeps them busy for the greater part of their leisure time. At best our Comrade X could begin to bring together a small group of like minded people to try to develop independent socialist activity in the town, but this is exceedingly hard graft, and while it maintains a base it is not likely to produce large scale effects. The missing factor is the absence of a national movement which can give some sort of direction and co-ordination to local efforts and which above all can bring in new people, new recruits to political activity. The crucial question is the extent to which a new current of socialist consciousness can be created and this will not be forthcoming except through a national effort.

But having stated the problems, the difficulties once again present themselves. The Labour Party still commands an extraordinary allegiance, even from those who have lost all faith in its socialist potential. There is no easy and obvious political alternative and it is this which holds so many back from making the decisive break. Even so, there is a great wealth of socialist ability in Britain which is not yet harnessed to any specific purpose and it is mainly the absence of a centre of organization and of co-ordination that prevents a coalescing of forces. All these problems were cogently analysed in the *May Day Manifesto* volume edited by Raymond Williams, and the May Day movement was the most recent attempt to encourage the coming together of socialists of different trends in common activity. The fact of failure means only that the problem remains, although it must be admitted that past failures weigh very heavily on the present and undoubtedly inhibit attempts to break out of our impasse. We shall never convince simply by intellectual argument. We can say bluntly to the members of the Parliamentary Left that their efforts, far from helping forward the movement towards socialism, are encouraging the opposite by underpinning the illusion that the Labour Party can ever be transformed into a fighting instrument of change. But words alone will not suffice; and only the emergence of a national movement, however loosely structured, which looks like offering a workable alternative to the parliamentary game, will ever really be convincing to sufficient numbers. No one at this stage can offer a tidy blue-print, and the future of the

Left, in the context of the present discussion, can only be partly sketched out in words. For the rest it will be an exploration in practice. There must, it should go without saying, be intensive discussion of the problems at all levels; but it will be in the practical achievement of unity and common action that the shape and form of the future movement will emerge.