

Debate on the Scottish Assembly

Discussion Article Casey

Letter on the Scottish Assembly McVicar

Socialists for an Assembly - article by Phil O'Brien, reprinted
from Strathclyde Labour Briefing at request of cd. McVicar

Report from Scottish aggregate 12.6.83

Review of conference decisions and plans for the
coming months - draft from Kinnell, discussed at NC
18/19.6.83 and 9.7.83

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Annual Report of the

Board of Directors

of the

Company

for the year ended

December 31, 1957

Prepared and published by the
Board of Directors

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In the aftermath of the General Election, the question of a Scottish Assembly has now become a major, if not the major, issue in the labour movement in Scotland.

The arguments currently being advanced for such an Assembly (as opposed to general devolution throughout Britain, with local assemblies elected on a basis of proportional representation) rest largely on factual inaccuracies, nationalism, irrelevancies, and hypocrisy.

To argue for an Assembly on the grounds that "Scotland (unlike England) voted Labour" is certainly inaccurate. Whilst Labour did much better in Scotland than south of the border and won in 41 of the 72 Scottish constituencies, its total share of the poll was only 34%. (This represents an actual decline of 7% compared with 1979.)

Moreover, there are massive regional differences in the voting patterns within Scotland, at least as significant as the alleged differences between England and Scotland. In the Highlands and Northern Scotland, and throughout the Borders, Labour does not hold a single seat.

Only in a band stretching from the Lower Clyde in the west to the area round Edinburgh in the East does one find a solid bloc of Labour territory. And that is no basis upon which to claim that 'Scotland voted Labour'. Moreover, in similar areas in England (e.g. Liverpool) Labour did just as well as in this band in Central Scotland.

To claim that even if Scotland didn't vote Labour, it did at least vote anti-Thatcher is really no argument at all. A majority of Scottish votes (71%) certainly went to parties other than the Tories; but to did a majority of votes in the country in general, albeit a much smaller one (56.5%).

It is also less than politically useful to lump together Labour votes with SDP votes, (or British Nationalist Party votes) under the general heading of "anti-Thatcher votes", unless one raises a nebulous "anti-Thatcherism" above the specific political differences between Labour and SDP/Liberals/SNP - and many backers of a Scottish Assembly do just that.

The "we voted Labour" argument is therefore factually accurate. It is also nationalistic, since what it amounts to is the statement: we, the Scottish people, voted Labour (whilst they, the English people, voted Tory). Class divisions are thus replaced by "national" (in fact: regional) divisions.

This nationalism finds expression in other aspects of the demand for an assembly. The Scottish National Party (SNP - quite unashamed, of course, of its nationalism) has called for a Scottish Popular Front to fight the Tories, involving itself, Labour, SDP and the Liberals.

Its call has not fallen on deaf ears in the labour movement. Even before the election George Galloway (who represents a whole current in the labour movement) had proposed the idea of an all-party alliance in pursuit of some form of Scottish autonomy. Since the election, a number of Labour MPs have responded sympathetically to the SNP's proposals.

In almost textbook fashion, cross-class alliances with forces extraneous to, and hostile to, the labour movement (which can only have a negative spin-off on the labour movement's struggles in defence of its rights and living standards) is put forward as the method of achieving an Assembly.

(And the demand for an Assembly also cuts across divisions within the Scottish labour movement. Whereas in the British labour movement as a whole the tendency, particularly after the General Election debacle, is now towards greater polarisation between left and right, the demand for an Assembly produces the opposite tendency: a drawing together of left and right around this demand.)

The most "left-wing" argument for an assembly is that it will provide a "pole of opposition" to the Tories attacks on the Scottish working class. Even disregarding the fact that the Tories have got the same attacks in store for Scottish workers as for all other workers, the argument is of little relevance.

It is not as if there will be any shortage of "poles of opposition" to the Tories attacks in the period ahead. The closure of Cardowan, the redundancies in the shipyards on the Clyde, the redundancies at the Ravenscraig Steelworks, the cuts in public spending, the Tories attacks on the entire trade union movement, etc., etc., are all just so many potential "poles of opposition".

Either socialists are able to develop such potential poles of opposition into real ones. In which case, the need for an Assembly would fall by the wayside. Or the leaders of the Scottish Labour Party and STUC would succeed in betraying and sabotaging such struggles. In which case it is fair to assume they could achieve the same thing in relation to a Scottish Assembly.

And - viewed in the real world rather than that of abstract speculation - the arguments for an assembly as some kind of defensive mechanism against the Tories attacks is equally spurious.

Councils

Labour-controlled Regional and Districts/could perform that task equally well. But, as the past four years shows, they don't. Instead, given the lack of accountability of District and Regional Councillors, they have, with only partial exceptions, simply administered the Tories cuts.

Exactly the same would occur with a Scottish Assembly - unless its labour members were made to be democratically accountable. But if the labour movement rank and file could establish that degree of control over them, then, by the same token, it would also be able to make District and Regional Councillors accountable. So, once again, the need for a new tier of government would fall by the wayside.

(Not that Labour would necessarily have a majority in a Scottish Assembly anyway. Only one third of its members would be Labour if democratically elected, i.e. on the basis of proportional representation, and the same voting pattern emerged as at the General Election.)

And the psychology and politics behind the call for an Assembly is not one of preparing for all-out battle with the Tories, but one of cutting and running. Scottish Labour MPs are pledging a campaign of Parliamentary obstruction to win an Assembly - the same MPs who have done nothing to obstruct the past four years of Tory legislation. Nor do they make any mention of Parliamentary obstruction to block another five years of Tory legislation.

The logic behind such an approach is not "fight for an Assembly so as to better organise an all-out fight with the Tories" but "fight for an Assembly, to avoid an all-out fight with the Tories".

(And the same applies to the Scottish trade union leaders. For four years they have done nothing to defend their members' interest. But now their professed concern for their members interests is advanced as the reason for their support for an Assembly.)

Whilst many other arguments could be advanced for an Assembly, reasons of space only allow me one final one to be made: the demand for an Assembly, if it has any meaning at all, is in reality a demand for full independence for Scotland.

A Scottish Assembly could protect "the people of Scotland" only if it had legislative powers to over-ride the legislation passed at Westminster. Within the framework of the British state, this would obviously be impossible. Hence it can only mean full independence.

Whilst not recognising the present borders of the existing capitalist states as inviolable, I cannot conceive of Scotland as being an "oppressed nation" (or even a nation) in any meaningful, Marxist sense. Nor do I see anything progressive in being hived off, as the Scottish labour movement, from the overall British one, which is an inevitable concomitant of Scottish independence.

Whilst the idea of devolved government throughout Britain, with local assemblies elected on the basis of proportional representation, may arguably have some merits, the isolated demand for a Scottish Assembly panders to Scottish nationalism and is more of a diversion from, rather than a route to, working class struggle against the Tories.

Letter on the Scottish Assembly — McVicar

I WAS surprised that analysis of the general election results in last week's issue made so little reference to the distinctive voting pattern in Scotland and their implications.

Clearly, the vote for Labour held up better in Scotland than south of the border. In Scotland, Labour's share of the vote fell 6% whereas in Britain as a whole it fell 10%, signifying that the fall in Scotland was less than what it was south of the border.

This is not a cause for complacency in Scotland, but it is a factor which must be placed in the overall context of 73% of the Scottish electorate voting for parties other than the Tories.

In a situation where all of the anti-Tory parties came out in favour of a Scottish Assembly, whatever priority these parties say and contemplate in their programme, no one who extensively canvassed voters over the election period could doubt that it was an issue to which they attached importance.

One of the few new seats won outright by Labour was Cathcart in Glasgow, where John Maxton captured what was widely reckoned to be a Tory marginal. In the bleak hours of Friday morning the only spark that kindled any enthusiasm was the fiery speech of Maxton at the Kelvin Hall, proclaiming the battle for an Assembly as a springboard for socialist policies.

The following day the EIS, the biggest teaching union in Scotland, passed a motion calling for the establishment of an Assembly.

All of this must surely prove that the Assembly is now a major issue in Scottish politics.

Amongst socialists, there have generally been three strands of opinion on an Assembly: those who have supported it in principle and campaigned for it; those who opposed it in principle; and those who said they would go along with it if that is the will of the majority of people in Scotland. Only the most perverse person could deny that the demand now enjoys that degree of support.

In which case, the question for socialists of the third variety is not whether, but how they orientate towards that campaign.

Fortunately, Scottish Labour MPs have made a good start, stating that they are not in favour of a cross-Party alliance, but want a Labour-movement based campaign for an Assembly. Unfortunately, they seem to have been persuaded by Foot and others to desist so far from the disruption of Parliamentary procedure which they promised.

We must encourage them to overcome that timidity by the building of the Labour Campaign for an Assembly in the Party and the unions into an effective fighting force.

John Maxton's stirring call for both socialism and a Scottish assembly was one of the few bright spots in the Kelvin Hall in the early morning of June 10th. The day after the election, the Scottish teachers' union, the E.I.S., overwhelmingly called for an Assembly with fiscal powers, not for any nationalist reason, but as one way to defend and maintain public education in Scotland.

The Scottish miners called at their annual conference for the establishment of a Scottish Assembly, as an essential step in the Labour Party's fightback against Tory policies. McGahey, though, followed the CP line of calling for support for an all-party campaign.

Early statements from Labour MPs aroused much expectation. The Labour Campaign for an Assembly created the impression during the election that Labour would actually do something. Robin Cook's instant early morning conversion to federalism, threats of parliamentary disruption, fiery words from Gordon Brown - all these for a brief moment misled many into thinking that we might get some leadership from our Labour leaders.

But should we have known better? Syrup was soon being spread. Disruption??? Not for parliamentary gents! Action???? Not yet. Instead, Bruce Millan, the perfect cure for insomnia, was to make it clear to all and sundry that Labour's commitment on devolution still stood. Great: we all know what that means, don't we? Cries, grumbles, moans, accusations of unfairness ... and the conclusion - Wait passively for the next election. Or do we mean the election after that ...

A Scottish Assembly may not have figured prominently in the election. But it was the subterranean issue - Scotland's Secret Manifesto. Activists were aware that when she won, a key question was: would the Scottish Labour Party mobilise an effective Assembly Campaign? An Assembly, not for some bogus nationalism, but as a focus for the struggle for jobs, for an economy that is not just a playground for multinationals and tourists, for defending and extending democracy, for protecting the weak, for civil inerties, and for a step towards socialism. Such a campaign would have to link up with the ongoing fight against closures, for CND, against local government cuts, and for women's fights: not dilute the struggle.

It is too facile to argue that because 72% of the Scottish electorate voted against the Tories, that they will then fight for an Assembly. The truth is that for many, particularly workers the Assembly is a yawn. To get support, an Assembly has to be shown to matter.

Politically, it does matter. For the issue of an Assembly with fiscal powers has now changed. The eclipse of the SNP with just 11.7% of the vote and a staggering 53 lost deposits is a clear rejection of nationalism as an ideology. Their campaign for a Scottish version of Thatcher's 'Rule Britannia' aroused distrust. Scotland is not an oppressed nation.

The collapse of the SNP should remove one of Labour's fears about the result of an active campaign for an Assembly. The Assembly is now both a democratic and a socialist demand. Democratic, because the majority want it, and because in this period when absolutist queens are again on the agenda, it could help defend and extend democracy itself. Socialist, because the only group that can carry through a campaign and sustain an Assembly, is the Labour movement: and the Labour movement will only do so if the Assembly is seen to have a socialist role.

The Scottish Labour MPs are right at this stage not to support an all-party campaign. To pretend that Scottish Tories are good Scots, or that the SNP are other than anti-socialist nationalists, or that the Alliance is more than a con to divide the working class, would be to sow the seeds of confusion. Remember the confusion caused at Ravenscriag by Milne's and Millan's endorsement of Younger and Millan as good Scots.

Socialists for an Assembly/2

Tactical alliances may be feasible later: but first we must have a labour campaign solidly rooted in the labour organisations. Having raised the issue, the Scottish Labour Party will be seen as an ineffective poodle if it now backs down over the Assembly. We must therefore make the Labour Campaign for a Scottish Assembly effective in every local workplace and supermarket. Is it only the Tories of this world who have courage, boldness and resolution?

What then should we do?

* Pass resolutions in your Constituency and trade union in support of the Labour Campaign for an Assembly. Step up the debate in the Labour Party, and call for a special meeting to discuss this issue alone.

It is not good enough that the 42 Labour MPs should discuss the issue among themselves, and with a few trade union bureaucrats. That was the way in the past. It will not do now.

* Form branches of the Labour Campaign for a Scottish Assembly in every town in Scotland, with leaflets, posters, and plans for local demonstrations.

* Secure the support of the Labour movement in England. The struggle of the Labour Left in the GLC and Sheffield for greater local control over their areas, with sufficient economic power to affect their own destinies, is part of the general struggle against the British absolutist State.

We must welcome and support the initiative taken by Glasgow District Council to have a UK campaign to stop further erosion of local democracy.

If we are serious, then we must face the prospect of withdrawing MPs from Westminster to establish a Constituent Assembly.

REPORT OF EDINBURGH-GLASGOW AGGREGATE 12.6.83

(Casey)

At the aggregate today, the question of a Scottish Assembly was discussed, which now (in my opinion, unfortunately) is a major theme in the labour movement in Scotland. We agreed to:

1. ask for discussion on it to be opened up in the paper.*
2. ask for NC to decide official line on it. The majority decision at the aggregate was along the following lines: when the demand for an Assembly is raised, we argue/move amendments along the following lines:
 - delete reference to Assembly, replace it by demand for devolution throughout Britain,
 - elections to local assemblies to be on basis of proportional representation,
 - support for MPs carrying out campaign of parliamentary obstruction for assembly, but demand that obstruction be extended against all Tory legislation,
 - for labour movement campaign only for assemblies - no cross party alliances,
 - support for united working class struggle against Tories throughout Britain,
 - support for united struggle by left against right in British labour movement as a whole,
 - all Labour members of Assemblies to be fully accountable to labour movement.

Three were for this, two and one candidate member against the first point. The majority's attitude was: the Assembly is a good thing in itself, you just have to be careful about how you argue for it. The minority's attitude was: the Assembly is not much use, so why kick up a hoo-hah about one. The aggregate was badly attended.

* The EC 18.6.83 decided to have internal discussion first.

Review of conference decisions

Note: The main conference documents had the character of broad orientation documents, rather than lists of specific tasks. In any case our precise immediate tasks will be partly affected by the election results, which have happened since the conference. Before going on to deal with the relatively limited items below, I think the NC must first discuss our general perspectives after the election, and specifically:

- Do we want to make some centralised attempt to initiate a campaign on trade union democracy? If not, how do we propose to take up this issue?
- Should we try to revive the MCDTUR? How?
- Do we still see democratic reform as a major issue to pursue in the LP? If so, what issues? PLP accountability? Control of Manifesto? Right of groups to exist within the LP? Right of affiliation? Women's rights?
- Is the time opportune for new initiatives to organise the LP left? What can we hope for from the Campaign Group?

TU and LP work

1. Need to campaign on TU democracy IB55/1, 39/7
See above. Suggestions: produce a new pamphlet on TU democracy, orient more to BLOC, make a special effort in TNU.
 2. Revive MCDTUR IB25:2/5
Implement EC decision on this (i.e. try to make an approach to LP/TU lefts). Levy to do?
 3. Cuts/privatisation IB25:2/3,4
Orientation to revival of anti-cuts committees on model of 1976. Publicise examples: Manchester; Oxford? Campaign directed at London NUPE (see Kendall IB44)
 4. Build LP workplace branches IB55/10, 39/7
Regular column in paper. Broad groups organiser to take this up. Targets: major factories (BSC Stanton, Cowley, GEC Coventry...); hospitals (CRI, Heath Hospital, Middlewood, Basingstoke...); council workers (Islington, Haringey); civil service (BL/EM)....
 5. Coordinate councillors IB55/13
Meeting planned. There have been attempts to get a regular column in the paper, but without success. Start debate in paper on what policy now with prospect of another 5 years of Tories.
 6. Build LAW IB45/2
Make it a priority for LP/TU affiliations
 7. Organise the LP left IB55/7
Discuss immediate possibilities; it's not clear to me that many such exist.
 8. Industrial org's report resolution at first session
Levy to prepare. Schedule day school?
- The paper
1. Reduce jargon, 'Trotkyese' IB55/10
Editors to note!
 2. Increase sponsors IB55/10
Create a broad EB to meet say monthly. Hold initial meeting to start campaign for sponsorship. Carolan to organise?

3. Develop critique of reformism, IB39/8
esp. of LP economic policy

Series of interviews with LP/TU
figures on this issue

Women

1. Develop women's sections IB39/8
2. Support WF re-launch IB53

Produce long-discussed pamphlet
on women. Liaise with CLPD WAC
on intervention at upcoming LP
women's conference.

Gays/lesbians

(all IB27)

1. Make organisation more habitable
2. LCGR work
3. TU gay caucuses, and initiatives from
TU Broad Lefts; campaigns in unions for
gay rights policies
4. Campaign for equal rights policies
by Labour councils

Schedule discussion in each branch
as per last NC

In hand, as far as I know

Industrial organiser to investi-
gate and report. NALGO, UCU,
NUPE look like priorities.

Put on agenda of upcoming
councillors' meeting

Youth

1. Implementation of Wiganisation (all IB 55)

Select areas to serve as model
(in South London? - see below).
Youth organiser to discuss plans
in detail with each area.

2. YS/YCND work

In hand. To be spread outside
London. Mobilisation necessary for
YCND conference.

3. YTS work

Develop work in Wallasey as a
model? Youth dayschool/conference
on the issue?

4. Relaunch CF

Set date for CF conference.

5. Appoint full-time youth organiser

Joplin

6. Youth steering committee

Elected at last NC. But according
to conference decision an EC
member must be added. Kinnell?
Q: would it be worth also adding
Booth?

7. Target region for YS NC member

South London. Jagger to work on it?

8. 'Move towards making financially
self-supporting'

(Parsons amendment) Jagger to take some
responsibility for overseeing youth
finance. CF dues to be introduced
and enforced. Either a re-vamp and
sales drive for the paper, and/or
a change to cheaper A4 format.

Conference

Decision to hold a conference at
summer school

Open pre-conference period in July
with existing documents on Ireland
(federalism), on civilian bombings,

on black work, on CND, and on building the W. Each branch to be asked to organise two discussion meetings during July with speakers. Time to be given over at summer school to the issues.

ITEMS REFERRED FROM CONFERENCE

1. New technology
2. 'Crisis of FI'
3. Glasgow resolution on L work (IB 38)
 - a) Rationalise campaign membership
 - b) L workplace branches
 - c) Expand work in Labour R
 - d) Column in paper on local L work
 - e) Special IB on L work
 - f) Special conference on L work
 - g) LSCAW ('we should treat it with contempt while not rejecting joint work')
 - h) L conference resolutions: priority to establishing right to affiliate.
 - i) Campaign in single-issue campaigns and TU branches against witch-hunt

Propose written discussion in IB and in paper

Propose Kinnell and Cunliffe do re-draft with deadline of summer TUC meetings: text to go to NC.

Make LAW and CLPD priorities

see above

A lot of work has been done. Should it be increased? Decreased? My view is that no special extra effort is desirable in that direction. A national Labour R does not seem likely.

L organiser to coordinate?

Not viable because of security problems

Not another special conference! Suggest broad groups AGM is made part of a weekend school which provides best framework for a practical discussion on work

I think a more positive attitude may be necessary because of Militant's increased strength and their more cooperative approach recently

This has been pre-empted by a circular which has already gone out. But the emphasis seems untimely.

Well in hand in campaigns. Need much stronger effort in TUs.

The next few months

It seems to me that our basic line for the few months following the election should be as follows. We've lost the election to the Tories but we can still beat them on the picket lines. The election result did not represent a fundamental shift to the right by the voters, but the failure of Labour's leaders in a situation where the capitalist crisis is revealing to many the emptiness of the vague anti-Toryism on which Labour has so long depended. The left let Labour leaders' get away with it because (a) the left is soft politically, (b) it did not adequately challenge the bureaucracies in the unions. A major slogan for the coming period should be for no more collaboration with the Tories, breaking links, etc. We continue to call for the left to organise, to step up the fight for TU democracy; we also hammer away at policy issues, specifically economic.

So the main tasks are:

1. Building groups;
2. Fighting for direct action against the Tories/for breaking collaboration/building L workplace branches/spreading the fight for TU democracy/reviving the MCDTUR;
3. As indicated above, the fight against cuts and privatisation seems likely to be very important: should we not be working for anti-cuts committees as existed around 1976?
4. Building LAW and in particular taking the fight into the TUs;
5. 'Wiganisation' in the YS, in particular around YCMD and YTS work;
6. Rebuilding WF.

The timetable would look something like this:

Late June/early July - 'After the election' meetings: try to recruit people active in the election campaign Building L workplace branches on the basis of work done during the election campaign. L recruitment campaigns to follow up election canvassing. L conference resolutions, affiliation to LAW.

In the later part of July, activity is likely to be restricted by the holiday period. We should take the chance to focus on consolidating paper sales and education, and to undertake the internal discussion for the August conference.

Early August - Summer school and special conference

During August we should continue consolidation and prepare for the revival of political activity after the holiday period. In particular, do groundwork for revival of MCDTUR.

September 5-9 - TUC congress. MCDTUR should organise some event round this: a lobby or similar. (There is also a case for an MCDTUR conference in the next autumn. But I do not easily see how this could be fitted in without getting us into the situation we have had so often before, of more scheduled events than we can possibly deal with adequately). Local MCDTUR meetings should follow up.

September 10-11 - I would suggest this date for an ACM/weekend organisers' school, which we should mobilise for heavily. The closeness to the TUC is not a big problem, because our input into the TUC is necessarily pretty limited. We would have a bit more than a month to organise for it after the W conference, which should be sufficient. If not, I would suggest September 17-18, which still leaves two clear weeks before the L conference. A later date would run foul of the L conference.

In September, also, we should start in earnest on a crash programme of Wiganising YSs, and a plan of work up to the YS regional conferences in the winter. As far as I can see - I don't know if the youth comrades have other plans - middle or late October would be a good date for the CP conference... a good staging post in this campaign.

October 3-7 -- LP conference. We should clearly make a major effort here, around the obvious issues and perhaps also around organising workplace branches.

It is of course impossible to predict what exactly will be happening in the way of industrial disputes and the autumn pay round. Another unknown factor at present is the LP women's conference. If this is cancelled or drastically curtailed, there seems to be a strong case for WF approaching CLPD WAC to organise an 'unofficial' conference. This would be a major focus for us.

It would be worth discussing whether there is a case for scheduling a national event in November, perhaps an industrial conference of some sort.

Other items that need discussion

The magazine

Education

Matters arising from finance report

For financial and also for political reasons I would argue for:

- a) Allocating a full-timer to be circulation manager, to do a drive on paper and pamphlet sales;
- b) Allocating half a full-timer to commercial work and fund-raising;
- c) Allocating half a full-timer to London organisation;
- d) Changing printers.