

FURTHER DISCUSSION ON THE
SCOTTISH ASSEMBLY

McVicar's Ahistoric Compromise Casey
On a Scottish Assembly McVicar, Meehan, Benjamin
The I-CL position on Scottish nationalism ... Kinnell
A letter and a reply from Workers' Action, December 8 1976

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McVICAR'S AHISTORIC COMPROMISE

(This does not deal with the contents of McVicar's piece in the last IB because this has been written prior to the appearance of that IB.

Where part of any quote given below is emphasised, the emphasis has been added in all cases.)

In a recent letter to S@, McVicar warns of the post-election danger of many of the socialist intelligentsia running round like headless chickens, joining the SDP, re-treating into Leninist sects, returning to their doctoral theses, or retiring to their herb gardens. Unfortunately, though hardly surprisingly, he omits to mention one other pastime to which Oxbridge graduates can turn to in their hours of distress: the divertissement which he himself now pursues - campaigning for a Scottish Assembly, (sa).

Although something of an over-simplification, there seem to be basically four driving forces pursuing this diversionary and reactionary goal:

a) Scottish 'nationalism' (Since Scotland is not a nation, oppressed or otherwise, there cannot be any such thing as a genuine Scottish nationalism.) Disregarding the various fringe groups campaigning round the slogan of 'Kick the English out of Scotland', Scottish 'nationalism' finds its principal organised expression in the SNP, for whom, its goes without saying, "Scotland's problems" flow from "Westminster rule", not the capitalist mode of production. It was virtually annihilated in the General Election, with its residue of support now predominantly in rural areas. For the SNP, or at least sections of it, an sa is a step towards the final goal of Scottish independence.

b) Communist Party/fellow travellers in the Labour Party: For Stalinists of all varieties, the notion of an sa is like a dream come true. It provides a very concrete focus for their favorite shibboleth of the 'broad democratic alliance' (i.e. cross-class collaboration). At a recent meeting of the Scottish Socialist Society (SSS), itself little more than a catspaw for Stalinism, CP speakers openly dismissed fight-backs against redundancies as 'a narrow economic focus' and 'traditional methods of trade union work' (i.e.: strikes, occupations etc.) as 'disasterous failures and a thing of the past'. What was needed was 'a re-definition of socialism' (the Stalinists can provide that all right) and the construction of 'a movement of national, not labour movement, resistance to Thatcherism,' on the grounds that 'the differences between us (CP/SNP/Labour/Liberals/SDP, and presumably progressive Tories as well) are subordinate to the dangers from Thatcherism.'

c) Union bureaucrats/Labour MPs and councillors: These are the kind of people who shoot their mouth off about how they're all in favour of an sa so as to be better able to fight the Tories. One would have to be criminally naive (or an accommodationist) not to see through such dishonesty. These are the same union bureaucrats who sabotage the NHS dispute and send striking miners back to work, the same MPs who have done nothing in the way of Parliamentary obstruction or anything else to fight the Tories during their first term of office, and the same councillors who have not even put up token resistance to the Tory-demanded cuts. But now, as 'proof' of their determination to fight the Tories, they're suddenly all in favour of an sa. Their devotion to the cause of an sa flows out of a desire to avoid any confrontation with the Tories. Maxton, MP for Cathcart, did at least have the decency to spell this out at the recent SSS meeting: "We must make it clear to the Tories: grant us an sa, then there will be less pressure on you in the United Kingdom. Extra-Parliamentary activity (in pursuit of an sa) cannot replace and overthrow Parliament. We cannot have such activity bringing down a democratically elected government."

d) Muddle-headed petty-bourgeois intellectuals devoid of even a minimal acquaintance with working class struggle and who equate socialism with import controls and the sale of council houses: These are the people who have got it all sussed out: a scenario of mounting class struggle culminating in Scottish Labour MPs (Hugh Brown? Bruce Millan? James White?) withdrawing from Parliament to set up a Scottish Constituent Assembly, harbinger of a Socialist Scotland. It is true that such people can't even run a Polish Solidarity Committee, or even use a stapler. But, meditating in their Habitat armchairs, they've already mapped out the road to socialism in Scotland.

Now McVicar, no doubt choking on his breakfast kippers, will vehemently deny that any of the above has anything to do with HIS reasons for campaigning for an sa. he's got SOCIALIST reasons for campaigning for an sa. Sad to say, this is not the case. This can be easily proven on two levels: that of McVicar's general arguments, and

at of what McVicar does - and has to do - in practice.

The General Arguments. The gist of these has been dealt with in the article in the previous IB, the main failing of which was that it was not hard enough by half on the call for an sa: instead of moving a battery of amendments to motions calling for an sa, we should denounce the whole charade as a reactionary diversion and call for a straight vote against. Some points need to be added/expanded upon:

a) By calling specifically for a Scottish Assembly, credence is automatically given to the arguments of the SNP. If Scotland should have an assembly but nowhere else in Britain (the demand being raised is for a Scottish Assembly only, not devolved government throughout Britain), then it can only be because Scotland is in some way basically different from England/Wales. As soon as that is conceded then one is on the territory of the SNP: if Scotland is different, then the question becomes that of how different and how different should the form of government for Scotland be (devolution? federalism? full independence? an sa with tax-raising powers?)

b) The call for an sa also automatically endorses the Stalinists' argument that "what divides us is subordinate to the danger from Thatcherism." By an apolitical lumping together of all the votes cast against the Tories in Scotland, McVicar is able to conjure up that mythical beast, "the overwhelming anti-Thatcher majority" in Scotland. Thus the differences between a nominally left-wing Labourism, Scottish 'nationalism', bourgeois liberalism, classical social democracy, not to mention a few hundred votes for the fascists, are subordinated to the abstract notion of "anti-Thatcherism". Moreover, depending on whatever starting point you choose to take (to ensure you come up with the result you want), vastly different results can be achieved: a decisive rejection of Labourism (34% of the votes only for Labour); a decisive rejection of Scottish 'nationalism' (11% of the votes), or a decisive rejection of the Alliance (26%).

c) Fundamentally, McVicar's call for an sa is a response to the result of the General Election. Prior to June 9th of this year there was no suggestion that we should campaign for an sa. But by McVicar's 'logic' there was a greater need for one then than now: in 1979 Labour picked up more votes than it did this year, and there was a bigger 'anti-Thatcher majority' in Scotland than now. To respond to the return of a Tory government by calling for another tier of local government is no response at all. It also automatically lets Labour councillors/MPs and union bureaucrats off the hook: if an sa is needed to fight the Tories, then, given that none exists at present, councillors, MP, union bureaucrats can't really be blamed for failing to put up any effective resistance to the Tories.

d) McVicar has no basis upon which to refuse to go along with the Stalinists' call for a popular front for an sa. Supposing that the Young Liberals, the SNP and SDP decided to affiliate to the Glasgow Polish Solidarity Committee (assuming that they actually managed to find the thing), would McVicar accept their applications? We know that he would. So why not also have a joint campaign with them for an sa? They support an sa. McVicar supports an sa. Isn't that basic agreement good enough for a united (popular) front with them? True, the SNP and the CP place their call for an SA from a different motive than McVicar. For them it's a way of breaking up not just support for the Labour Party but also the Labour Party itself. (And it would be a break-up on the worst possible lines as far as socialists are concerned) But in any united front the motives of the various bodies participating are always different anyway.

e) McVicar, I believe, endorses the general contents of an article by Phil O'Brien in the July edition of Strathclyde Labour Briefing. Given that the article sums up just about everything wrong with any attempt to make a 'left-wing' case for an sa, a few comments on it:

1) "John Maxton's stirring call for socialism and a Scottish Assembly ...". It must be a matter of debate as to whether Maxton can even spell the word 'socialism'. His movement to the right continues unabated. his support for Kinnoch for leader, his current whipping up of a witch-hunt against Militant in his CLP, his support for the sale of council houses, his fear of any decisive confrontation with the Tories (see above) etc. Yet, solely because of his call for an sa (every Labour MP is verbally for socialism), the article portrays him as a left-winger!

2) "The Scottish teachers' union called for an sa ... as one way to defend and maintain public education in Scotland... The Scottish miners at their annual conference called for an sa as an essential step in the Labour Party's fightback against Tory policies." But the teachers' conference voted against specific motions (e.g. on Munn and Dunning) which would have defended education in Scotland. And the miners' leaders calling for an sa as an essential step in the fight against the Tories are so genuine in their calls to fight the Tories that in the last four weeks alone they

have ordered back to work striking miners at three Scottish pits in order to fight against the Tories. That such conferences passed motions for an sa does admittedly, actually prove the diversionary nature of the call for an sa. It does, at least certainly suggest it though. But all this is ignored by Phil O'Brien's article which simply presents the passing of motions for an sa at these conferences as ever to be welcomed by the Left.

3) "An sa may not have figured prominently in the election. But it was the subterranean issue." This is no doubt an honest assessment by O'Brien on the basis of his own experiences in the election campaign. But other activists did certainly not gain that impression. And even if the sa was, to use O'Brien's expression, "Scotland's Secret Manifesto" (not even, note, the Scottish working class's secret manifesto, but Scotland's) - so what? Would that make it politically correct? Is Britain's Secret Manifesto of import controls also something for which socialists should campaign? In the case of Phil O'Brien the answer is unfortunately 'yes'. And the author of the article goes on to contradict himself completely when he goes on to admit: "The truth is that for many, particularly workers, the Assembly is a yawn."

4) "The sa is ... a democratic demand because the majority want it ... and it could help defend and extend democracy itself." So hanging too, given that the majority want it, is a democratic demand? What next - 'Socialists for Hanging'? And, other things remaining equal, as sa would not defend and extend democratic rights in Scotland, but, on issues such as gay rights and women's rights, create a second Northern Ireland.

5) "The sa is ... a socialist demand 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 first argument is simply factually wrong. The second argument is political nonsense: it would be true only if the working class had already been liberated from bourgeois ideology and were full-blooded socialists. McVicar himself is amongst those who have constantly poured scorn on such an idea.

6) "Scottish Labour MPs are right at this stage (my emphasis) not to support an all-party alliance ... tactical alliances may be feasible later." Or, to put it in plain English: "I'm against popular frontism and class collaboration just now - but not necessarily in the future."

of

8) "If we are serious, then we must face the prospect of withdrawing MPs from Westminster to establish a Constituent Assembly." In fact, one would have to be in a particularly jovial mood to envisage such a prospect. Unless the sentence is sloppily written, it means withdrawing MPs of all parties from Westminster (the "tactical alliance" referred to above?). Scottish Labour MPs, never mind the rest, certainly aren't going to be dragged away from the Commons Bar and the Mother of Parliaments to set up a Constituent Assembly. And how would it benefit Scottish workers anyway to have Hugh Brown, Donald Dewar, James White, John Maxton et al sitting around in Edinburgh instead of in London?

9) O'Brien's article, like the position of McVicar himself, fails to explain just how an sa is to be elected, what powers it will have, what it will do, and why Labour MPs sitting in Edinburgh are going to be more accountable than Labour MPs sitting in Westminster (glossing over the fact that there will probably be less of them - in elections to an sa, the voting patterns would probably be significantly different from patterns in a national General Election.) To say that an sa should be the ultimate arbiter of its own powers (the phrase currently in circulation) might sound quite radical but in practice it simply evades the issue. The Scottish working class, in other words, is meant to campaign for a pig in a poke. And since the sa is not, by its very nature, an organ of workers power but merely another tier of bourgeois government, the demand for an sa cannot have a specifically socialist content.

f) One other argument often raised to 'justify' socialists calling for an sa is that the campaign for an sa would create a conflict with the Tory government. This is no doubt true, but also completely irrelevant. Campaigns for hanging, restoration of the belt in schools, and even the imposition of import controls would also create conflict with the Tories. But we don't campaign for those demands for the same reason we shouldn't campaign for an sa: there's nothing in them of any benefit to the working class. And nor would the creation of an sa weaken the British capitalist state:

one need only look at West Germany and the United States to see that federalism is not in the least incompatible with the capitalist state.

The Practice: The Birth of Tartan Trotakysim.

An attempt to put forward a 'socialist' case for an sa leads, of necessity, to a re-jigging of reality in order to give the impression that the need for an sa flows out of the logic of the class struggle. One finds this in McVicar's own, written and verbal, arguments.

Maxton's support for an sa (to try to defuse class antagonisms) is, in the footsteps of Phil o'Brien, served up by McVicar as evidence of Maxton's socialist credentials: in his article in the latest issue of 'Strathclyde Labour Briefing' McVicar's approach to Maxton is indistinguishable from that of o'Brien, with support for an sa being regarded as interchangeable and synonymous with support for socialism.

The original text of McVicar's 'model resolution' for an sa underlines the extent to which reality plays second fiddle to any 'arguments' that can be dug up for an sa. The original text of the motion referred to the overwhelming support for Labour in Scotland reflected in the results of the General Election. No-one even glancing at the General Election results with an open mind could have made such a claim, given that Labour's share of the votes fell by 7% to 34%. Moreover, McVicar, who writes letters to *SC* bemoaning the lack of analysis and substitution of scenarios instead in front page articles on the General Election in *SC*, does exactly the same thing himself: he makes no attempt to explain why Labour lost ONE IN SIX of its voters in Scotland at the last General Election, compared with 1979; instead, Scotland is portrayed as a Labour stronghold, supposedly justifying a campaign for a Scottish Assembly. Nor has McVicar ever made any reference to the fact that where Labour's vote in Scotland did hold up or increase, it was where the Labour Party is at its most rotten in the whole country: Glasgow. The massive votes chalked up by Martin, Millan, or White were not votes for a fighting, campaigning Labour Party; they were traditional Labour-loyalty votes at their worst, especially in the case of Hugh Brown. But all this is glossed over by McVicar in his search for a 'socialist' campaign for an sa.

It is also worth noting McVicar's sudden decision to drop his idea of campaigning for proportional representation (PR). In the aftermath of Bermondsey, McVicar wrote a document suggesting that socialists should campaign for PR. Yet now, when PR really is an issue because of the imbalance between votes for the Alliance and the number of seats they have in Parliament, McVicar has dropped his earlier position in favour of the call for an sa. For the left-reformists, an sa elected on the basis of PR would not be of any use since Labour MPs would not be in a majority. So anyone calling for an sa elected on the basis of PR would certainly be out of favour with that section of the mainstream Left which supports an sa. (By no means all of the mainstream Left supports an sa: the ILP and sections of the LCC, for example, don't) McVicar's ditching of his earlier position can be easily demonstrated. At the League's Scottish aggregate on June 12th all present agreed that where a motion was moved for an sa, we should move a series of amendments including the proposal that an Assembly should be elected on the basis of PR. (On reflection, this was wrong: we should simply oppose and vote against such diversionary motions). Yet when McVicar presented his model resolution to a Strathclyde Labour Briefing meeting the following evening and put the same motion to his Labour Party branch meeting the evening after that, not a single one of the amendments agreed to at the Scottish aggregate were included, on the grounds that, as McVicar later explained, the motion would not have got through if it included the clauses agreed to at the aggregate. McVicar's enthusiastic support for PR thus disappeared in order to get through a motion for an sa.

(In passing, it should also be mentioned that both the pre-fusion organisations had anti-sa positions. McVicar is therefore acting outwith the constitution in moving such a motion, and engaging in external factionalisation in his attempts to set up his 'Socialists for a Scottish Assembly' campaign.)

In spite of the watering down of the motion, McVicar still encountered problems at his Labour Party branch when moving it, due to a clause to the effect that if the Tories had not granted an sa by the end of the first full session of Parliament, then the Scottish labour movement should hold elections for an sa. (All the scenarios for an sa are based on the months of the calendar and on the Parliamentary timetable, not on the rhythm and logic of the class struggle.) Now such a clause is clearly nonsense. The only situation in which the labour movement could hold society-wide elections (even just on a Scottish level) is if it were regarded as having the right to call and hold elections, i.e. if it were already the

the holder of power in society, which in turn could only come about as a result of a working-class revolution. In any other situation any call by the labour movement to participate in an election which it organises would simply be ignored. For the labour movement to seize power in order to hold an election for an SA is obviously a nonsensical position to put forward, even implicitly.

At McVicar's branch meeting the objections to the clause came from the same basic direction, though from a different perspective: that the labour movement could not hold an election because it did not have the right to do so. Fortunately for his motion, and the cause of Scotland, however, McVicar was able to find a formula to put these troubled minds at rest: that the labour movement, in conjunction with other forces, should hold an election. These other forces being of course: the SWP, CP and Alliance - and maybe a few progressive Tories as well, just for good measure? McVicar calls for a 'socialist' campaign for an SA because he is opposed to the class collaboration of the Stalinists' one. Yet the highpoint of McVicar's own campaign turns out to be collaboration with the very forces which he condemns the Stalinists for wanting to campaign with. At least the Stalinists are consistent.

Those with an interest in esoteric irrelevancies and mysticism may well be able to spend many a happy hour musing upon 'socialist' campaigns for an SA. Serious socialists however can find somewhat more fruitful activities, and politically principled ones, in which to engage their energies. Certainly, in this particular case, the SWPer who rushes off to the nearest picket line with nothing in his/her head but a pile of 'Socialist Workers' in their arms is an infinitely better socialist than those who want to conjure up 'socialist' campaigns for the irrelevant diversion of an SA - with class collaboration as the highpoint of this 'socialist' campaign.

On a Scottish AssemblyA "Formal Position"?

In a letter dated 5 July to the comrades in the Glasgow branch, Annell, writing on behalf of the EC, stated that the current "formal position" of the WSL is "the previous position of the two pre-fusion organisations, ie to regard the Assembly as a diversion."

This is not strictly an accurate explanation of the situation. It would be more accurate to say that, whereas the pre-fusion WSL regarded the Assembly as a diversion, to be opposed whatever the state of popular sentiment on the matter, the ICL was of the opinion that the demand should be supported if the majority of people in Scotland demonstrated their support for an Assembly. These are two distinct positions, the conflation of which is insupportable. The grounds then for claiming that the WSL has even a "formal position" of opposition to an Assembly are extremely weak.

Secondly, these grounds are even further undermined when we consider how little evidence exists that anything like a thorough analysis of the issue took place in either organisation. The only documentary evidence of a "debate" in the ICL we have witnessed is a brief piece in a back issue of "International Communist" by a comrade who ceased to be a member of the organisation a number of years ago. As for the pre-fusion WSL, we are unaware of any theoretical analysis of the issue. We would surmise that the only article analysing the issue in any depth from which that organisation drew its conclusions was written by one of the signatories of this document in an issue of the "Fourth International" published by the Socialist Labour League. The anti-Assembly sentiments expressed in that article are no longer espoused by its author.

Taken together, the two contributions constitute a very slender foundation for establishing an anti-Assembly position. As well as being inadequately researched, they are also now very dated. To claim that the WSL has even a "formal position" of opposition to an Assembly on the basis of these documents is an untenable posture to strike.

Hence we would contend that, as the Assembly is now a pressing issue in the Scottish context and as the organisation has no fixed position on the question, the debate be allowed to proceed publicly as well as internally and that there be no attempt made to restrict comrades from publicly participating in the campaign for an Assembly.

A Mandate for an Assembly

Although there have been, as far as we are aware, no public opinion polls conducted on the issue in Scotland since the General Election, we are in no doubt that a majority of people in Scotland now favour the establishment of an Assembly. At the election, 73% of the Scottish electorate voted for parties other than the Tories and all of these anti-Tory parties contained an Assembly pledge in their manifestos. Since the election, the largest teachers' union in Scotland, the EIS, and the Scottish Area of the NUM have both declared for an Assembly. No one doubts that a very large body of opinion within the Scottish Labour movement and within the populace generally now supports the establishment of an Assembly.

In parenthesis, it is worth noting that the reason for the failure of pro-Assembly opinion to prevail in the 1979 Referendum was because of an amendment to the Referendum Bill secured by George Cunningham who later defected to the SDP. This amendment stipulated that 40% of the Scottish electorate had to vote for an Assembly before that demand was acceded to. In the event, 37% did so, and thus the pro-Assembly campaign lost. It is noteworthy that if British general elections were decided on the same criterion, then almost every government since 1945, whether Labour or Conservative, would have failed to be elected.

We would therefore contend that those socialists who said that they would support the pro-Assembly campaign if the majority of Scottish people so decided, are now morally obliged to do just that.

Scotland - a Nation?

The second group of socialists we referred to earlier are those who are adamantly opposed to an Assembly on principle. We believe that it is essential to try to convince those comrades of the democratic, and potentially socialist,

nature of the Assembly demand.

It is hardly surprising that the issue remains a source of debate within the British Labour movement. There is a long history of contention over this issue. In the 1880s and 1890s the indigenous trade unions and the ILP were passionate advocates of Scottish self-government. With the rise of a bourgeois nationalist movement in the late 19th century, however, John Carstairs Matheson and the predominantly Scottish Socialist Labour Party came out against Home Rule. As against Matheson and the SLP, John Maclean was to become increasingly passionately devoted to self government, ending his days campaigning for a Scottish Workers Republic.

With the death of Maclean and the defeat of the post-war upsurge, the increasingly Stalinised Communist Party vigorously opposed any moves towards Scottish self government, describing Maclean as a "racialist" and expelling Grassie Gibbon, the finest modern Scottish novelist, for alleged "Trotskyism". As James Young has pointed out, it was only in 1940, when the Scottish Committee of the CP was looking for a popular front with the Nationalists, that an about-turn was made on the question of Scottish self government.

In the meantime, the small group of Trotskyists in inter-war Scotland was unable to make any insightful contribution on the question. Influenced by Trotsky's one-line dismissal of a Scottish parliament in "Where is Britain Going?", they clung to an abstract internationalism within which they were unable to posit their indigenous experience.

In more recent times, it has been the right wing who have strenuously resisted any form of Scottish self government within the Scottish Council of the Labour party. Willie Ross, the Hammer of the Tartan Tories, exemplified the right wing establishment which dominated Labour politics in Scotland in the period since 1945 until very recently. It has been amongst the left wing, whatever its limitations in other respects, that the sentiment for an Assembly has been strongest.

Whilst many English socialists say that they are not inimical to a federal framework for the UK, they can see no valid reason why such priority should be given to the establishment of a Scottish Assembly. That view can only meaningfully be countered by a sustained exposition of the conception that there is an exceptional character to the Scottish dimension. What are the salient characteristics that give Scotland a national identity?

The turning point in Scottish history was undeniably the Act of Union of 1707. Prior to that, despite the Union of the Crowns in 1603, no one denied that Scotland was a nation state. The removal of the seat of government, parliament, from Edinburgh to Westminster produced a crisis of national identity. Henceforth, as Tom Nairn has argued so cogently, a gulf opened up between the political and the civil life of Scotland.

Throughout the 18th century, Scotland retained its separate legal and educational systems, as it still does to the present day. Those distinctive elements were supplemented by an efflorescence of Scottish culture which made the country the intellectual envy of all Europe. With talents such as Hume, Burns, Scott and Black, in the words of T.C. Smout, "the cultural performance of Scotland between 1740 and 1830 was of dazzling virtuosity".

Yet that rich cultural heritage was to wither and virtually perish in the course of the 19th century. The onset and acceleration of the Industrial Revolution opened hitherto unknown opportunities for the Scottish bourgeoisie. This, combined with unrestricted access to the markets of the Empire of the English, became the focus for the energies of the burgeoning industrialists and middle classes. Enthralled by the possibilities of self enrichment, they abandoned governance to the English aristocracy and culture to the Lailyard. Thus, in the great age of European bourgeois nationalism, which culminated in the attempted revolutions of 1848, Scotland remained on the sidelines, engrossed in the pursuit of material wealth.

What then accounted for the neo-nationalist upsurge of the late 1960s and the 1970s? The material basis for that must be sought in the malaise of British capitalism, unable now to fall back upon the spoils of empire so readily as in the past. From being a powerhouse of the Industrial Revolution, Scotland, saddled with a preponderance of heavy industry, became crippled by massive unemployment and social deprivation. Multinationals, at first attracted by the generous disburse-

ents of "Regional Policy", later compensated for falling profit rates by lopping off their subsidiary branches. The uneven development of capitalism is the material basis for the renewed search for Scottish self identity in the 1970s. That awareness was to be made even more intense by the agonising spectacle of successive Westminster administrations squandering the revenues from North Sea oil in sustaining ever-lengthening dole queues and hideous food surpluses in the EEC.

In the few sketchy paragraphs above we have tried to outline, however schematically, some of the elements which Scottish socialists have wrestled with throughout the past decade in an effort to delineate essential features of a Scottish self identity beneath the Tartan kitch and grasping self interest of the bourgeois nationalists. The search by democratic socialists to give that identity a political expression is manifested at this juncture in the demand for an Assembly.

The Break-up of the British State

The results of the recent general election will achieve nothing in terms of alleviating the moribund state of British capitalism. Thatcherite right wing radicalism will be no more successful than the welfare capitalist measures of successive post war governments, Labour or Conservative. The reasons for that failure are as much governmental as economic. The inability of government in Britain to achieve limited growth and efficiency even in capitalist terms is irrevocably bound up with the strangulating impact of the British state.

That state, a symbiotic formation of patrician dilletantism and rapacious finance capital, the historical development of which has been so well described by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, defies all attempts at reform, whether Wilsonite "white heat technological revolution" or Thatcherite laissez faire plus Rayner style pruning exercises. The centralised, bureaucratic British state defies all reform, stultifies all efforts to change, absorbs all Labourite challenges.

The process of socialist change in Britain must encompass the destruction of that state. From the arsenal of Marxism we must draw upon the tradition expressed by Marx concerning the Paris Commune in 1871 and as developed by Lenin in "State and Revolution". It is that tradition which must be the inspiration of socialists rather than the conception of the seizure of the existing state machine and its utilisation in the interests of the working masses, a view which Marx abandoned in 1871 and to which Lenin was forced by circumstances to reluctantly return in 1918.

A key factor in the disintegration of the state in Britain is the struggle to establish a Scottish Assembly. The break-up of the unitary state, we are convinced, would be a significant contribution towards rupturing the stasis which dominates in British politics.

Why a Labour Campaign for an Assembly?

Although the project for an Assembly has been a long time in gestation, the Labour movement in Scotland remains bereft of a feasible strategy. This has been exemplified by the divisions apparent since the general election.

On Friday 8 July it was intended that a meeting should take place involving representatives of the executive of the Scottish Council of the Labour Party and members of the executive of the STUC to discuss the launching of a Labour Campaign for an Assembly. That meeting never took place. The reason? Leading figures in the Scottish trade union movement found themselves unable to attend for a variety of reasons. In other words, the STUC opted out. But why? Surely a clue must be found in the contents of a paper prepared for that meeting by George Foulkes, the Ayrshire MP. In this Foulkes proposed a number of practical options, involving degrees of parliamentary disruption and non-cooperation with the Tory government at national and local governmental levels.

How could the leadership of the STUC even contemplate being involved in such radical courses of action when they, like their counterparts at Congress House, have set their faces firmly against any moves to stop talking to the Tories? Even the mildest forms of non-cooperation are off the agenda as far as Milne and Co. are concerned.

Their incapacity to attend the Friday evening meeting was overcome by the following day when they appeared at the meeting organised by the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly, held in Edinburgh. There the leadership of the STUC found no

difficulty in getting down to talks with the SNP, SDP, Ecology Party, Communist Party and sundry others. There the STUC knew they would be called upon to do no more than pass the usual pious resolutions. They would not face the prospect of breaking off all links with the Tories nor would they face the danger of being outflanked on the Left which possibility would be strengthened if the campaign were to be a Labour movement affair.

The inadequacies and manoeuvrings of the STUC cannot however be the pivot upon which socialists should determine their orientation on this issue. The question remains - why a Labour Campaign for the Assembly? Why not an all party, cross class alliance united to achieve this single objective?

Our primary concern as socialists must be the mobilisation of the working class in action to achieve the democratic aim of an Assembly. The key to that development lies in the Labour movement, whatever its inadequacies. One of these shortcomings is the prevalence on the Left in Britain of a primitive, economistic conception of class struggle which, although willing to accommodate within its perspective various kinds of double oppression, is unable to take on board the conception of the break-up of the unitary, centralised British state. Re-educating the Labour movement throughout Britain on that question will be one of the prime aims of the Labour Campaign. In fulfilling this educational role, and in many other respects, it will be not unlike a number of other Labour movement based campaigns (eg Labour Committee on Ireland, Labour Committee on Palestine, Labour Campaign for Gay Rights).

Does that exclude alliances with other political formations in Scottish society to achieve our objectives? Certainly not. Any "Labour Party sectarianism" in this campaign would be counterproductive. It will be necessary to make tactical alliances to achieve our objectives. We would contend that the Labour Party should have been present at the conference on 9 July in order to state the case for a socialist perspective in the Assembly campaign and the necessity for an independent form of organisation to project that trajectory and to mobilise opinion around it. Given the back tracking by some sections of the Labour and trade union leadership and deliberate sabotage by others, how should we now proceed? Any initiative must come from the base as well as the leadership for it to be capable of creating a viable campaign. We would therefore advocate that activists in Scotland get themselves organised in forming local branches of the Labour Campaign for an Assembly, even if that is in embryo form in the period immediately ahead.

That orientation should be pursued irrespective of ditherings and posturings by Labour MPs. John Maxton slid from his call for an Assembly as a springboard for Socialism to his sectarian, bureaucratic speech at the Scottish Socialist Society Conference a few weeks later; Hattersley calls for an Assembly whereas Kinnock and Heffer remain silent on that issue; Robin Cook becomes an overnight convert to federalism; George Foulkes, hardly an identifiable left-wing figure, becomes an advocate of confrontation with the Tory Government. But these shifts, manoeuvres, retreats and so on are not the fulcrum around which we build our campaign. They have to be studied and related to but they do not determine our trajectory.

The Outcome

Only the most wilful perverseness could blind anyone to the reality that, even under the most sustained campaign for an Assembly, involving rallies, demonstrations, parliamentary disruption etc, Thatcher will refuse to implement such a measure. An Assembly with meaningful powers will have to be torn by forceful action from the British state. That will assuredly involve the establishment of a constituent Assembly which will be the ultimate arbiter of its rights and powers and its relationship with Westminster. Again, the initiative for that must be taken by the Labour movement in tactical alliance with other pre-Assembly political forces. Comrades who deride the Assembly campaign on the grounds that the mechanics of such a Constituent Assembly have not been determined at this stage reveal themselves to be the most timid constitutionalists.

Another objection that has been raised is that such an Assembly will be no more than another tier of government, unable or unwilling to resist the dictates of Westminster or Whitehall, as impotent as Strathclyde or Lothian Regional Councils. We are not in the business of offering guarantees but what we can say is that the political composition of an Assembly will be determined by the nature of the campaign that is waged to secure it.

If the concept of an Assembly is counterposed to the struggles of the working class as favoured by the Stalinists and Nationalists, if it is posed as a retreat to the laager behind which we will vainly try to hide from the Tory storm, as favoured by not a few Labour MPs, then all that will ensue will be frustration, demoralisation and a debacle. On the other hand, if the campaign for an Assembly is fought for throughout the length and breadth of the British trade union and labour movement as a democratic demand, if it is enmeshed with the struggles of Scottish workers in every form, if it is projected as a springboard for the implementation of socialists, then it may both fulfil the interests of the Scottish working class and, through undermining the viability and credibility of the British state, thereby create possibilities for the working class throughout Britain to get to grips with the dismantling of the centralised capitalist state.

Macvicar
Meehan
Benjamin

July 1983

Some Introductory Reading

Tom Nairn, *The Break-Up of Britain* (1981)
James Young, *The Scottish National Question and Labour History* (1982)
Gordon Brown (ed), *The Red Paper on Scotland* (1975)

The ICL Position on Scottish Nationalism

The position taken by the old ICL on Scottish nationalism is summarised in the excerpt below from the ICL Manifesto.

On the issue of the Scottish Assembly, we called for a 'no' vote in the referendum. Although formally and generally there is a democratic case for 'devolution', we argued that in this particular case to vote 'yes' would be much more to put wind in the sails of the nationalists than to endorse a general democratic idea.

While arguing among the Scottish people that they should not demand an Assembly, we also argued among the English people for Scotland's right to such an Assembly if a majority wanted it. Thus, when a majority did vote for an Assembly in the referendum, we called for the Westminster government to respect that vote. We ~~did not~~ condemned the undemocratic 40% rule under which the Assembly was denied.

We did not change our view on the diversionary nature of the call for an Assembly. We simply maintained our stand in favour of the democratic rights of the Scottish people.

Kinnell

Nationalism in Britain

The weakening of British capitalism and the failures of the official labour movement have generated a number of nationalisms within Britain: Scottish, Welsh. These differ fundamentally from the nationalism of the Catholic population of North East Ireland, because throughout modern history these sectors, unlike Ireland, have been more or less equal partners in British capitalist state, in its colonial and imperial phases. The new sub-nationalisms are reactionary, like British nationalism as a whole.

Rooted not in legitimate grievances of oppressed nation but in a general frustration to which they respond with a petty bourgeois spirit of particularism, parochialism, and the mean and narrow search for sectional advantages (North Sea Oil!) - such views have nothing in common with a working class outlook.

They have nothing to contribute to drawing together the workers of England, Scotland and Wales in real fraternal unity.

They are a disruption of the labour movement, a drive to divide and segment the real unity, necessary to Scottish, Welsh and English workers, which now exists. Their logic is regional fragmentation of the organised labour movement, from the trade unions to the Labour Party.

These sub-nationalisms are pernicious, not only in their openly right-wing expressions, but also where they find influence in the left, for example, in the Scottish Labour Party and the IMG's adaptation to Scottish nationalism.

'Left' Scottish nationalism looks to John Maclean. Maclean was a great martyr and fighter against capitalism, the British Karl Liebknecht. But his lapse into the belief that a fusion of a Scottish independence movement with communism could be a lever for disrupting the British Empire was a tragic and entirely negative experience of early British communism.

We endorse the general democratic right of self determination and oppose the Tories and Tribunes who would deny that right to Scotland, for example, by rigged referendums. A referendum on the future of Scotland (or Wales) should be conducted in Scotland (or Wales) and also include English voters. That denial, rooted in conservative Great British nationalism, will help, not hinder, the spreading of the nationalist poison.

But within Britain the ICL puts all its emphasis on opposition to nationalism and particularism. At present we oppose secession and separation; when and if there is an expressed majority in Scotland (or Wales) for separation, we support their right to separate.

From W.A. ;8/12/76 - a letter from a reader and the reply by Workers' Action.
Face the Fact about Scottish Nationalism

I hope you will let me take up some of the points raised in your reply to my letter on Scottish nationalism. As you no doubt realise, the issues involved are not only of a serious political nature (what side do we take in current arguments) but also a profound scientific nature, referring to the history of Scotland and the nature of imperialism and nationalism. Unfortunately your reply makes far too little of such issues, sliding as it does round many of the theoretical questions involved.

Let me give you a couple of examples. You say that the "Jacobite rebellions can scarcely be presented as a national-democratic movement" and that such a movement was thoroughly reactionary. My original letter did not refer to the Jacobites as such movement - I only implied - they were mainly a nationalist movement. Of course the Jacobite movement was feudal in character and based on one of the most backward sections of the Scottish people, the Highlanders. But so what?

If you remember, Trotsky was prepared to support the Ethiopians fight for national independence from their Italian conquerors, even though the movement was led by a reactionary, feudal king. Similarly in the case of the Ukraine he was prepared to support bourgeois nationalists against representatives of a degenerated workers' state. In his writings on the national question did Lenin or Trotsky use the backward nature of the social group which was pressing for national independence to deny that group the right of self-determination.

Nationalism is precisely the expression of such a group's desire to improve its conditions. It may not be the highest necessary expression - but it is an advance.

Later on you appear to deny the identity of Scotland as a nation. This is asserted rather than proved - indeed, I would like to see you try to prove it. Scotland has a distinct history, culture, religion, and form of government up to the Act of Union in 1707. It was separated and developed independently of Britain far longer and in a more advanced fashion than Ireland and today that national legacy is still there.

A Scottish nationalist movement has existed in one form or another ever since the 18th century. Contrary to your belief, the majority of the Scottish people did oppose the Act of Union. The Scottish parliament itself was heavily bribed to make it docile to the wishes of the English government. Even so, one of its members claimed that there "wasn't a man in Scotland who wished to see the Union". It was shortly after this that the Jacobites rose up against the English oppression. What could be clearer than that that was a nationalist revolt?

Comrades, face the facts. The SNP according to the latest electoral projections will sweep Labour out of power in Scotland. I agree that that will be so because of the failings of the Labour government, but that is still no argument against moves for Scottish independence. In a sense, you recognise this by seemingly willing to accept that if the majority of the Scottish people want independence by expressing their wishes through a referendum, then you will be prepared to let them have it ... big deal! In effect you are denying them the justice of their case, while saying that if they are duped into nationalism all revolutionaries can do is stand aside and let them get on with it. For you, the sting in the tail of that argument is that it condemns revolutionaries to complete impotence in the enormous debate that will certainly be taking place around devolution and independence.

I find it ironic that the same issue of Workers' Action which contains your reply also contains an article supporting independence for Quebec. For the life of me I cannot see any fundamental differences between the Scottish and Quebecois nationalist movements ... and I suspect most of your readers can't either.

Surely, comrades, this shows the pedantic nature of your arguments against Scottish nationalism. Wake up, comrades. Nationalism is sweeping Scotland; revolutionaries should be linked to that movement by offering it critical support. If you don't change your line, Scottish readers of Workers' Action will not be swimming against the stream - they'll be swept away by the flood that is moving in the right direction.

Richard Hargreaves

Reply: Acting as the catspaws of reaction

Let us first recapitulate the elements of the Marxist theory of the national question.

As trade comes to play an increasing role, so (over a long period) the unit for economic life extends from the household, the village, the tribe, or the lord's estate, to a larger scale. The boundaries of these units are chiefly determined by - and determine - geography and communications, including the most important means of communication, language, and the forms of culture built up round it.

The decisive stage in the development of nations is the emergence of capitalism and the associated massive increase in trade, mobility of population and communications generally. Then, as the Communist Manifesto puts it "Independent, or but loosely connected provinces with separate interests, laws, governments and systems of taxation become lumped together into one nation, with one government, one code of laws, one national class interest, one frontier and one customs tariff." National political institutions - political parties, trade unions - also arise.

Last Refuge

This development of nation states is progressive as against semi-feudal particularism; it opens the way to the advance of the forces of production and the more extensive organisation of the working class. Thus Marx and Engels considered progressive the struggles for the unification of Germany and Italy, and (in retrospect) the creation of a uniform national market and state system by the French Revolution; and when Dr Johnson declared that "Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel", he understood 'patriotism' not as we would understand it today but as synonymous with democracy, radicalism, rule by the majority of the nation.

International trade develops even before the flowering of capitalism; and capitalism itself creates a world market and the close economic interconnection of every area of the world. If capitalism developed in an even, straight-line fashion, it would long ago have progressed from the nation-state to continental or world-wide state forms.

However, capitalism develops unevenly. Even before the consolidation of the classic nation-states of Europe was complete, these states were plundering and oppressing large areas of Asia, Africa and America. Certain small nations in the more advanced sectors - particularly in Eastern Europe but also Ireland and Quebec - also suffered the fate of becoming economic and political vassals of the major states, rather than being integrated into or developing an autonomous state.

Provinces

In Spain there has been a peculiar development where the massive incompleteness of the bourgeois revolution left the state as nothing more than a collection of provinces held together by bureaucratic imposition of the authority of Madrid. The national question has remained alive, especially in Catalonia and Euzkadi (though revolutionaries in those regions do not fight for separation.)

With the more or less complete division of the world by the major capitalist states, by 1900 - that is, the epoch of imperialism - the national question took a different aspect. The nation-state has become obsolete in comparison with the tremendous development of the forces of production, but the rival bourgeoisies have been unable to transcend it. The best they have managed is the feeble federalism of the EEC. Thus the tension between the needs of economic development and the nation-state framework has been expressed in the creation of colonial or neo-colonial empires and continual disputes between rival imperialist bourgeoisies trying to expand their empires at each other's expense. The two World Wars were the most bloody of these disputes.

'National self-determination' and 'national defence' have thus become obsolete and reactionary slogans for the major imperialist nation-states of Western Europe and America - because in reality they mean the 'determination' and the 'defence' of colonial or neo-colonial empires. (A limited and partial exception to this generalisation can be made for the national question in certain countries while they were overrun by Germany during the second World War - but that is a side issue for the present discussion).

Meanwhile, however, since world war 1 especially, the national question has become a burning issue in the oppressed nations. Marxists believe the nation-state is obsolete; yet we have supported dozens of national liberation struggles. In these struggles we fight for the working class to take the lead, and thus to take the struggle forward to socialist conclusions. Yet we support the national liberation struggles against oppressor powers even if they remain under the leadership of petty bourgeois or bourgeois forces.

Nation-state

Why? The nation-state is obsolete from the standpoint of world history. But from the standpoint of nations, or nascent nations, whose development as nations has been aborted by imperialism, it is far from obsolete. They have no prospect of emulating the classic West European nation-states, that is, of their statehood being the basis for massive and organic bourgeois development (though some real development certainly is possible). However, the demand for these oppressed nations or semi-nations to have their own government is an elementary bourgeois-democratic demand.

Bourgeois democracy, too, is decaying and obsolete. Yet Marxists continue to fight for basic bourgeois-democratic rights, because the more such rights are achieved, the more widely can the working class organize and the more clearly can it see the fundamental class divisions in society. We are ultimately for a world-wide federation of nations - but a voluntary federation on the basis of equality. Modern imperialist nations are - as a matter of economic law - incapable of establishing democratic and equal links with 'third-world' nations. Marxists therefore support the struggles for national liberation of oppressed nations.

We do not cease to fight politically against the nationalism of oppressed nations, any more than we cease to combat the ideology of bourgeois democracy. Indeed, our support for national liberation struggles derives not from any sympathy for nationalism, but from our bitter opposition to the (anti-democratic) nationalism of the oppressor nation. To deny the right of one nation to separate from another is to endorse the 'right' of the dominant nation to control the dominated nation - it is thus to endorse the nationalism of the dominant nation.

What, asks comrade Hargreaves, is the difference between Scotland on the one hand, and Quebec or Ireland on the other?

Scotland was certainly not a fully-developed nation prior to the Union of 1707, still less so prior to the 'regal union' (the merging of the monarchies of England and Scotland into one person) of 1603. There was no national economic integration, no common language, not even (as comrade Hargreaves suggests) a common religion.

The development since Union has not been a colonial development, but one of integration into the British national economy. Even the Scots-nationalist writer Tom Mairn concludes that "Scotland had in Scott's own time left the category of 'subject nations' for good and joined the ranks of the 'imperialists'", and notes "Scotland's participation in two centuries of Great-British exploits, in the subjugation of many genuine 'subject nations' ". As regards the distinctive economic character of imperialism, export of capital, John Foster records that "it seems clear that Scotland contributed far more than its share of the British total" before 1914. Today, one third of British finance capital is in Scotland.

Some autonomous development of social institutions - law, education, - does persist in Scotland. But this is to be attributed to the notorious un-radical nature of the British bourgeois revolution, which leaves us also with such medieval remnants as the monarchy and the House of Lords. There is no serious history of national struggle in Scotland (the Parliamentary efforts of the Scottish Home Rule Association in the 1880s and Hugh MacDiarmid's crack-pated ramblings were just about the high points prior to today's oil-fired SNP exploits), and political institutions - especially those of the working class - have developed on an all-British, not Scottish, basis. Indeed, Scottish

militants have often played a major role in the Brotoch labour movement.

On an Austro-Marxist definition of a nation - hinging on some vague concept of distinctive 'culture' - Scotland might be characterised as a nation. With a Marxist method, treating economic development and class struggle as basic - no. And if it is a nation, it is without doubt an oppressor nation.

Comrade Hargreaves' comparison of the Jacobite rebellions of 1719 and 1745 with the Ethiopians' war against Italian imperialism in the 1930s is - to use the kindest word possible - eccentric. (So also is his comparison with the Ukraine, but one thing at a time). John Foster writes of the Union showing "the need of English capitalism at this difficult stage in its development to gain the adhesion of culturally similar forces elsewhere or at least to prevent the inevitable alternative: the precipitation of feudal, highland-based counter-revolution". The Jacobites represented just that feudal counter-revolution. To the extent that the rebellions were "nationalist" (which was not much: the Pretenders aspired to the common throne of Scotland and England; the 1745 rebellion penetrated deep into, and raised forces in, England; and there were more Scots involved in defeating the '45 than supporting it) they represented the revolt of particularism against bourgeois economy. It was not one of the national-democratic movements characteristic of European politics in that epoch, but just the opposite.

The case of Ethiopia, impelled into revolt against modern imperialism long before bourgeois-democratic movements would organically have developed there, is something quite different. Certainly, for example, Haile Selassie laid no claim to be King of Italy.

If comrade Hargreaves wants to make comparisons with Italy, it would be nearer the mark to compare the war of 1860 in which Garibaldi defeated Francis II and made possible the integration of the kingdom of the Two Sicilies into a united Italy. Francis II. previously had plans to invade the North; after his unification there were substantial revolts, led by priests and agents of Francis II, in the South; and even today the South is a deprived area of Italy. Would comrade Hargreaves consider King Francis II to be the leader of a nationalist movement to be supported against Garibaldi? Or would he define Southern Italy as a nation?

Wildly inaccurate

One statement, and a wildly inaccurate one at that, from a member of the Scottish Parliament, scarcely stands as evidence of massive popular opposition to Union - certainly not if put against the lack of serious popular anti-Unionist agitation. Also, most importantly, there is no evidence of the establishment of an imperial/colonial relation between England and Scotland at all comparable to Italy's to Ethiopia. John Foster firmly declares that it was a non-colonial relationship, "a position of near partnership, the result of a careful grafting of one capitalist economy and culture onto another." Tom Nairn celebrates "the rapid progress of Scotland's new bourgeois civil society" "in the extremely favourable conditions of the Union". "Few, even among fervid nationalists, would regret that the country escaped so sharply from the age of witch-burning and feudal futility".

What of Quebec and Ireland? They were subjugated by colonial conquest. They have a distinct economic and geographical identity - not of a fully-developed nation-state, obviously. They have a distinct language (in the case of Quebec), distinct religion and culture (for the majority, at least), distinct political institutions, and a militant history of national struggle.

National independence (and national unity in the case of Ireland) is an essential democratic demand on the road of clearly uniting the proletariat of those nations against their 'own' bourgeoisies. In the Scottish case, separation would hinder the unity of the working class. It is on that consideration; and on no pedantry, that our policy is based.

Right direction?

If comrade Hargreaves wants an example from Canada, he would find a better analogy in Canadian nationalism (which is a strong feeling, directed against the USA), or in the separatist sentiments emerging in some Canadian provinces like British Columbia. Would he consider these to be "in the right direction" too?

Revolutionaries who argue against Scottish particularism, while conceding the general right to self-determination, are no more condemned to "complete impotence" than revolutionaries who likewise upheld an internationalist policy against strong popular feeling by saying that workers should not vote in the EEC referendum. (Though, if comrade Hargreaves is logical, he will conclude that the 'no' vote, being nationalist, was also "in the right direction"). On the contrary, those would-be revolutionaries who argue (albeit with inaudible 'criticism') for Scottish separatism are condemning themselves to be the catspaws of reaction.