

Devolution, Democracy and Socialist Advance

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At the Labour Party Conference, on October 4, 1977, Prime Minister James Callaghan included in his forthright 'election build-up' speech an unqualified pledge to have Bills providing Devolution to Scottish and Welsh Assemblies passed in the coming session of Parliament—before another General Election. The Government, he said, would be missing an historic opportunity if it did not respond to the genuine desire for a measure of devolution. He made it clear that a guillotine timetable would be brought forward to ensure that the Devolution Bills would be properly considered and a conclusion reached. And he made it clear that the issue would be one of confidence, with every Labour MP expected to support the Government measures—contrary to the disastrous position in April, when the votes of a substantial block of Labour MPs joined with the Tories to defeat the Devolution Bill. The new, separate Scotland and Wales Bills have now been presented.

Historic Challenge

This certainly does provide an historic second chance (or third or fourth chance if you go back further in Labour's history) but it is also a historic challenge to tackle the ignorance and inadequacy of the British Labour Movement's approach to the National Question. It is a challenge we shall ignore at our peril. Commenting on the defeat of the first Devolution Bill, Phil Williams, vice-president of Plaid Cymru and their parliamentary candidate for Caerphilly, said that the lessons were clear: "Only Plaid can win a fair deal for Wales. . . . As a result of the vote in Parliament, Wales will suffer, but Plaid Cymru and the SNP will gain." It was the English Tories and some English Labour MPs who mainly defeated the Bill, he said, proving that, time and time again, the interests of Wales are outvoted by the 512 English MPs.

The fact that a 'tiny handful' of Labour MPs from Wales and Scotland also opposed the Bill, though the great majority of the Welsh and Scottish Labour members supported, "made no real difference". Whether Tory or Labour, it is "the English" who are the enemy of Welsh and

Scottish interests . . . this is the Nationalist case. Serious-minded Socialists, indeed all who have the future of the British Labour and working class movement at heart would do well to ponder it, and ask—Is our movement really the champion of democratic rights for the nationalities within Britain? Is it seen as such? If not, why not?

Far too many in our movement may still ask—Why should we bother to champion such causes anyway? Is it really related to the socialist aims, the socialist society which is our purpose, or is it not just a diversion played upon by those who wish to divide the working class? Some socialists may scornfully say: What are we after—Devolution or Revolution? It sounds a revolutionary phrase and a simple answer. But like so many simple, revolutionary-sounding answers to complex questions, it is wrong. In fact if we are scientific socialists at all we cannot but be for the rights of nationalities to self-determination, and that goes for the nationalities within Britain, as well as for those in far-off continents. If we are serious about developing a broad mass movement, allying all the forces for the revolutionary social transformation of our society, then we need to be for national rights, not only in words but in action. Devolution is only a partial answer, but it is the most specific and immediate aspect today.

Socialism and Nationalism

It will not hurt us to admit that if there has been wider and fiercer debate on the issue of nationalism and devolution in recent years, it is because the question has got up and hit us. As with many aspects of Marxist theory, its relevance is harshly confirmed by events. And the penalty for our slowness to grasp and apply many aspects of our own theory has been an inadequate response to such events.

Few people thirty years ago, or even fewer perhaps ten years ago, would have expected the fate of a Labour Government at Westminster to be dependent upon a Devolution Bill, and the votes of 11 Scottish and 3 Welsh Nationalist MPs. Fewer still would have envisaged a run-up to a General Election in which a serious fear was that

the Scottish Nationalists might well enlarge their share to as many as half the 71 Scottish seats, and along with some Welsh Nationalist representation, undermine the possibilities of Labour and socialist majorities at Westminster for a whole period ahead.

Of course outside the Parliamentary head-counting process which weighs so heavily on Mr Callaghan's strategies, there are the equally serious problems of nationalist developments in their effects on the unity of the working class movement itself, on its unity of purpose, and solidarity of action in its basic struggle against British monopoly capitalism, and for fundamental social change. Such dangers may not seem that significant at present, but it would be foolish to ignore the extent to which they do exist and can and will grow unless the socialist movement in Britain finds and effectively practices the adequate response to the realities of this new British political situation.

The national question, and its significance as a source of social movements which it is vital should be properly related to the struggle for socialism, is not new to Marxists. In the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin and in the vast experience of the world-wide movement since their times, there is a rich store of theory and of practical experiment to be studied. From the beginning Marxism has indicated that while the struggle for socialism demands world-wide unity and solidarity, it is in form a struggle for power fought out within specific national and state frameworks. While our aim is the unity of the working people of all nations, and ultimately the unity of humanity in a world of peace and co-operation, the road to such unity can only be through the fullest independence, self-determination and voluntary unification of peoples. Nationalities, nations, nation-states and multi-national states become differentiated and fully developed through a long historical process. They also can die away, merge with each other.

Where a nation has indeed totally disappeared from the historical scene it would be a futile exercise to try to restore some artificial model of it. But far more dangerous (and prevalent) is the attempt to issue premature death certificates, or even to encourage nations into their allegedly overdue graves, in the name of some existing unification which owes more to imperialism's world structure than to any democratic or socialist ideals.

Socialism and National Liberation

In the stormy epoch of world change ushered in by the October Socialist Revolution 60 years ago, one of the most striking features is the key relationship between the movements for socialism and

for national liberation. In the birth struggles of the socialist revolution itself a positive attitude to the right of self-determination of all the nations of the old Czarist Empire was a vital factor. Fundamental to the succeeding development of the USSR has been throughout an emphasis on the economic, social, cultural and linguistic rights of the numerous nations and national groupings, many only brought into autonomous life by the planned growth of a multinational socialist society.

Whatever problems and imperfections or distortions may have taken place with this vast and variegated process, there can be no doubt that the planned advance industrially, socially and culturally of the nationalities within the USSR constitutes one of the most powerful demonstrations of the potential for human advance within socialism, and one of the basic foundations of the strength of the Soviet Union. It is also a feature which has had the widest world effects.

Looking at the sixty years since 1917 it is perhaps commonplace to remark that the socialist revolution, rather than fulfilling Lenin's (and everyone else's) expectation by bursting out in the most developed capitalist countries of Western Europe, has in fact proceeded in the colonial and semi-colonial world. And whether in China or Cuba, Vietnam or the newly emerging states of Africa, it is the alliance of Marxism and the forces of National Liberation which has been the key to success.

The consequences of this specific development of the revolution over half a century are enormous. It is not within the scope of this article to touch on the effects for the internal development of socialism in the Soviet Union itself, great though they clearly must have been. Within the socialist world as it developed after the second world war, including those countries of Eastern Europe where the road to socialism was opened up through the defeat of the fascist powers in the war, many of the major problems and their solutions have been concerned with the proper relationship between the community of socialist nations and the national rights, and particular forms of advance of each nation.

The importance also of a principled relationship between the socialist states and the emergent third world countries is vital for the issues of world peace, and the confrontation with imperialism, as well as for the success of the liberation struggles themselves.

Advanced Capitalism and the National Question

Less analysed so far, but also of growing significance are the problems of national rights, state independence, and newly-reviving nationality ques-

tions in the developed capitalist countries of Western Europe.

In the recent Spanish elections this question was underlined by the importance to the Communist and Socialist movements of the national rights of Catalonia, the Basque country and Galicia. One can easily add to this the problems of Corsica and the Bretons in France, the Walloons and Flemings in Belgium, the continuing bitter conflict in a divided Ireland, or to cross the Atlantic, the sharp developments over Quebec in Canada.

Over and above these there is also developing the question of the independence of the peoples of the major capitalist states themselves, in relation to the multi-national combines, the rivalry and penetration of American imperialism, and the Common Market.

Analysis

These problems are only beginning to have the detailed and deeper analysis they need. In this article the intention is to deal specifically with the national problems of Wales, Scotland and England, as they now confront us in Britain, but to understand that it is in this total world context that we are considering it. In 1967 the Communist Party Executive issued a Statement setting out a basic approach to the National Question in Britain and the case for Scottish and Welsh Parliaments. Between 1968 and 1969 a twelve month discussion took place in *Marxism Today*. Subsequently, Congress Resolutions, and evidence given by the Scottish and Welsh Committees of the Party to the Kilbrandon Commission, and to the Secretary of State, have elaborated on this basic position.

Considerable progress has been made in winning recognition in the trade union movement, the British TUC, the Welsh and Scottish TUCs and in the Labour Party, that this issue was a vital one and that it would not go away. Under the pressure of events even the right-wing Labour Government was constrained to accept, as Callaghan has again put it, that "there is a genuine desire for some measure of devolution".

Nevertheless the 1976 Labour Devolution Bill failed to pass the House of Commons, and since Mr Callaghan is now presenting very similar proposals again, although in two separate Bills, one for Scotland and one for Wales, it would be wise to examine why the original bill failed and what needs to be done to avoid a repetition of the deadlock which would be even more disastrous this time.

Why Labour's Devolution Bill Failed

To see it as simply a matter of Parliamentary tactics, or to blame a few sectarian or short-sighted Labour MPs, would be to avoid the root

of the matter, and therefore to fail to find the basic remedy which must be found for the sake of the whole future of socialism in Britain.

There were at least three major reasons for the failure of the Labour Government's Devolution Bill.

First, that having been dragged and pushed most reluctantly to face the need for 'some measure of devolution', the measures they produced were quite inadequate, and therefore unconvincing. They neither recognised the Scottish and Welsh right to self-determination nor gave adequate economic powers to begin to deal with the burning problems of industry, employment and communications which are at the root of the 'desire for some measure of devolution'.

Second, they gave no answer to the consequences which any such devolution of powers to Wales and Scotland must have for the people of England, and for the government of Britain as a whole. A separate White Paper on *The English Dimension* was clearly not enough to allay the fears, or even arouse the interest of a large body of English voters or MPs.

Thirdly, it is true that the opposition of a number of Labour MPs, some for misguided ideas of the 'regional self-interest' of their own constituencies, others for equally misguided notions of left-sectarian socialism, contributed to the defeat of the Bill and put the Labour Government at risk. But it would be complacent not to see that the actions of these MPs reflected the backwardness of our Labour and working class movement generally on the national question as it affects our views of democracy and socialism here in Britain. To many the days when the pioneers of socialism were naturally in favour of Home Rule; or when Labour was for a Parliament for Wales and for Scotland, had faded into irrelevant memories. The resurgence of nationalism came as a surprise, an unpleasant diversion to be disregarded or condemned.

Historical Background

Our Labour movement in Scotland and Wales, as well as in England, was ill-prepared for this new issue. To understand the reasons and to overcome them we need to recall the historical development of the present multi-national state of Britain.¹

The peoples of Scotland and Wales, as well as of England, have developed their national consciousness and nationhood in the peculiar con-

¹ I opened up some earlier discussion on this in an article in the November 1967 *Marxism Today*. Jack Woddis gave a paper on the special problems of the National Question in an Advanced Capitalist Country at Marx House, December 4, 1976.

ditions of being an integrated part of the oldest industrial capitalism, and the centre of the first and major world imperialist system. The English, numerically, financially and industrially were the predominant force in this unequal partnership.

In the historical development of Scotland and Wales there are significant differences. Scotland developed as a united kingdom, with its laws, church, parliament. The unity of the crowns through James I of Great Britain (James VI of Scotland) in 1603 and the Act of Union in 1707 indicates the considerable separate development of Scotland and of the Scottish capitalist class.

Wales, on the other hand, never developed its own feudal system, and was never fully unified as a kingdom before it succumbed to the superior economic and military power of English feudalism. The Tudor Act of Union of 1536 imposed incorporation into England on a Wales whose landed gentry were already virtually identified with the English ruling class, and where trade and commerce were growing up around the English garrison towns, dependent upon the English connection. At the same time the persistence of the Welsh language, and literature, and the roots of its radical tradition, are factors of importance to later developments.

The Similarities

But while these historic differences are of significance and need our study in analysing the movements in each separate country, the basic similarities would seem of greater weight in determining a general socialist strategy. Summing up the effect of these developments, in a *Marxism Today* article in November 1976, I wrote:

“When the industrial revolution brought in the hectic development of modern capitalism, and with it the transformation of the economic backwardness of Wales and Scotland, neither country had a native bourgeoisie strong enough to develop in independence from or in opposition to, the English.

The creation of the British bourgeois-democratic state in its modern form, and the profound social and industrial changes of the 19th century, were carried out under a unified capitalist class in which the Scottish and Welsh elements were completely merged into the British.”

This was a period, it must be remembered, which saw not only the huge concentration of population in the developing iron, coal and later steel centres, but also a massive actual increase in the population. The population of Wales in 1801 was 587,000. In 1901 it was 2,019,000. For Scotland the figures were; in 1801—1,608,240; in 1901—4,472,000.

The two centuries from the 1770s on have thus seen the virtual creation of the modern Welsh and Scottish peoples, their working class movements, their trade unions, the chartist and radical movements, the extension of the franchise, and of local government, the Labour Party, Co-operative movement, Marxism and the Communist Party—all this, shaping the consciousness of the modern age, has taken place within the integrated development of British capitalism and imperialism.

Small wonder that many therefore thought that the national question, when the twentieth century dawned, was a thing of the past. Events have shown otherwise.

In fact, alongside the two centuries of modern capitalist development we also have to consider the consciousness developed by 1,000 years of a people's history as a stable community, occupying the same territory, and sharing a language, culture and social ties. Evidently the national consciousness of the Scottish and Welsh people has persisted, despite the integrating effects of monopoly capitalism, despite the cosmopolitan culture and the mass media. It has even powerfully entered into the being of the “new population” accumulated in the period of capitalist expansion.

Lenin

Our own history thus verifies the wisdom of Lenin's remarks in *State and Revolution* (1917) where he refers pointedly to:

“Engels and Marx never betraying the slightest trace of a desire to evade the national question,” and to Engels as “not displaying indifference to the question of the forms of state; on the contrary he tried to analyse the transitional forms with the utmost care, in order to establish, in accordance with the concrete, historical, specific features of each separate case, from what and into what the given transitional form is evolving.”

Despite his adherence to the idea of a unitary, democratic republic, Engels (Lenin emphasises) was prepared to see a federal republic as “an exception and a hindrance”, or as a “transitional form . . . or a step forward under certain special conditions. And in these special conditions the national question comes to the front”.

Of special interest to us is that the example which Lenin then quotes from Engels (*Critique of the Erfurt Programme*, 1891) is that of Britain “where geographical conditions, a common language and the history of many centuries would seem to have ‘put an end’ to the national question . . . even in this country Engels took account of the fact that the national question had not yet been settled and recognised in consequence that

the establishment of a federal republic would be 'a step forward'".

The first point of interest here is not so much the precise application of federalism, devolution or other variations of centralised or local self-government, on which both Engels and Lenin had a good deal to say. The primary reminder to us is the recognition of the fact of nationality as a political factor to be reckoned with.

The Persistence of Nationalism

In real life the demand for national rights and self-government has indeed persisted in both Scotland and Wales, as one of the forms in which the struggle for social justice and for more effective popular democracy has expressed itself. The process, like all political movements, has been uneven. In Wales from the 1860s to the end of the century there was an upsurge of radical nationalism, associated with many factors—the conditions of a powerful emerging working class, radical trade unionism, the extension of the franchise in the 1868 General Election and after, the rise of a Welsh rural and commercial middle class, politically Liberal and culturally nationalist. This wave (typified by such figures as Lloyd George and Tom Ellis) rapidly faded at the turn of the century, when Liberal radicalism dissolved into twentieth century British Imperialism. But it left behind many permanent achievements and institutions in Welsh cultural life, and gave a powerful impetus to the consciousness of Welsh nationhood.

While on the political front the collapse of Welsh liberalism was accompanied by the foundation of the ILP, the Labour Party, the Marxist Societies and the Communist Party, the leadership of the political nationalist movement was not generally taken up by the new working class organisations.

Nationalism and the Labour Movement

This whole period of the origins of the modern working class movement in Wales up to and after the First World War, the reasons for the remarkable development of Welsh Labour solidarity and the strength of revolutionary Marxism, is a rich vein waiting to be more fully worked by the historians. In relation to the national question, and at risk of great over-simplification, we can say that on the one hand there was the dominant trend of right-wing reformist leadership for whom the extension of self-government and such radical changing of the constitution (despite occasional programmatic declarations) was democratic dynamite best left alone; on the other hand the strong trend of working class internationalism and syndicalism, and narrow Marxism, reacted against both bourgeois nationalism and bourgeois parliamen-

tarism in a way we can now see to be sectarian, but which left deep marks on more than one generation of devoted and powerful leaders.

Indeed one can see some explanation, if not justification, in a period when the aftermath of the first world war and the general crisis of capitalism were the backcloth to the blazing victory of the Russian Revolution. The slogan of 'Soviet power' was a more immediate, transforming idea to grip the mind, than the deep strategic questions of the broad alliance of social and national forces which made it possible.

Right through the twenties and thirties the world crisis, the great slump and depression, unemployment, the rise of fascism and the growing imminence of world war understandably made the working class struggle for jobs, for living standards, for peace and solidarity against fascism the predominant issues.

In the great movements and struggles of those days the solution seen by those who looked most ahead was rather for socialism and an internationalism in which any form of nationalism played little part. From 1925, when it was founded, up till 1945, the Welsh Nationalist Party (Plaid Cymru) had relatively little impact outside a limited circle of cultural and intellectual life.

The Post-war Years

Why then the growth of nationalism since 1945 and more especially since 1966? In 1945 the great world victory over fascism not only brought to their culmination the national liberation struggles and resistance movements in all the European countries both East and West; it opened up a new period of national liberation throughout the colonial world. The emergence of newly-freed nations, small and large, became a striking feature of our time, which could not but affect the political feeling of the nationalities even within the victorious capitalist democracies. It must be remembered that the victory carried with it also the powerful popular feeling that a new age was being born, the age of the 'common man', of a new democracy. The great anti-fascist alliance with the Soviet Union had also had its effects in breaking down the old anti-Soviet barriers (soon to be partially rebuilt in the cold war) and amongst the many dynamic truths released upon the world was the realisation of the colossal multi-national Union of peoples and cultures which had replaced the old Czarist prison house of peoples.

The great expectations of those days were focused overwhelmingly however not on any new concepts of national or democratic self-government for the various national components of Britain, but on the policies anticipated from the new Labour Government with its sweeping

majority. The idea of Parliaments for Wales and Scotland was indeed alive and won wide support, and even inclusion in Labour programmes. But it was the nationalisation of the basic industries, the blue flags at the pit heads, the National Health Service, the Education Act, the Welfare State which inspired the hopes of a new society. And when these hopes faded, with Labour Government austerity and wage restraint, it was a Tory Government which returned in 1951 and for 13 years was able to trade on Labour's failures, and the relative resilience of the British economy, with Macmillan's 'you've never had it so good'.

Only when the succeeding Labour Governments of Harold Wilson in 1964 and 1966 followed their great socialist election promises with the severe credit squeeze, the steep rise in unemployment, the pit closures and rail cuts, did the political pattern begin to change. Gwynfor Evans' by-election victory at Carmarthen in 1966 heralded the rise of political nationalism as a new force in British politics.

Economic and Social Factors

It is important to note the very real economic and social factors which underlie the swing of some labour voters (and others) to nationalist candidates. Significantly the swing, an uneven, up and down process, was more to the Nationalists than to the Tories.

- (1) The experience of inflation, soaring unemployment, social service cuts, all combined to convince even loyal Labour voters that the great post-war transformation has not in fact changed anything fundamentally. Security and prosperity both for the individual and the community have to be sought elsewhere.
- (2) If there is a disillusion with the state of society, there is even more with the Labour Governments who have failed to change it. This does not have to mean people want more 'socialism' . . . it can easily mean a disillusion with the alleged 'socialism' they have had from Labour and a turn to someone who offers at least more concern for 'their own' needs.
- (3) This trend is reinforced by the harsh experience that in Wales and Scotland, after all the talk of post-war industrial developments, a more varied economic base etc., in fact unemployment, poverty levels, rail and transport cuts, social amenities, pit closures, factory closures, the forced emigration of youth, the run-down of communities . . . whatever criteria you take, the social scene and future prospects are disproportionately grim.

This is not to deny that similar levels of unemployment, or poverty can be found in some regions of England. That will not offset the consciousness that in Wales and Scotland it is a nation whose needs are being neglected, whose economic development is still being distorted. When unemployment drives young people away, it is from their country they have to go and it is a whole national culture, way of life and even language which is being undermined.

- (4) If the disappointment and frustration of the hopes of the post-war period is one factor in the turn towards a stronger national consciousness, another is the rising level of expectation which people have in modern society, the quality of life they feel they have a right to, and the much more real and down-to-earth democracy they want to exercise.

This feeling, which expresses itself in so many forms, in the variety of community actions, the fluctuating but ever-present demands for more democracy in industry, in school, in consumer rights, for women's rights, for black people's rights, also finds sympathy for the concept that we should have more control over our own social and economic affairs in a country, such as Wales or Scotland.

The Nationalist Forces

Any examination of these factors makes it evident that the roots of the upsurge of national consciousness lie deep in the crisis of our social system, and they will continue to grow.

The extent to which this national consciousness is diverted into nationalist political parties or separatist movements depends ultimately on the effectiveness with which the working class and the Labour movement provide the programme and leadership which will rally and unite all the genuine forces of democratic patriotism in Scotland, Wales and England, with the forces of the socialist movement.

This is why it is so urgent to arouse the understanding of the movement throughout Britain—in England, as well as in Wales and Scotland—to see that the battle for national rights—political, economic and social—is now an essential part of the struggle for the unity of our three peoples for democracy and for socialism.

The nationalist parties see in this situation only an opportunity to be seized to destroy the Labour Party in Scotland and Wales, to cut all links with Westminster and in fact to move towards the separatism and division of the British working class which would be equally fatal for the socialist

cause in Britain and for the actual interests and rights of the Welsh and Scottish peoples.²

Democratic Reform and Socialist Advance

But when some of our friends in the Labour movement seek to answer this danger by declaring that we should oppose devolution because it is not a solution to the real economic and social problems, and because it will lead, they fear, to further nationalist intransigence and ultimate separation—then we must say to them that they are making a dangerous and sectarian mistake. We might as well say that we should oppose nationalisation, because it doesn't solve all our economic problems; or we should oppose extensions of democracy, because that also does not solve all the problems of capitalism, and may only lead people to demand more and more democracy.

If we leave such reforms to be fought for, misused or distorted by the enemies of socialism, then indeed they will be turned into diversions. That is why we must formulate the demands and lead the struggle for them in such a way that each step leads on towards the understanding of the need to transform society, and the political power needed to do it.

What is the essence of our problems on pay, unemployment, public ownership, the environment, transport, social services—surely essentially it is concerned with how to extend the power and involvement of the people, and confront and overcome the domination of the great multi-national firms, and their political establishment.

The crisis of our society—inflation, unemployment, stagnation of investment, distorted development, cuts in social services, unbridled waste and profiteering—all this is the crisis of a monopoly-dominated, big business society. The fundamental problem for the people of Wales, Scotland and England is that real power rests not in the hands of the people, nor of Parliament, but in the gigantic aggregations of financial and industrial ownership, predominantly the multi-national combines. Their motivation is their international profitability—not the balanced development of our economy, or full employment, or the living standards and quality of life of the people of Wales, or of Britain.

To solve this problem needs more than constitutional reforms. It needs a fundamental socialist change, ending the concentration of power in the hands of this small class of financiers, super-industrialists and landowning companies.

In the struggle for this the greatest force we

² There are of course some in the nationalist movements who also share socialist views and see the dangers of such division, as there are many in the Labour movement who champion national rights.

have is the united working class movement, linking the overall struggle against the monopolies for political change in Britain as a whole. If we did not already know this, we have examples of it every day, whether on the Grunwick picket lines, or in the miners' united movements, or in the joint actions against National Front racialism, or against social service cuts.

Equally clearly, a united Britain, given a government and Parliament pursuing socialist policies, would be best placed to take over the massive organisations of monopoly finance and industry, to use the total resources of Britain's economy to the best advantage, advancing the harmonious development of all the nations and regions to the fullest extent.

But in mobilising the people to fight for such a fundamental change does not the demand for effective self-government play a big part, just as does the demand for real industrial democracy, or real local democracy?

The New Devolution Bills

The publication of the Labour Government's new legislation, the Scotland Bill and the Wales Bill, has come too late to be given any detailed consideration in this article. But some of the preliminary comment, and political forecasting on the subject makes it necessary to outline both the dangers and the opportunities of the situation.

For the Labour movement to treat the Bills as a mere Parliamentary tactic, a pre-election manoeuvre, would be disastrous. We are facing issues now which are fundamental to the constitutional future of Britain. But to be even more seriously considered is the profound effect these issues will have on the economic, social and political life of the peoples of England, Scotland and Wales and especially on the structure, unity and policies of their trade union and political organisations.

The defeat of the guillotine motion which wrecked the first botched-up Devolution Bill in March 1977 did not signify the dismissal of the national question as an irrelevancy. On the contrary, it expressed the deep and central nature of the problem, the futility of trying to avoid it, and the inadequacy of the solutions so far produced. The lessons of this Parliamentary impasse are important for everyone in Britain, but most of all for socialists, and for the Labour and trade union movement. The future of this movement, and its ability to serve the basic needs of the British people, now largely depends upon its ability to meet the profound democratic challenge contained in the crisis over devolution.

There is clearly no firm future for Labour either in any Lib-Lab Pact, or in scraping one Bill

through with temporary Nationalist votes. The Labour movement has to win a new popular majority for socialist advance. In *The British Road to Socialism* which will be debated at the Communist Party's Congress while this article is at the printers, the process of revolutionary change which Britain needs is dealt with at length. In this process, Socialist leadership for the rights of all the nations within Britain has a key part to play.

It is realistic to estimate that a majority of the Scottish and the Welsh people do not want separation from the United Kingdom. They do not favour a new layer of bureaucracy, and a lot of expensive new government jobs either. These phoney caricatures of devolution have been much used to spread confusion and hostility to any change. But we should be aware also of the growing disenchantment with the present system of government which is remote, costly, bureaucratic, dominated by big business power and corruption.

What is wanted by very many people is:

- (1) The right to fulfil their national needs and aspirations.
- (2) More real power for the people to tackle the actual problems, economic and social, of their own country, which under a capitalist system of misgovernment have been gravely neglected and distorted for two centuries. This means some form of elected bodies having economic and social planning powers.
- (3) More democratic participation by the people in making and in implementing decisions affecting their lives and prospects.

The overcentralisation of government, the erosion of people's rights, the decline of local government powers, are burning democratic issues for people in Wales and Scotland, as they are for people in many regions of England. The solution to the national problem must provide for improved government and equal rights for all three nations.

Right of Self-Determination

It follows that whatever the solution it must be voluntarily accepted by each nation. There are various ways in which a people can exercise its right to self-determination. In our conditions and at this time the obvious way is through a democratically-elected assembly. The Assemblies proposed for Scotland and Wales must therefore have the basic right to decide their own future and what form of relationship between them will best serve their interests.

To recognise the right to self-determination does not at all mean that it is always and everywhere essential or progressive to opt for the separation of each nation into its own national state. The struggle for national rights, and for progress and

socialism, can effectively combine and reinforce each other within a multi-national state. In Britain today it is clearly in our best interests for the rapid achievement of socialism and for the quality of that society when we get it, to maintain and strengthen our unity.

The English Dimension

But the only possible basis for that is in the recognition in action as well as words, that it is a voluntary, democratic unity of free nations. This essential right to self-determination, essential for the English, as well as for the Scottish and Welsh peoples, is nowhere recognised in the present government legislation. Until it is accepted and given effective form, no constitutional changes are likely to be a permanent solution. The very establishment of Scottish and Welsh Assemblies must itself raise as an urgent and practical question the ways to ensure equal and effective rights for the English people in governing their own affairs, while preventing any English domination over Wales and Scotland.

As the Communist Party said in its Congress Resolution in 1969:

"The best form of relationship in the interests of the English, Scottish and Welsh peoples will need to be democratically discussed, and reviewed in the light of experience. . . . Whether or not a separate English Parliament, or some alternative form for the handling of specifically English affairs in the Central Parliament will be found most advantageous, it is clear that profound democratic and socialist changes are needed to make the Parliamentary system in Britain serve the interests of the people."

There would seem to be two major possibilities; either a separate English Assembly, with legislative powers, presupposing a federal Parliament over all three countries; or provision for the English MPs at Westminster to meet separately on purely English matters. This latter course would not amend the imbalance of the present central Parliament, with its overwhelming English majority.

There is an obvious need for the widest discussion now on these alternatives and their various consequences. The right of the English people also to have their separate Assembly if they so wish cannot be denied.

While recognising the need to stimulate public debate on the principles of national rights, and on their ultimate forms of expression in Britain, the most urgent question is to secure the amendment and passage into law of the present Scottish and Welsh Bills.

The adoption of these Bills, even with their serious weaknesses, would mark a significant victory for the labour and progressive movement

in Britain as a whole and open up quite new possibilities for further democratic action and advance.

The Significance of National Assemblies

The whole Labour movement must be aroused to grasp and to campaign around the tremendous impetus such Assemblies can give to the struggle for the essential every day needs of our people.

For example, a Welsh Assembly would be a potential focus of mass struggle for the proper development of the coal, oil, hydro-electric and nuclear energy industries in Wales, for the location and planning of the steel industry in Wales, for the planning of an effective rail, road and air transport system, instead of the crippled abortion we have now. All the vital needs of our people, for youth opportunity, for full employment, for housing, recreation and culture, would be harnessed to practical plans for Wales around which the effective struggle of the people could be united.

This would be a key extension of democracy enabling more people to be involved in wider aspects of the struggle against remote and bureaucratic government and so to reinforce the total challenge to the domination of our country by the capitalist monopolies. To play this positive role an Assembly must not just be a talking shop sited in Cardiff instead of Westminster. It must be democratically elected, by proportional representation, with adequate legislative powers to tackle the major economic, social and cultural problems, including unemployment, industrial and transport location, areas of decay or underdevelopment, the level of education, and housing provision in Wales.

To present such a picture only emphasises the weaknesses of the present Bills. Indeed part of the campaign to secure the passage of the legislation must be the battle to win vital improvements during their passage through Parliament. To refer only to the main questions—the legislative powers proposed for Scotland are not enough, notably in regard to the economy, but if separate legislative functions are necessary and workable for Scotland, they must be so also for modern Wales. An Assembly without law-making powers would be ineffective in practical operation and impotent even in pressing its views on Welsh affairs.

An Assembly with legislative powers would need to be headed by a form of Executive Government responsible to it, not the loose sort of County Council Committee structure proposed in the Wales Bill. For both Scotland and Wales the powers of economic planning and industrial development are quite inadequate. Let us take, for example, the nationalised industries. In practical terms, the nationalised industries already play a dominating part in the Welsh economy. Largely

today it is a part which seems, like the public services, to be condemned to cuts, closures, and manpower reductions. Why should not the boards of the nationalised industries become really democratic, with elected representatives from the workforce and from the wider trade union movement exerting real majority control on the managing boards at every level? And in such a democratic set-up would not the presence of representatives from a Welsh Assembly, concerned with the proper economic planning of the life of Wales overall, also have a useful part to play?

Whether in today's struggles or in a future socialist Britain, I think we can see a vital role for such democratic assemblies in securing the most effective interplay of centralised planning and local needs, and popular initiative—a vast expansion of operative democracy such as our society needs. Here democracy, jobs, training, incomes policies and public ownership come together.

Just as the Scottish and Welsh TUCs invigorate and strengthen the British TUC, so Welsh and Scottish Assemblies, given that we fight in them for left majorities with progressive policies, will invigorate the fight for socialism in Britain. This indeed is the only way to cut the ground from under the feet of divisive and demagogic nationalism.

Broad Alliance and National Interests

The battle for such a decentralisation of power and decision-making, threatening to involve far more people at the grassroots in mass action for their needs, will meet with every resistance from the ruling class. The conviction and activity of the Labour movement needs to be mobilised now to combat this. In the course of the campaign people throughout England need to be drawn into the debate on their own future. Clearly they have the same right to decide their own future forms of government as we demand for Scotland and Wales. As a step towards righting the historic injustices and neglect of centuries, Assemblies for Scotland and Wales are a long overdue measure. But they are more than that. They are a vital part of the process of transforming the present over-centralised, bureaucratic system into a more effective and truly democratic instrument of the popular will.

In the course of this mighty process of transformation, the British Labour movement can engage in dialogue and united activity with very wide progressive elements of our people, including many of those in the nationalist movements who hold basically progressive and socialist viewpoints. This is the road to that broad alliance in which the national interests of each nation can be ensured through the united socialist advance of all.

Politics, Ideology and Class Struggle under Early Industrial Capitalism: a critique of John Foster

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A considerable tradition of Marxist scholarship has been devoted to the formation and early struggles of social classes during the Industrial Revolution in Britain, historically the first country to experience industrial capitalism. John Foster's study, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution*, is a notable recent addition to this literature, and the welcome appearance of a paperback edition¹ is perhaps an appropriate occasion to reconsider some of the wider implications of his work. This article is not so much a 'review' of the book—the time for that is past, and other reviewers have indeed said much of what I would want to say²—as an attempt to discuss some of the broader questions it raises, both about the Marxist approach to historical analysis and about the interpretation of the period. Since the main tenor of my comments will be critical it is worth emphasising at the outset one merit of Foster's work: in attempting to construct a theoretical account of the processes he examines, and thereby opening himself to critical scrutiny Foster marks an important advance on more conventional modes of historical discourse, in which unstated and impenetrable assumptions fill the space properly occupied by theoretical concepts.

Foster's thesis is that the emergence of industrial capitalism was punctuated by a deep crisis during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, in which the 'suicidal economics' of the cotton industry and the growth of a 'revolutionary consciousness' (by which Foster means a political

perspective of the sudden and probably violent overthrow of the state) among the working class shook the new factory system to its as yet historically shallow foundations. This challenge forced a profound historical re-orientation on the British ruling class—a shift to overseas investment, diversification of the industrial base with the development of heavy engineering etc., fragmentation of the labour-force, ruling-class strategies to encourage 'sub-grouping' within the working class, and the development of new more viable forms of 'social control' over a working class that had experienced industrial and urban concentration. This process of stabilisation, or 'liberalisation' as Foster calls it, brought about a remarkably sudden shift in working-class consciousness, from revolutionary challenge to capitalism to various kinds of sectional and subordinate struggle.

Readers familiar with the historical literature will recognise some elements of this argument. The emphasis on a stabilisation of industrial capitalism in the third quarter of the nineteenth century and the role in it of processes broadly similar to those Foster identifies is to be found, in somewhat different forms and emphases, in the work of various historians, Marxist and otherwise. Foster, however, rightly attempts to give precision to what can otherwise be a rather vague and idealist notion of a changing socio-political climate, and to locate this within a developed theory of the nature of working-class consciousness.

Foster's treatment of the economic developments of the period is in some respects questionable; Saville and Stedman Jones have argued that he over-estimates the weaknesses of the cotton industry, reduces the consequences of the factory to economic insecurity, overlooking the transformations of the labour-process that are at the centre

¹ Methuen University Paperback, 1977 (original edn. 1974).

² See especially Gareth Stedman Jones in *New Left Review* 90 (1975); John Saville in "Socialist Register 1974"; E. P. Thompson in *Times Higher Education Supplement*, March 8, 1974.