

Socialists must support Scottish self-determination

By Dale Street

DELEGATES to last month's conference of the Scottish National Party (SNP) met in a mood of optimism about their increasing electoral success — in last year's Euro-elections, this year's elections for the new Scottish unitary authorities and successive parliamentary by-elections.

With support for Scottish independence at about 40%, the SNP stands second to Labour in opinion polls with 25% of the vote. They have closed the gap by 8% in recent months.

Insofar as there was conflict at the conference it centred on attitudes towards devolution — does it represent a step towards full independence, or a meaningless sop — but the conflict was more apparent than real.

Party leader Alex Salmond aims to

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exploit devolution as a means of gaining full independence. A more fundamentalist wing, led by Paisley councillor Jim Mitchell, denounces devolution but does not advocate voting against it, nor boycott of a future Scottish Assembly.

Other policy debates re-affirmed the SNP's character as a traditional social-democratic party. There is no question of transforming capitalism but solid support for policies such as full employment, restoring student grants and the welfare state, and a national minimum wage.

Clearly, the SNP has changed a lot in recent decades. It used to be predominantly a Protestant rural-based party, lacking an economic policy beyond the slogan "It's Scotland's oil", and seeking to portray Scotland as the last colony of English imperialism.

In the past, support for the SNP was

spasmodic and localised. Now, there is a solid body of SNP voters with a basic loyalty to the party. And a solid body of support for an independent Scotland, even if they do not all vote SNP.

Consolidation of support for the SNP and independence is partly a reaction against the failure of Labour to effectively resist the Tories. Labour is the party of the "establishment" in Scotland. It dominates local authorities in the crucial "Central Belt". Two-thirds of Scottish MPs are Labour. But in 16 years Labour has never attempted a serious fightback against the Tories.

More fundamentally, support for the SNP and independence is rooted in the idea of a separate Scottish identity and a different "Scottish political agenda."

All parties in Scotland are attempting to relate to this identity. Labour and the Liberal-Democrats pledge support for a Scottish Assembly, and so, even, do some Tories now. The SNP calls for independence.

Debate on the Scottish "constitutional question" looms large in political life in Scotland. This confronts socialists with a dilemma.

Scotland clearly has a right to self-determination. In terms of what people in Scotland want now, that means devolution within the framework of the British state.

On the other hand, debates about devolution and independence are largely speculative and focus on fine points of detail — how many seats there should be in a future Scottish assembly, for example.

Support for devolution rarely goes beyond the level of speculation. The attempt to launch a "Scotland United" campaign after the last General Election proved a fiasco and bit the dust.

There is no reason why socialists should oppose the creation of a Scottish assembly. But equally there is no reason for socialists to engage in nit-picking debates about how many seats it should have.

The worst option of all is for socialists to put a radical-socialist gloss on the debates about devolution and independence, and portray them as a necessary stepping stone to a socialist Scotland.



Labour's Maundy money

By Martin Thomas

AT LAST Labour's Shadow Chancellor, Gordon Brown, proposes some action against the rich — a windfall profits tax on the privatised utilities.

Has Labour's Treasury team plucked up some courage since the time when they rushed to volunteer support for a government bail-out of the wealthy Lloyds "Names", only to hear the Tories say that these fat-cats must take the rough of the market with the smooth?

Not at all. Brown can propose his tax safe in the knowledge that Tory back-bench leader Marcus Fox makes the same proposal, and Chancellor Kenneth Clarke is considering it. Clarke can still say truly that he is the only Chancellor in recent history to

face no opposition from the other side of Parliament.

City experts reckon that the utilities could afford to pay £10 billion in windfall tax, and still be very nice earners. Brown talks of only £3 billion, and emphasises that it would be a one-off payment. It would be the privatised bosses' equivalent of a medieval king's Maundy money — a few pence occasionally scattered to the poor to fob them off.

Labour should be campaigning for public ownership of the utilities, coupled with expropriation of the big financial institutions which own most of the utilities' shares, modest compensation for the small shareholders, workers' control in the utilities, and democratic public regulation of the services they provide.

The fragile Middle East peace

By Mike Fenwick

THE MIDDLE EAST interim peace deal signed by Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin, expands substantially the areas under Palestinian self-rule. This is a long way short of an independent state wherever Palestinians are a majority. But it is substantial progress towards Palestinian autonomy. At the same time it guarantees the rights of the Jewish settlers and leaves authority for security in the region with Israel.

In the case of water rights — a major economic and political issue — the Israelis have recognised Palestinian ownership of sources located in the West Bank. However this recognition is in such vague terms, and nothing will be firmly decided until the final settlement, that it counts for little. The Israelis have only gone this far under pressure from the US, who will have a representative at all future meetings on the issue.

The situation in Hebron is volatile. This is the only major city in the West Bank from which the Israelis have not agreed to withdraw. Partly this is for religious reasons. The city is an important site for both Jews and Muslims. Jewish settlers live in the Old City and the centre of the New City, which they have helped to develop. In order to protect these few hundred settlers Israel claims it must retain responsibility for security over the whole of this Palestinian city.

Yasser Arafat is under intense pressure from local Palestinian groups to get the Israelis out of Hebron, including a threat to boycott the forthcoming elections for the Autonomous Council.

An electoral boycott in Hebron, the largest electoral district in the Occupied Territories, would mean that elections could not take place. Arafat desperately needs these elections in order to keep the money rolling in from the West, and to prove to the Israelis and the world that he still has popular support.

Arafat has proposed that Israeli soldiers remain only in the Old City. This would then be given "special status" to guard the security of the settlers in the whole city.

This compromise, which may not be accepted locally, could bring down the fledgling Palestinian Authority's legitimacy.

The fragility of Palestinian self-rule was shown in Jericho at the end of August when Israel closed the city for a week. No food, medicine or fuel were allowed to enter the city, and Palestinians who normally work in Jerusalem were banned from travelling. The cause of this siege was the failure of the Pales-



tinian Authority to extradite two suspected Hamas bombers to Israel. Israel can whenever it wishes eliminate all traces of "autonomy" by severing any Palestinian town from the outside world.

From the Israeli point of view the guarantees of overall control in the region should help win over most of the settler communities, the most vociferous opponents of the deal so far. Already the right wing are failing to mobilise the mass of support they had hoped for in demonstrations against the deal.

The Israeli elections next year will show just how successful Shamir and Rabin have been in terms of maintaining support from those who welcomed the deal as the basis of a democratic settlement between the two peoples.

Build the Campaign for Free Education!

STUDENT ACTIVISTS involved with the "Campaign for Free Education", this spring defeated an attempt by the right wing National Executive of the National Union of Students to dump a policy of support for free education. The right-wing Labourites in the Executive wanted to support a system of comprehensive student loans.

This academic year the Campaign for Free Education will intensify its efforts to defend the ideal of a free education system, funded through progressive taxation — the only way, we believe, to guarantee access to higher education for the majority of working class people.

We must organise for is the NUS national demonstration in London on 23 November. The NUS executive shows every sign of ignoring NUS's continued policy for free education, so we have to make this a demonstration for free education, grants not loans.

Another events we are preparing for are is a demonstration outside Tory Party conference on 12 October in Blackpool.

● Campaign for Free Education conference, 24 October, Birmingham. For more information contact Alison Brown, NUS Women's Officer on 0171-272 8900.

TUC leaders bow down to Blair

THIS YEAR'S TUC Conference will be remembered for one thing: the timidity of the leaders of some of Britain's biggest unions, the TGWU, GMB and UNISON, in the face of Tony Blair's intransigence.

There is an overwhelming majority in the trade union movement for a legal minimum wage of at least £4.15 per hour, and a massive majority for it amongst the electorate as a whole. Yet, rather than championing the interests of that majority, the union leaders — shepherded by the TUC's John Monks — chose to submit to Tony Blair's vocal advocacy of the rights of Britain's tiny minority, the capitalist class, who wish to maintain poverty pay and workplace insecurity.

So the TUC voted for a formula — half male median earnings — that some say means £4.15 per hour, but Harriet Harman — Labour's employment spokesperson — claims could be as little as £3.33. A



Demonstrating for a minimum wage. Photo John Harris

minimum wage of 17p per hour less than Labour fought the last election on.

But, despite the fact that the union leaders did everything they could to avoid conflict with Blair, they couldn't prevent rank and file delegates giving him the most muted reception a Labour leader has received in many years.

Tories come clean on the Welfare State

By Jill Mountford

RODNEY WALKER, retiring Chair of the NHS Trust Federation, has let the Tory cat out of the bag. He has publicly argued that we need a two-tier health system because the NHS has a diminishing capacity.

Superior healthcare for those who can afford additional private cover, and a run-down, on-the-cheap NHS for the rest of us!

Healthcare rationing is now set to be the next big debate in the NHS crisis.

The Tories tried to dismiss Walker's frank picture of what they are doing to the NHS. Then the findings of *Healthcare 2000*, an "independent" inquiry into the future of healthcare in Britain, hit them.

The *Healthcare 2000* inquiry was funded to the tune of £100,000 with money from big companies, and headed by Sir Duncan Nichol, former NHS Chief Executive.

The inquiry believes that the NHS can no longer offer free comprehensive provision for all. It argues that, even with tax increases there has to be rationing, and payment for some treatments and services.

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Despite all of this, the inquiry comes out strongly in favour of the principle of a national health service funded through

taxes.

Stephen Dorrell, Minister for Health, dismissed the inquiry as being nothing new and far too gloomy. He would.

If all this wasn't irritating enough for the government, another NHS bigwig has stoked the fire further by calling for a debate on the rationing of treatment.

Sir Leslie Turnberg, President of the Royal College of Physicians, has called for a national committee to be set up to advise the government on rationing.

The "Child B" case, the young girl with leukaemia in Cambridge, is a lesson for those resigned to the coming of the NHS rationing treatment.

"Child B" was refused treatment by Cambridge Health Authority on the basis that the £75,000 needed for the next phase of her treatment was not a rational use of funds. After an anonymous donor put up the money Child B's progress has been slow but positive. She's had another birthday and is back at school.

Can you spare £500 a month?

RELAX! Chill out! You're OK! If you have a surplus income of around £500 per month, that is, after you've paid for the roof over your head, the food bill, all the utilities, childcare, travel and anything you regard as being necessary — then you don't need a welfare state. Who says? The government!

Newsnight (28 September) took a couple with two children on national average earnings and sent them off to a major insurance company for quotes for cover on healthcare, unemployment, accidents and pensions for old age.

They were told that they needed to spend approximately £500 on private insurance and savings to cover themselves for what the welfare state was set up to provide.

The insurance company could offer no policy to cover against unemployment and calculated that they would need to save £65 per month and presumably keep their fingers and toes crossed.

So, what if you don't have a surplus income? Most of us don't. The vast majority of us scrimp and save to make ends meet. For the rest of us it looks like welfare US-style.

The government and, indeed, the Labour leadership are spending a lot of time and effort asserting that the welfare state, particularly healthcare and pensions, are no longer affordable. Starting from the premise that the welfare state is necessary, we have to find a way of making it possible. Taxing the rich, renationalising the utilities and investing in jobs will do for a start.

Northern Ireland: Still in stalemate

By Jack Cleary

THE "HARDLINE" Official Unionist David Trimble won the election to succeed James Molyneaux as leader of his party, and newspapers commented that this was a set-back for a the "peace process". The choice of Trimble over "liberals" John Taylor and Ken Maginnis was seen to express grass roots Official Unionist desire for an assertive militant leadership, with the mettle to confront the enemies of Unionism.

Only weeks earlier, Trimble had been on the streets demonstrating in support of the right of Orange marchers to parade their tribal triumphalism through Catholic areas.

The never-strong hope that the Official Unionists would agree to sit down around a table with Sinn Fein/Provisional IRA and the SDLP seemed to be about to die. Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein did not think so. Adams thought that only a man like Trimble, from the militant wing of his party, could ever "deliver" a deal with the Nationalists.

That was wishful thinking, of course. Yet, only weeks after his election as leader, Trimble has gone to Dublin to meet the 26 County Taoiseach, Bruton.

This is the first time in three decades that a Unionist Party leader and a 26 County Prime Minister have officially met. The last time, when Unionist Leader and

Northern Irish Prime Minister Terence O'Neill met Sean Lemus, it was a matter of great offence to many Unionists in Northern Ireland. It undermined O'Neill.

Times have changed. But not that much.

The political stalemate continues with the British and Unionists on one side demanding decommissioning of IRA guns before there can even be *any question of* all-party talks, and on the other side Sinn Fein, demanding that all-Party talks start first and discuss, amongst other things general "demilitarisation". Taoiseach Bruton has publicly supported Sinn Fein's refusal to talk about "decommissioning" guns before "all-party talks".

Sinn Fein/PIRA people are now warning that the ceasefire may break down. Sinn Fein's late September special conference may indicate growing tensions within the organisation because so little political progress has been made.

Britain is probably content with the no-talks stalemate: the alternative is to go ahead with talks which — even if the Unionists were to participate, and they are unlikely to — could only establish once more that both Unionist and Nationalist demands *can not* be satisfied.

Adams and his friends have not yet given up the most important hope that produced the ceasefire: the belief that the USA will press Britain into siding with Sinn Fein against the Unionists and force Britain to twist Unionist arms, until they break if necessary.

Bosnia still needs solidarity

By Chris Reynolds

I AM writing this article on 26 September: it is best to specify the day, so quickly and dramatically have been the reversals in ex-Yugoslavia over the last two months. At the end of July, Serbia and its Bosnian-Serb under-studies were on the offensive. On 11 and 25 July they overran the Muslim enclaves of Srebrenica and Zepa in eastern Bosnia, massacring thousands. On 19 July they launched a big offensive against the north-western Muslim enclave of Bihac. It looked likely to fall. A Bosnian government drive to break the siege of Sarajevo, in June, had failed. Western leaders muttered about cutting their losses and withdrawing the UN troops.

Croatia had reconquered Western Slavonia on 1-2 May, but Serb armed forces still held about a quarter of Croatia, including key communication links.

Then, on 4-6 August, Croatia reconquered the Krajina. The Serb armed forces did not fight, but instead led tens of thousands in flight to Bosnian-Serb territory and to Serbia. The Croatian authorities, declaring blandly and hypocritically that the Krajina Serbs could stay or leave as they wished, followed up by razing Serb villages and killing Serbs who had stayed behind.

On 30 August NATO started a major bombardment of Bosnian-Serb armed positions. The Bosnian and Croatian armies followed up with a big offensive in western Bosnia, taking about 20 per cent of the country's whole land area and breaking the isolation of Bihac. On 20 September the Serbs lifted the siege of Sarajevo. The Americans are pushing hard for a ceasefire and a diplomatic settlement.

All assessments of the war must be checked against the new events. In the first place, Croatia's role has changed. In June 1991 Croatia declared independence and started improvising an army. By September, the Serbian-controlled ex-Yugoslav army and Serb militias had conquered one-third of the country, driving out Croats. Croatia was the oppressed nation, Serbia the oppressor.

Now, however, Croatia has consolidated and reinforced its army, with US aid. In 1993 it seized a large chunk of Bosnia. Today, it stands against war-ruined Serbia as a rival proto-imperialism.

As for the UN/NATO intervention — some people on the left are crying "UN/NATO out!" because, they say, the UN and NATO are waging imperialist war against the Serbs. Others raise the same cry with the opposite argument: that NATO is gaining leverage to impose a settlement which legalises the bulk of the Serbs' gains from conquest and 'ethnic cleansing'.

The second assessment is more accurate. The Bosnian-Serb chauvinists are to have 49 per cent of Bosnia under the current American plan, and no-one has threatened Serbia itself. The US in Bosnia, like the other big powers, wants to restore the quiet necessary for profitable trade and investment. Should any socialist

or even radical-democratic political force emerge, they will stamp on it ruthlessly.

The US has been, in patches, more aggressive against Serbian imperialism than the European powers only because it is more concerned than them about its relations with Muslim countries. The difference has been very limited. Even if the US has provided a little covert military assistance to the Bosnian government, it has maintained the embargo which prevents the Bosnian government getting heavy weapons: the vote by the US Congress to lift the embargo was so hedged around as to have no short-term practical import.

Socialists therefore cannot endorse, support, or encourage the UN/NATO intervention. If we are to make ourselves clear, however, we cannot cry "UN/NATO out" without explaining the alternative in the name of which we oppose the UN and NATO. Sarajevo relieved by a NATO offensive designed as a lever for an imperialist carve-up is bad; Sarajevo still besieged is worse.

"The dividing lines will be arbitrary, with hundreds of thousands of embittered refugees on all sides."

Given the forces in play, what are the possibilities now? Already the US has forced the Bosnian government into a subordinate relationship with the Croatian government which seized and "ethnically cleansed" a large chunk of its territory, through the Croat-Muslim Federation. The American plan now is to slot that federation into another federation, with a Bosnian-Serb statelet.

This carve-up will be unstable. The dividing lines will be arbitrary, with hundreds of thousands of embittered refugees on all sides. A solid peace requires a multi-ethnic democracy in Bosnia, and a democratic federation of nations in the whole region, with full rights for minorities. But how can that be achieved?

According to *Socialist Outlook and Workers' Press* the current Croatian/Bosnian offensive is the "liberation" of Bosnia. If pushed far enough, it is the road to the restoration of multi-ethnic Bosnia; it is the progressive alternative to UN/NATO intervention.

To break the isolation of Bihac, and enable people to return to their homes in towns like Jajce, is good. Military defeats for Mladic are welcome because they increase the chance of peace: in fact, no peace offering the Bosnian Muslims any real national life would be possible without such defeats. But most of the gains have been made not by the Bosnian but by the Croatian army, and some in areas which have been Serb-populated for centuries. The Croatian army has as grisly a record of 'ethnic cleansing' as the Serbian; its aim is not to restore multi-ethnic democracy in Bosnia, but to carve out territory for itself.

Both in the Croatian Krajina and in western Bosnia, the Serbian forces have fled without fighting. This must be a calculated decision by Belgrade — and the fact that such a decision could lead to such a rapid collapse shows that the Croatian-Serb and Bosnian-Serb statelets were primarily artefacts of Belgrade, rather than of the local people. Conquests with the whole Serb population fleeing are, however, an adjustment of the likely partition of Bosnia, not an advance towards restoring an integrated multi-ethnic Bosnia.

For socialists, our prime concern is Muslim-Croat-Serb working-class unity, on a programme of consistent democracy — self-determination for all nations, autonomy for all local minorities, equal individual rights for all residents everywhere regardless of nationality. Until a sizeable contingent of Muslim, Croat, and Serb workers has been united on that programme, all talk of restoring multi-ethnic Bosnia is empty. Indeed, even if tomorrow the workers should take power in Sarajevo, in Zagreb, and in Belgrade, they would still have huge problems dealing with the millions of disoriented and embittered refugees, and they would be foolish to try to reimpose multi-ethnic integration by decree. Tuzla, dominated politically by the Social-Democrats (ex-CP), retains the strongest elements of multi-ethnic democracy in Bosnia; but even there, the floods of "ethnically cleansed" refugees from the countryside have created great difficulties in Muslim-Serb relations.

A Bosnian army general, Arif Pasefjic, summarised the military issues soberly in late 1993, and the two years since then confirm his assessment. "At the beginning... we insisted that we were fighting for a unified, multi-ethnic Bosnia, because we were fighting in alliance with the Croats and there was the possibility of victory together against the aggressor. Then it became clear that the Croats were pursuing other aims... Now we are fighting for the basic survival and existence of the Muslim people. We would now accept a just settlement of divided territory for all the three warring peoples, and with access to the sea... The substance of the war is now to secure a fair territory for the Muslim people, and for any other nationalities who want to live with us and are welcome to do so..." (Quoted in Ed Vulliamy, "Seasons in Hell", pp.339-40).

The effective partition of southern and western Bosnia into a Croat statelet and a mainly-Muslim one, loosely united in the Croat-Muslim Federation, is an evil. Socialists and democrats would fight for common institutions, for free movement of people, for the reintegration of the town of Mostar, which has been divided by Croatian force so that one side of the river is Croat, the other Muslim. But for the Bosnian army to go to war to reconquer the Croat statelet would be militarily suicidal and politically unable to achieve anything except moving the partition line. The same principle applies with the likely Bosnian-Serb statelet. The path to reunification must be primarily political, not military. ■