

Is Scotland a colony?

Doctor James D Young is the nearest thing to a theoretician possessed by the 'Movement for a Socialist Scotland', the breakaway from the Labour Party in Scotland which, on February 25th, proclaimed itself the 'Scottish Socialist Party'.

An assessment of his pamphlet, 'The Scottish National Question and Labour History', penned by this master of the non sequitur in 1982 would, therefore, cast some light on the muddled thinking behind the emergence of this new party, especially given the misplaced reverence with which the Doctor is regarded by some of the members of the fledgling party.

"There has been an almost unbroken continuity of pent-up anger and resentment against British imperialism within Scotland since the late eighteenth century," asserts the pamphlet.

This assertion dovetails with the argument put forward by Young in his book 'The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class': "The colonial relationship between England and Scotland defined the context in which industrialisation and the making of the Scottish working class occurred...At every critical point in the relationship between England and Scotland, the authorities in London made it crystal clear that Scotland was an internal colony."

The alleged status of Scotland as an "internal colony" of England explains, or so the Doctor would have us believe, why the 'Scottish identity' is "at once a national and a class one", and why the Scots have traditionally been "much more anti-imperialist and outward-looking than the English."

The notion of Scotland as an "internal colony" does not stand up to a moment's examination. Even Tom Nairn (author of 'The Break Up of Britain', and every bit as much a nationalist as Doctor James D Young, albeit one with a greater concern for historical facts) recognises that by the nineteenth century "Scotland had left the category of 'subject nations' for good and joined the ranks of the 'imperialists'."

Scotland's development since 1707 has not been a colonial one, but one of integration into an all-British national economy. As Nairn again points out, it has participated in "two centuries of Great British exploits, in the subjugation of many genuine 'subject nations'."

Hardly surprisingly, therefore, Doctor James D Young is not on any firmer ground in asserting a continuity of struggle against the supposedly internal-colonial status of Scotland. One can point to a history of 'struggle' for some

Stan Crooke looks at the theories of the Scottish Socialist Party

form of Scottish self-government. But that history is far from being "almost unbroken".

Early Scottish radicalism had little connection with an aspiring Scottish nationalism. Radicals active in the aftermath of the French Revolution, at the time of the 'Radical Rising' of 1820, or during the campaign for Parliamentary reform in the early 1830s, looked to allies in the South to help achieve their goals, not towards Scottish separatism.

Only the revival of radical liberalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century saw the development of links between Scottish nationalism and radicalism. When a rather motley array of disaffected Liberals launched the Scottish Labour Party in 1888, they took with them, as a piece of political baggage from their Liberal past, the call for Scottish Home Rule and passed it on to the emerging labour movement.

After a flurry of interest in the issue in the period 1914-1923, any campaigning for some form of Scottish self-government again dropped off the political agenda of the labour movement in Scotland.

Between 1924 and 1931 the Scottish TUC did not discuss the question at all, and then voted down a pro-Home Rule resolution at the 1931 congress. Although there was an occasional flickering of interest in Scottish self-government in subsequent decades, it effectively remained a dead letter until the growth of the Scottish National Party in the late 1960s.

According to Young, "in the 1880s and 1890s, the indigenous trade unions and the Independent Labour Party were passionate advocates of Scottish self-government". Apart from overstating the case (the programme of the Scottish United Trades Council Labour Party, for example, a Trades Council-based Labour Party set up in 1892, did not take up the issue of Home Rule), this assertion begs the question of why the early labour movement in Scotland supported, passionately or otherwise, Scottish self-government.

Certainly not because its members were so confused as to consider Scotland an "internal colony" of England. As already pointed out, the early labour movement in Scotland inherited support for Scottish Home Rule from the Liberals. As John Mac-

Cormick, eventual founder of the Scottish National Party, wrote of the Independent Labour Party in the 1920s: "Many of them had begun their political life as Liberals in the Gladstonian tradition, and Home Rule was inherited along with other items of the Radical faith."

For the Liberals of the late nineteenth century, Scottish Home Rule was a means to three specific ends: abolition of the liquor trade; disestablishment of the Church; and resolving the land question. The pioneers of the labour movement — abstemious God-fearing folk, for whom unearned income from land was a sin against the Protestant work ethic — shared the ends and, with them, the means.

There was certainly nothing 'anti-imperialist' about the Liberal or Labour support for Scottish self-government. Like the Liberals, the Scottish Labour Party envisaged separate parliaments for England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales — plus the maintenance of an 'Imperial Parliament' to govern the British Empire.

Doctor James D Young is even less successful and even more inaccurate in dealing with the attitude towards Scottish separatism and nationalism held by individuals and organisations to the left of the mainstream labour traditions in Scotland in the early twentieth century.

He claims that John Maclean "supported the agitation for Scottish self-government long before the First World War, though he did not regard it as the most central issue facing the left in Scotland." This is a rather generous interpretation of, for example, Maclean's writings of 1912 in which he described a possible Scottish Parliament as "a Scottish Babel" and "a buffer betwixt us and our goal, or a brake to curb our revolutionary fervour." Its creation would be "a retrograde step and should meet with our opposition and ridicule. What is good or bad for England is good or bad for Scotland."

Young's attempts to portray Trotsky as an ideological precursor of his exotic arguments (which become increasingly exotic in the course of his pamphlet) are positively bizarre. Attributing to Trotsky views which were entirely alien to him, the Doctor writes:

"Aware of the insurgent proletarian radicalism of the years of the Red Clyde, Trotsky did not ignore the importance of racial factors in the Scots' contribution to the socialist struggle...Trotsky attributed the greater militancy of the Scots than the English workers to 'racial' characteristics and the lateness of capitalist

development in Scotland." (Trotsky explicitly opposed the creation of a Scottish Parliament, but Doctor James D Young skips over this fact. In passing, it is worthy of note that this self-styled political iconoclast endorses the hoary mythology about 'Red Clydeside'. But how could he do otherwise, given his assertion that "(by) 1919 it was crystal clear that the Scots were to the left of the English"?)

There is also something odd about the Doctor's references to the Communist Party and the national question in Scotland. "The British CP was opposed to the struggle for Scottish self-government at its very inception," he writes, because "it was opposed to the break-up of the Empire and full freedom for the colonial peoples."

Ten pages on we learn that "the Party changed line in 1940. The communists in Scotland were now agitating for a Scottish Parliament and identifying with Scotland's cultural heritage...The Party not only supported the Scottish agitation; it also asserted that the Scots had 'a common language and common economic life'."

But was the pre-Stalinist Communist Party really opposed to the break-up of the Empire? And why should this affect its attitude towards Scottish self-government? The Liberals and the Scottish Labour Party had been both pro-Empire and pro-Scottish self-government. And the Communist Party of the 1940s which backed Scottish self-government was more definitely a toady of British imperialism.

In any case, the Communist Party 'changed line' arguably well before 1940. In 1936 the Party had put out a statement in support of a Scottish Parliament. By 1938 its members turned up for May Day demonstrations clad in tartan, carrying pictures of Bruce, Wallace, Burns and R.L. Stevenson!

Young asserts that the early Trotskyist movement displayed "a certain ambiguity towards the distinctive national traditions and cultures of the Africans, the American negroes and the Scots" — surely an amazing amalgam by anyone's standards.

But it is no accidental amalgam. Doctor James D Young really does equate Blacks in America with Scots in Britain. Referring to the bitterness of Blacks in the Southern states of the USA, the Doctor declares that "the same sort of resentments were elicited on Red Clyde when Scottish socialist speakers such as Bob Smillie asserted that the Scots were just as entitled to decent housing as the English workers."