

Ireland: time to rethink

It is difficult, perhaps even unfair, to judge the substance of any new campaign by the speeches made at its launch conference.

The recent Time To Go conference on Ireland attracted a large audience on the basis that 20 years after the first Civil Rights marches in Northern Ireland, it was time to build a broader, more open movement for British withdrawal. It doesn't matter that the vast bulk of speakers from the floor seemed unaware that anything new needed to be said on Ireland. It is disappointing, however, that the keynote speakers invited to set the tone for the new initiative sounded like they had been asleep for the last 20 years.

The best we can hope for, it appears, is yet another campaign to assemble a bigger audience for the very familiar arguments about British withdrawal.

Now British withdrawal from Ireland is a basic democratic demand worth fighting for. Any attempt to swim against the tide of hysteria in Britain which dominates discussion of Ireland is valuable. So why the need to be critical of Time To Go?

To be blunt, it's the concentration on withdrawal as the solution to the Irish question which is in need of review.

The Labour Party leadership and the left are both disorientated and without any strategy on Ireland — but at least the Labour Party proposes (in words) a positive solution, a united Ireland, while the cardinal principle for the left is the negative one of withdrawal. It's hard, when examining yet again the case put by the Troops Out current, to avoid the conclusion that what is wrong is their refusal to discuss any political solution in Ireland.

One of the main speakers at the Time To Go event was expected to give the withdrawal case a new, more serious and thought-out edge. Bob Rowthorn, co-author of a recent book on the Northern Ireland economy, has tried to tackle head on the argument that there would be a bloodbath in Northern Ireland if Britain withdrew. Rowthorn nodded in the direction of reality, but only, in the end, to duck and evade some of the real problems.

The central obstacle to British withdrawal has been the fear of a sectarian bloodbath. If Britain withdraws abruptly, with no political or economic arrangement



then, says Rowthorn, yes, a bloodbath would ensue. But if withdrawal was negotiated and certain other conditions were met then the fear of civil war would be "rubbish".

What are these other conditions? In his speech at Time To Go, Rowthorn summarised the argument of his recent book.

Essentially, he is concerned to remind British governments that they have an important power over Northern Ireland which they have never properly used — their control of the economy. The economy of Northern Ireland is heavily dependent on government aid. The government is the biggest single employer, the major industries are subsidised or rely on government contracts, the locally based security forces are a significant employer of Protestants and dependency on welfare benefits is greater than anywhere else in the UK.

The British government should withdraw from Northern Ireland in favour of a united Ireland. Should the Protestants resist, as they certainly would, Britain should withdraw its economic aid to concentrate their minds on the need to come to terms. Britain has the economic power to make Protestant survival impossible, to break up the cross-class alliance of Loyalism, and reduce resistance to a minimum.

There is a second condition. According to Rowthorn, we would need a very "strong" government to deal with

resistance, or deter it. "Nothing would encourage Protestant resistance more than a weak government."

For these proposals to be welcomed at a gathering of socialists is strange indeed. What Rowthorn's argument amounts to is a conquest of the Protestants (dressed up thinly in academic guise). What's more, the conquest is to be carried out by a "strong" British government.

What does withdrawal of economic aid mean? First, it means demanding that capitalists relocate to areas where the people are more agreeable. Second, it means the government imposing huge cuts in spending and impoverishing tens of thousands of workers, with the support of socialists — all in the name of anti-imperialism. Withdrawal of economic aid means throwing people out of work, redundancies, wage reductions and, in Northern Ireland, severe cuts in welfare benefits.

What's more, it isn't clear how such a policy would be imposed on the resisters, but no others. Either it would be imposed on all the people of Northern Ireland, in which case it would be counter-productive, or it would be used selectively against Protestants and would be blatantly sectarian.

Bob Rowthorn's proposals are not democratic, let alone socialist. The agency he looks to is anti-socialist par excellence, and the whole approach displays

a tragic misunderstanding of what it is that motivates nationalist feeling and resistance.

In fact nothing would encourage more widespread Protestant violence than this collective punishment or deterrence. The whole strategy rests, absurdly, on a strong-arm British state to impose a democratic or just settlement on Ireland, specifically on the Unionists.

The argument was peppered with assertions that the Protestants would not fight seriously in any case — they are realistic rational people, "no group fights for demands which are unrealisable — ordinary Protestants would see this and there would be no fight." If Britain had the will then it could deal with the Protestants' "bluff".

All of this is dangerous light-minded nonsense. History proves that many national groups fight for apparently unrealistic demands. The current bloody fight of the Sri Lankan Tamils bears witness to the strength of national and communal politics even where the old colonial or occupying power has left.

Bob Rowthorn's strategy, shared by many on the British left, is one of a limited civil war — which can be faced down and won by a strong state willing to launch an economic and military war on Protestants.

This is not a good basis for building a withdrawal movement, or any movement which can bring us closer to a democratic settlement in Ireland. Some socialists in Britain are beginning to realise what the major problem is, but they haven't yet been prepared to recognise the scale of its importance.

When Bob Rowthorn and others talk about the "bloodbath problem", they mean the technicalities of how a British withdrawal can be made more peaceful and clean. But the "bloodbath argument" is in fact code for the fundamentals of the Irish question — i.e. the minority problem, how will the Irish majority relate to the natural Irish minority in a future united Ireland?

Eventually socialists, even those active in Britain, will have to seriously discuss that problem and produce some general proposals to deal with it, or we will make no real progress. As long as it is seen as a question of crushing or liquidating Protestant resistance, with the force of the British state (which is the only force which could remotely do it), then we will go nowhere and the Irish working-class will have been abandoned again.

Patrick Murphy

* Bob Rowthorn and Naomi Wayne, *The Political Economy of Northern Ireland*. Polity Press, £8.95.

Debate on new Toryism

I agree with Jack Frain (Workers' Liberty No.10) that 1945 socialism is in severe decline. That socialism was a mix of Fabianism and Stalinism: a bureaucratically statified economy plus parliamentary democracy. It was never *working class* socialism. I agree that we have to restate and argue for the socialism of working class self-liberation.

But I disagree with Jack Frain's assessment of the Tory government. I think he overestimates our enemy.

Jack Frain argues that Thatcherism is a "coherent project" for modernising Britain and creating a "new order". It is not only establishing a "new framework for thinking", but also in reality it is posing "new individual market-based solutions" on many issues.

To generate a serious economic renaissance, a government has to do more than bash the unions and make speeches about enterprise. It has to promote new technologies. It has to build or modernise roads, railways, public transport, education and training. With its penny-pinching zeal for cuts, the Tory government has performed miserably in this area.

Jack Frain cites housing as an area where the "new individual market-based solutions" are gaining ground. True, the Tory government has forced councils to sell a lot of houses cut-price. It has also generated a huge growth of homelessness and a big increase in the number of dwellings in disrepair. Many of the new homeless are former owner-occupiers who could not keep up their mortgage repayments.

The high-rise blocks of the '60s are discredited, and that high-rise design can be traced back to the Modern Movement in architecture in the 1920s. But 1945 socialism cannot really be identified with high-rise blocks. Under the 1945-51 Labour government councils built houses, not flats; and no-one is denouncing those houses as symbols of the old bureaucratic order. The drive for high-rise blocks in the 1960s was not primarily the work of "bureaucratic Labour". The Tory government of 1959-64 also favoured high-rise blocks. Keenest of all on high-rise building were the very Tory and "market-based" big construction companies.

Now some Labour councils are building houses with gardens, or renovating blocks of flats to minimise or eliminate their design faults. The Tory government is starving them of money for this work. Meanwhile, private house-building has done nothing at all comparable to the great speculative building boom of the 1930s which initiated mass owner-occupation in Britain.

Does the Tory government at least have a coherent new ideology, even if it has not yet reshaped society according to that ideology? No again.

For sure the Tories are not coherent. Remember monetarism? In 1979-81 everything was sacrificed to the principle of keeping the growth of the money supply slow and steady. Then the principle was quietly forgotten. The money supply has gyrated crazily.

Privatisation has been a success for the Tories. But that is not an example of coherent ideology. Privatisation scarcely figured at all in their 1979 manifesto. They have fumbled their way into the policy empirically.

Yes, the Tories have been consistent about their basic ideology of free enterprise and the free market. But it is not new! It has been the basic prejudice of the Right for a very long time. Today's Tories promote the same old rubbish with more confidence and flair, that's all.

Privatisation seems to be, as the Financial Times put it, "an idea whose time has come". But why? After 1945 many countries nationalised a lot of basic heavy industry. Coal mines, railways, steelworks and so on had been run under government control during the war, with only minimal investment and repairs. They needed much new investment to get them in normal working order. Yet they were fundamental to the economy. Only the state had the resources to guarantee this basic infrastructure for the rest of industry.

Likewise in the Third World countries just beginning to construct their own more or less integrated industrial base: the state took responsibility for the heavy industrial infrastructure.

40 years later the needs of capitalism are different. The world has tremendous excess capacity in steel production. Energy consumption per unit of industrial output is being heavily reduced. The big nationalised industries are a burden; and, what's worse, they are often strongholds of trade unionism.

The leading technologies of today, like microelectronics, generally operate in smaller units and smaller enterprises.

That is why capitalist governments want to cut down and chop up their nationalised sectors. As for the brave "new order" this will create, it already exists — in

the US, where there was never large-scale nationalised industry. We have seen this future, and it doesn't work.

Despite all this, the Tories might have won ideological victories, converting workers to their 'enterprise culture'. But there is little evidence even of that. Of course, workers who have gained a few hundred or a few thousand pounds through British Telecom shares or by buying their council house cheap are pleased about it. But the working class Tory vote has not increased dramatically.

According to Gallup, the Tories lost 8% of the unemployed vote, 1% of the semi-skilled and unskilled manual worker vote, 2% of the skilled manual vote and 6% of the office worker vote between 1979 and 1987. Labour lost working class votes — but to the Alliance.

Opinion surveys, for what they're worth, show a small but clear shift to the left in average opinion since 1979. Even among Tory voters, a very high percentage say that Mrs Thatcher has no sympathy or concern for the lives of ordinary people. Public support for the National Health Service and its anti-Thatcherite principles is high. A recent poll asked people whether they would prefer a "basically socialist" or a "basically capitalist" society: the pro-socialist replies outnumbered the pro-capitalist 55-45. There is a 53%-30% majority against privatising profitable state industries.

Morale and confidence is low in the working class. That is where the Tories have won their victory. But we should not overestimate our enemy. The Tories seem mighty only because we are on our knees. Let's stand and fight!

Martin Thomas

Reply: they have changed!

I agree with good parts of Martin's argument, but not all of it, and not the general framework he uses to discuss Thatcherism.

I agree with Martin that Thatcherism has not established a stable basis for capitalist expansion. Just to take one indicator, as North Sea oil runs out, the Treasury forecasts an accumulated deficit of £26,000 million by 1989. The "boom" is very shaky indeed.

I agree that avoidable failures by the labour movement and the left have been important to Thatcher's successes. As my review said: "Our side is saddled with a leadership that refuses to fight." Neil Kinnock and Norman Willis have probably been as important



to Thatcher as the Adam Smith Institute or the Centre for Policy Studies.

I agree that Thatcher has not yet achieved a 'New Order' or new consensus. But beyond that, I think Martin underestimates our enemy.

Thatcherism may not have achieved a new hegemony, but Martin seems indifferent to the fact that its strategic goal is to create a new hegemony, in a way that no other post-war Conservative government has done. Martin throws all Tories into one bag: some might have "more flair" than others, but it's "the same old rubbish" really.

Now rubbish it certainly all is from the standpoint of the interests of the working class. But the same rubbish? I think not. Thatcher is plainly not Harold Macmillan with "more flair". Thatcherism differs radically from the conservatism of the past in its objectives, its practice and its effects.

As a response to the exhaustion and collapse of the Social Democratic state, and its rule in the 1970s, Thatcherism has not only shifted the balance of class forces massively from labour to capital, disorganising every centre of opposition it has faced during a decade of government, but has been central in the creation of a quite new political terrain on which, in 1988, the class struggle is fought.

Gramsci argued that within continuity there was *difference*, that revolutionaries must attend *violently* to the "discipline of the conjuncture", to what was *specific* to it. The fact that it is Stuart Hall who has insisted upon this is irrelevant.

Marxism Today's relationship to Gramsci is, I think, well understood. As Norman Geras argues: "It is the politics that dare not speak its own genuine name and pedigree, wanting the political benefit of something less discredited."

For sure we must resist the breathless iconoclasts who rush to the "New Times", jettisoning every important political idea like excess baggage in their haste. But we cannot allow them to define

us negatively. We can't just say no where they say yes.

In this respect Clive Bradley's review of New Times politics (*Socialist Organiser No.377*) was excellent, beginning the work of developing an analysis of the new conjuncture from our political standpoint.

But Clive's article, correctly, raises many questions to which the left, including ourselves, only has the beginnings, albeit very important beginnings, of answers. I don't think it's enough to say, as Martin does, that "the Tories are mighty only because we are on our knees, let's stand and fight!"

Yes, without a fight nothing is possible, but I can't help feeling the undercurrent of Martin's reply is that the fight will take place on a terrain that isn't really any different to that of the recent past, against a Tory government that isn't really any different to Tory governments going back "a very long time."

It's like saying warfare is warfare, whether it's fought with tanks or nuclear weapons. True, but hardly the point.

Martin says the Tories have no coherent ideology. There are many contradictory theories bound up in Thatcherism: the neo-liberal "individual freedom" theme; the authoritarian/strong state/discipline theme; the deregulation and the clamping down, side by side, by the Rupert Murdoch-William Rees Mogg axis we are threatened with as broadcasting's future.

But is there no merit at all, for Martin, in Stuart Hall's observation? "In fact, the whole purpose of what Gramsci called an organic (ie. historically effective) ideology is that it articulates into a configuration, different subjects, different identities, different projects, different aspirations. It does not reflect, it constructs a 'unity' out of difference."

Martin says it's the "same old rubbish with more flair and confidence." Is that really enough to describe a political project which, beginning in 1975 out of office and continuing from 1979, has led a sustained assault, and introduced deeply radical changes into the trade union movement, housing, the nationalised industry, the benefits system, taxation, local government, civil liberties, the judicial system, the civil service and broadcasting?

And, moreover, unlike the Labour government of 1945, which exhausted its agenda by 1950, the Thatcherites plainly see themselves in the early stages of an "unfinished revolution".

It's not at all clear that Thatcher "fumbled" her way into her privatisation policy empirically. Remember in 1979 she was surrounded by a cabinet vastly more experienced than her, Heathite in large part, or, as she would put

it, collectively "not one of us". But the John the Baptist figure of Keith Joseph certainly was whispering "privatisation" in Thatcher's ear as early as 1975.

Martin's points about the Tories' failure, so far, to create an "enterprise culture" are well made. Thatcherism remains a hegemonic project without hegemony. It dominates but it doesn't, yet, direct. The Tories have never enjoyed mass support. The problem, of course, is that they didn't need mass support to stay in office.

With a split opposition it can retain power endlessly by its lock on 42% of the electorate, given the electoral system. Labour must win the old Alliance vote, or many working class Tories, if it is to form a government.

There are two routes to this — the leadership's softly-softly claim the middle ground approach, or the project of building a tidal wave of collective opposition to Thatcher, in and out of parliament, galvanising the opposition that exists, and presenting a clear socialist alternative future to Thatcherism's "tale of two cities" future.

Only the second route has any connection to socialism, and as the fortunes of Dukakis proved, any chance of electoral success.

But building such a movement requires a left political practice and politics that is in tune with British society of the 1990s and beyond, sensible of the profound differences in the structure and culture of the contemporary working class, compared to the 1950s or 1930s, sensible of the scale of Thatcher's reversals and the specific nature of Thatcherism as a political project.

Martin, perhaps, runs the risk of reacting against the "everything-has-changed" thinkers (who now want to reinvent the wheel) so sharply that he ends up thinking nothing important has changed at all.

Jack Frain

A left Zionist view

As the Palestinian intifada in the occupied territories nudges Israel's political and moral capital ever closer to the perilous freefall zone, old assessments arise anew as to the origin and character of the Zionist-Palestinian conflict.

Echoes of the French-Algerian war can be expected to mix somewhat incoherently with



analogies to Rhodesia and South Africa as Israel becomes ever more convincingly depicted as a colonialist, settler phenomenon. So, while the Israeli establishment fevers with might and main to deny the authenticity of Palestinian nationalism it can, paradoxically, only succeed in further undermining the legitimacy of the Zionist enterprise itself in the eyes of democratic opinion. Where is Israel headed and is it too late to shape a different future?

Of course to the anti-Zionist demonologist, the current regressive policies of Israel are genetically coded, the inevitable process by which a European people encroach upon and continuously dispossess a native people. What is different in today's political complexion — this argument continues — is that the Western world is no longer so consumed by its guilt for the holocaust that it is ready to extend in perpetuity carte blanche support to the holocaust's remnants and descendants. It is unsentimentally prepared to pose the difficult questions, previously injudicious to ask. This demonology is the flip-side of the eschatology which now animates growing numbers in the ranks of Zionism, ie. that the Jewish people possess a divine deed to the biblical lands of Israel.

But unlike the Zionist messianics, with whom rational disquisition is precluded from the outset, the contemporary anti-Zionists at least bring to their argument a set of propositions which can be examined and weighed. First among these is the axiomatic contention that the Jews of Europe were a European people and that their penetration of Palestine constituted a form of settler-expansionism.

However straightforward this may appear, it is not a conclusion which can be drawn from the political culture of the West any more than the formation of Liberia, Israel's closest analogue, can be dismissed as a mere settler state phenomenon. The Jews were dispersed within the interstices of European society much as, say, the Turkish gastarbeiter of today is employed in the margins of the Germany economy. And just as the Turk does not become a Ger-

man by virtue of his contribution to the German commonwealth, so too did the Jew remain an eternal foreigner to his European hosts despite the enormity of his social contributions.

But unlike the gastarbeiter who at least has a homeland to return to when his services are no longer demanded and a state to intercede if physically threatened, the 'European' Jew remained at the mercy of forces he could not control or in large measure even influence. Thus if Jewry belonged to Europe, it belonged as an internal colony: as 'equal' to the other nations of Europe as a doormat is to the muddy shoes which rest on it. This was the existential condition of Jewry not only in Europe, but among the Arab and Muslim nations as well, where oppression differed in degree but not in kind. And it is, strictly speaking, this surfeit of national powerlessness — and not anti-Semitism or national hatred per se — which Zionism seeks to remedy.

A Zionist is therefore a Jew who no longer wishes to be ruled by other nations. And insofar as most Jews at least understand the Zionist impulse regardless of whether they personally undertake practical measures to realise it, they remain a reservoir of Zionist support. It is in answer to the call for national self-preservation that the modern Jewish migrations to Palestine began about 100 years ago. "A land without a people for a people without a land," may have been the rallying cry of those woefully ignorant of anything beyond their ghetto walls. But it had little to do with the practical realities of the Jewish national birthplace long occupied by another people.

Be that as it may, it serves little purpose to moralise over the situation. To the Palestinian the Jewish immigrant was the Zionist 'invader'; while the Zionist considered himself a drowning man who imposed himself on an already occupied lifeboat. The existing occupant may protest that his rickety craft had belonged to his family for generations. He may have pleaded that there are larger and better equipped lifeboats that his unwelcome passenger could have chosen and that he, in any case, could hardly be held to bear the lion's share of the burden for the drowning man's plight. However, neither the drowning man nor the Jewish refugee could realistically be expected to feel much remorse for saving their necks, although it is undeniably true that the social standing of the boat's proprietor, modest to begin with — as was the Palestinian's — had been diminished in the process.

Neither Palestinian nor Jew seemed consistently capable of sizing up the situation as it actually was prior to partition and,

for that matter, is. Both appealed to the 'civilized' world's basest instincts for its approval and assistance. Zionist 'statesmen' bombastically offered to extend the boundaries of British civilisation or to hold the line against encroaching Asia in return for Western support of a Jewish homeland. Palestinian leaders demanded in turn that the West put a halt to the 'bolshhevik', i.e. Jewish, immigration, compared the Jews to death-dealing microbes, demagogically asked why they should be saddled with Europe's scum and usurers, and ultimately allied themselves to the Nazis. To be sure there were other voices such as the League for Jewish-Arab Rapprochement and Cooperation, Brit-Shalom, Ihud and Falastin al-Jadida, but these were all too often drowned out.

Imperialist policy has always been successful in playing both sides against the middle, while pursuing antagonistic ends. So too do Zionists and Arabs continue to be complicit in their own political exploitation, by renting out their services in return for imperialist support. Russian imperialism, with its old-style colonial empire that includes vast areas of Muslim inhabitation, provides itself with an Arab imprimatur through its sponsorship of Palestinian nationalism.

What is so tragic is that the objective conditions for peace have never been more abundant. Between 1948 and 1967 the Arab world demonstrated virtually no authentic desire for peace. Their demands could be reduced to the call for Israel to dismantle itself by relinquishing the Negev and repatriating hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. This was often cynically coupled with some expressed willingness to resettle Oriental Jewry to the Arab lands of their origin, thereby 'assisting' Israel to depopulate itself.

Since the late 1970s an important series of changes have transpired. The Egyptian-Israeli peace accord weakened the prospects for a decisive Arab military victory and injected an element of sobriety into the mainstream Arab stance. The 1982 Fez document, endorsed by the PLO, calls in effect for a two-state solution to the Palestine problem with Security Council guarantees for "peace for all states of the region". Peres has furthermore admitted — although not by way of endorsement — that negotiations with the PLO could take place immediately, while Israeli military strategist Y Harkab as well as Palestinian historian W Khaladi have repeatedly emphasised how the PLO has systematically retreated from the maximalist demands embodied in its Covenant.

Equally striking is the recent result of a Jaffee Centre poll

which finds that a full one-third of the Israeli electorate favours negotiations with the PLO.

Finally, the intifada has forced increasing sections of the Labour Party to shed its ideological baggage, and concede the obvious, namely that the process of Palestinian national differentiation is long complete. It can no longer suffice even as self-delusion to repeat the shopworn contention that the Palestinians are not a distinct Arab nation.

There is only one progressive and durable solution to the Israeli-Arab conflict and that is self-determination within the framework of peaceful coexistence. The Zionist left has explicitly moved in that direction which is in advance of the Labour Party's stated programme of trading land for peace. Such a solution does not require Palestinian acquiescence in the judgement that the creation of Israel is an act of historical justice. Nor does it demand of the Jewish nation that it apologise for avoiding Auschwitz by creating the political space for a new and sovereign life for itself. It requires direct negotiations between Israel and the PLO as a prelude to a comprehensive solution.

Unfortunately, the international left has all too often felt itself compelled to reject the Zionist left for Palestinian self-determination, as if the two were mutually exclusive. The argument for this can be reduced to the contention that Israel embodies a form of apartheid. As such, any attempt to square the political circle by combining apartheid with self-determination for the oppressed can only lead to a fraudulent self-determination, a Palestinian Bantustan.

This line of reasoning is based on a serious misconception about apartheid. The crucial element of apartheid — that which distinguishes it from all other forms of colonial, national and racial oppression — is that the class struggle also breaks down along racial (or national) lines. Since blacks and whites in South Africa have not evolved two parallel and separate economies, but belong instead to two different classes within a common economic structure their fates are nationally fused. The relationship between Jews and Palestinians in the occupied territories does not conform in any significant degree to this pattern.

The Israeli occupation may have distorted the direction of economic activity in the territories, siphoned off surplus value from Palestinian capitalists and exploited Palestinian workers. But Israel has its own predominantly Jewish working class and no sector within Israel other than construction is crucially dependent on the employment of Palestinians. These policies have served, at best, to defray

some of the costs of occupations. The rest are borne by Israeli and American taxpayers convinced, however misguidedly, that it represents a necessary overhead premium for survival: apartheid pays for itself many times over.

Those among the radical left who abuse the apartheid analogy to call for a mass, popular uprising to sweep away Israel and create a "democratic, secular Arab state where Muslim, Christian and Jew will enjoy equal civil rights" may think of themselves as upholding the original ideals of the Palestinian 'revolution'. They are in fact upholding the view of the Palestinian rejection front. Habash, the head of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who once held and, may for that matter still hold, this perspective, had soberly spelled out its implications: "total war of annihilation against Israel and Israelis and Judaism and Jews wherever they (are)". Those who reject a two-state solution in the name of socialism might reflect on this.

Barry Finger



Why culture stagnates

I agree with Edward Ellis' reply to Belinda Weaver's article "Big Screen Blues". But there's another angle which hasn't been looked at. Artistic expression, in whatever medium, goes through periods of inventiveness, imagination and having something to say, versus periods of stagnation, boredom and repetition.

These productive and exciting periods have more to do with social and political developments, than with how the artist's work is turned into a commodity. Far from being an expert in the cultural history of the 20th century, I can nevertheless illustrate this with a couple of examples.

John Berger's writings on Picasso and Cubism described the

conditions out of which emerged the "moment of Cubism". The work of Einstein, scientific and industrial breakthroughs and the international development of imperialism were dynamic forces, and there was massive change in the world. A small group of painters were gripped by the excitement of this change, and produced the Cubist revolution in painting, and their most impressive works between 1910 and 1920. Berger pointed out that Picasso's later works were disappointing, had nothing much to say, but were widely accepted because the artist's reputation had been made.

During the pre-Stalinist years of the Russian Revolution, all forms of artistic expression flourished, and some of Russia's most famous artists produced their main works then — Kandinsky, the painter; Malevich, the constructivist sculptor and designer; Eisenstein, the filmmaker.

The Cold War of the 1950s, with the US House Un-American Activities Committee, were years of artistic repression and boredom for the US cinema. Then in the 1960s and 1970s the wave of radicalism which swept the world also swept the arts. Music, cinema and writing particularly developed, and had lots to say about the Vietnam War, militarism, racism, sexism and changing the world.

The last period of western popular music innovation was the 'New Wave' of punk, mainly from Britain, in the resistance to the decay of capitalism and the rise of Thatcher.

Now it is not only film-makers who seem to have little to say, there is a general cultural stagnation. What movements in music, novels, paintings, architecture in the 1980s have been stimulating and compelling? There are individuals producing interesting work, but no movements to speak of.

This is not surprising considering the crisis of capitalism, and the weakness of the working class in fighting back in so many countries. Neither the ruling class nor its opponents is a popular source of inspiration in the major capitalist countries.

Belinda's lament is valid. There isn't much in the way of really excellent films, which are satisfying, intellectually stimulating and memorable. But there are some, and there are plenty of good, but not excellent, films around.

The lack isn't so much because of junk film commodity production (which Edward Ellis correctly points out has always been part of the film industry), but because the wider social and political conditions to which artists respond in their works are not very inspiring in the main English language film-making countries today.

Janet Burstall