

Scottish Assembly call is divisive

Ian McCalman reproaches socialists who condemn as diversionary the current calls for a Scottish Assembly with engaging in "rather abstract" considerations. But surely the person engaging in such considerations is Ian McCalman himself.

After all, current debate about a Scottish Assembly does not revolve around Engels and Lenin, nor Nairn and MacDiarmid nor a "sub-culture of resistance to Anglicisations"

Moreover, the fact that the likes of Tom Nairn or Hugh MacDiarmid are scarcely, if at all, referred to in debate about a Scottish Assembly is not necessarily a bad thing.

For Nairn (to whose politics Ian McCalman gives over one-third of his article) it is nationalism, not class struggle, which is the driving force of history. Marx, unlike Nairn, got it all wrong. The British state can cope with class struggle, but not with (neo-) nationalisms. Hence, declares Nairn, the "grave-digger" of this state will not be the proletariat but the "peripheral bourgeois neo-nationalisms".

That Nairn, on the basis of this reasoning, should call for independence for the "country" (sic) of "Protestant Ulster" (sic) is the least of his failings. To refer merely to possible "limitations" on the part of Nairn's politics is therefore something of an understatement, albeit an understandable one if one wishes to pass off Nairn's nationalist fantasies as a brave new innovation in socialist thought.

Equally unattractive is the prospect of a dialogue with the political legacy of Hugh MacDiarmid, whom Nairn and McCalman proffer as the standard-bearer of a resurgent Scottish identity in the 1920s.

MacDiarmid first toyed with fascism ("Hitler's Nazis wear their socialism with precisely the difference which post-socialist Scottish nationalists must adopt. Class consciousness is anathema to them, and in contradiction to it they must set up the principle of race-consciousness.") before finally opting for Stalinism (he made it a point of honour to re-join the Communist Party in 1956, after the invasion of Hungary).

Ian McCalman implicitly admits the lack of relevance of his



article to current debate about a Scottish Assembly when he writes that the issue "should be placed" within the broader context of a federal United Kingdom. Perhaps it should be. Or perhaps not. But the point is that the actual, real, existing debate, such as it is, about a Scottish Assembly is not in any way an aspect of debate about a federal Britain.

Ian McCalman would do better to follow his own advice when he writes that socialists should "proceed from the actual unfolding of events rather than the imposition of cut and dried schema". Viewed in such a light, the diversionary nature of calls for an Assembly become much clearer.

Is there a "deeply felt demand within one part of the UK — Scotland — for a greater degree of self-government"? Yes and no. This "demand" is in fact so "deep" that even its own supporters admit that it rates something like number 101 in the list of priorities of Scottish workers, and emerges only once every four years and then but weakly, after a Tory victory in a general election. It is therefore hardly a matter of "advising Scottish workers to restrain their claims on this score."

The Labour Party's policy of support for a Scottish Assembly (which continues to meet with

considerable opposition and indifference within the labour movement) is certainly not the expression of some deep demand for self-government, beating in the heart of the Scottish proletarian masses.

The policy was adopted by the Labour Party in Scotland in 1974 (after nearly half a century of almost continuous indifference and outright opposition to the call for Home Rule) on the instructions of Walworth Road, as it was believed that this constituted the best way to turn the then growing tide of support for the SNP.

Thus the call for a Scottish Assembly does not flow out of "the actual unfolding of events" in the class struggle. On the contrary, it is an alternative to class struggle politics. As Nairn himself, in a rare moment of lucidity, puts it: "Had the class struggle accelerated politically at the same time (as the onset of the post-war slump), it is doubtful if Scottish and other neo-nationalist movements would have made such headway."

The call for an Assembly is itself an attempt to replace relating to the "actual unfolding of events" with the imposition of a "cut and dried scheme"; the Assembly is posed as the alternative to defiance of Tory attacks on local authorities, the alternative to non-compliance with the

poll-tax, the alternative to the case of industrial action to defend jobs and living standards, etc., etc.

In the current context (the real, existing one, as opposed to the imaginary one into which Ian McCalman believes the question of an Assembly "should be placed") the calls for a Scottish Assembly clearly do represent a diversion, both in terms of being "potentially divisive" and of boosting nationalism, and also in that they fail to relate to the actual unfolding of events — minor differences apart it is not as if workers in Scotland are going to face qualitatively different attacks from the Tories from workers anywhere else.

Indeed, it is not merely a matter of calls for a Scottish Assembly being "potentially" divisive or "potentially" boosting nationalism. The extent to which the language of Scottish nationalism has already entered the 'discourse of the left' should be strikingly apparent.

To raise the idea of a federal framework for Britain and Ireland — North and South — is not without value (though not necessarily correct). But it is a exercise in self-delusion to seek to chime in with the current calls for a Scottish Assembly whilst arguing that what you 'really' mean is a federal republic à la Engels, the smashing of the bourgeois state a

la Lenin, or the creation of a constituent assembly a la Revolutionary Democratic Group and, in an article of 1983, Ian McCalman.

The most appropriate analogy for such an approach can be found in the debate over British entry into the Common Market in the late 60s/early 70s.

Workers' Fight, to which McCalman refers, pointed out that the left who argued against British membership were like a boy with a tin whistle on the last night of the Proms, thinking that if he chimes in with the first few bars of 'Land of Hope and Glory' he can switch over to the 'Internationale' and have the band follow suit. Of course, the boy's tin whistle is simply drowned by the band.

Ian McCalman pursues the same approach, even if the instrument with which he toys is the bagpipes and the tune which he is striking up is 'Oh, Flower of Scotland': declare oneself in favour of a Scottish Assembly in order to join in the general hubbub, and then, somehow, somewhere, revert to a more proletarian repertoire at a later date.

It did not work in the debate about Common Market membership. And it won't work now in the debate about a Scottish Assembly either.

Stan Crooke

Romanticising Old Movies

'Raiders of the Lost Ark', which I watched for the sixth time when it was on TV recently, provoked me into thinking about Belinda Weaver's article on films (WL 8), and convinced me that I disagree with her. It seems to me there are loads of good films around these days.

Belinda's argument is that film making has degenerated, so that today most films are bad. In the past, film making was an industry — out for profit — but 'they also wanted to make movies. They loved the world of movie making.' Today, megabucks have taken over. It's profit before quality all down the line, so that we get 'the kind of films... which aren't even entertainment, much less art.' Movies are made to a money-spinning formula, so, among other things, there is a glut of sequels. We get unconvincing plots, bad acting, and 'lowest common denominator films'.

Far be it from me to rush to the defence of today's film makers. But there are a number of problems with Belinda's account. I would question, first of all the somewhat romantic view she has of films and film makers in the past. As Belinda describes

it, you would think that up until the last decade or so, films were on the whole pretty good, and their corruption by entrepreneurial greed happened just lately. Is she serious? Of course, there were plenty of excellent films made before 1960, 1970, or whenever Belinda would date the decline. But the overwhelming majority was rubbish. A good portion of the films made in Belinda's golden age, for example, were unspeakably awful Westerns — made to a formula far more primitive than anything you could see today (and at least as reactionary), with sub-literate scripts and acting so bad that your average dog could do better (and occasionally did — witness various generations of Lassie).

People went just as much to see glamorous but talentless stars as they do today. Take Audie Murphy — not too glamorous to look at, I dare say, and an actor who never seemed to realise that it helps to change the tone of your voice now and then... But he had been the most decorated war hero of World War Two, and so was prime star material. Or Alan Ladd, who never learned how to create a facial expression, but was nevertheless considered so lucrative a business proposition that they would go to the length of digging holes for his leading ladies to stand in to disguise his diminutive height.



The list of formula-made drivel is endless, running often into sequels in comparison with whose number 'Jaws' is a mere infant. So I think it's untrue to suggest that in the past larger film audiences forced film makers to make better films. I'm not sure that the reverse isn't true: films on the whole were *worse* before the advent of TV.

Belinda mentions the effects of TV and video only to dismiss them. She insists that the basic reason people don't go to the cinema is that they 'have just got browned off with movies'. But I think there's a lot more to it.

TV had a major effect on film and cinema. Forced to compete with the box, film makers made less cheap 'B' films. In fact, nowadays, no one makes 'B'

films at all. Once the movies had declined as the basic form of mass entertainment, films became fewer and more expensive. They also became more sophisticated. An audience reared on TV wants more from cinema. This doesn't necessarily mean that the films are better or worse; it means that they reflect the society they are made in — and society's changes. You might prefer 'Dracula' or 'Frankenstein' to 'Evil Dead 2', but 'Dracula' simply is not frightening to today's audiences. (I say 'Dracula', although both 'Dracula' and 'Frankenstein' had a fair few sequels, it might be added). Times have changed, technology has advanced, and films have changed with the times. It seems to me that a very big part of the reason films cost so much to make these days is precisely that their audiences are so sophisticated and so hard to please. Belinda's picture of manipulated morons is too simplistic.

Videos, by the way, completely contradict one of her main assertions. If it's the *films* people don't like, why are so many videos hired out each year? The answer I think is not very mysterious. Cinemas are too expensive for most people to be able to visit them very often. Videos are cheap. If cinemas were cheaper, people might go more. I certainly would. As it happens, despite the cost, audiences are increasing at the moment.

Which brings me back to 'Raiders of the Lost Ark'. After six viewings, I still think this is pretty excellent stuff, better written, better acted and more gripping than many older 'adventure' movies. So for that matter are plenty of 'formula' films. 'Aliens', for example, is a classic masterpiece of tension and excitement. (Nor is Sci Fi a recent bandwagon — it's just that Sci Fi films are *immeasurably* better now than the naive Cold War pap that was churned out in the 1950s).

And Belinda ignores a growing field of films which are neither megabuck blockbusters, nor 'art' films. 'My Beautiful Laundrette', for example, and other films of its type, have proved extremely popular and fall outside Belinda's categories, which seem to be rather artificial.



Capitalism warps and distorts film making according to the needs of money-making, like it distorts everything else. It has *always* done so, and it always will. Films today are a commodi-

ty, but they always have been (and so, for that matter are novels, poetry books, etc). But given the limitations that capitalism imposes upon films, I can see no evidence that today they are deteriorating. Of course this whole argument is very subjective. Of course a lot of films are rubbish. I'm just not sure that Belinda is right about what is rubbish, or why.

Edward Ellis

Don't give up on COSATU

An article in *Workers' Liberty* no. 9 by a South African socialist active in the unions made a number of claims with which we take issue.

First, the claim that "the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) represents the only hope for the growth of the non-Stalinists to place socialism firmly on the agenda" is both unsubstantiated and unlikely to be true.

Our knowledge of NACTU is limited but we know it is a loose federation which includes many unions which are far more conservative and bureaucratic than any union in COSATU, and that it is held together in part by a black consciousness ideology which falls short of COSATU's principle of non-racism.

NACTU unions have been involved in a much smaller number of disputes than COSATU unions. NACTU claims to organise at least a third of the workers in the independent labour movement yet it is doubtful if NACTU unions have been involved in more than 10% of the industrial action in 1987 — the year of the largest strike wave in South African history.

It may be possible for socialists in NACTU to organise themselves and grow but it would be equally possible for socialists in NACTU to be drawn into an ill-defined, right-wing "anti-Stalinism".

Second, the claim that the COSATU left are "paralysed and incapable of leading a socialist struggle" seems to us to be a half-truth which ignores the real advances made by socialists in COSATU, as for example, the fusion of MAWU, MICWU, NAAWU, UMMAWOSA and MALWUSA to create a powerful, militant and explicitly socialist metal union, NUMSA.

The fact that socialists in COSATU have suffered certain setbacks in the recent period is no reason to write them off. The real issue is not to counterpose the NACTU left favourably to the COSATU left but to organise the trade union left generally so that

it can act as a coherent force. We have been given no reason to believe that this should be done under a NACTU rather than a COSATU banner.



Whilst COSATU represents and organises the large majority of workers in South Africa, especially in the key mining, metal and automobile sectors then a perspective for socialism which ignores COSATU amounts to a perspective for socialism without the working class.

Third, we have a problem with the comrade's analysis of Stalinism. He writes that a workers' party would be impossible because "the Stalinists would eliminate the leadership of a workers' party", that "they are not going to tolerate any opposition to their claims to monopoly control", that the Stalinists dominate completely and that "Anything that is not within the framework of the two-stage theory of revolution is regarded as counter-revolutionary".

In this analysis there seems to be a far too blanket identification of the ANC wing of the liberation movement with "Stalinism", a lack of precision about what Stalinism is (it certainly can't be identified with the two-stage revolution as such) and a danger that in the name of "anti-Stalinism" the left might find itself drawn into an unprincipled alliance with the right, at the expense of its own socialist independence.

This analysis also implies that the whole of the leadership of COSATU is made up of one undifferentiated Stalinist bloc.

Anti-Stalinism is too negative a slogan to provide the basis for a positive alternative based around non-racial, democratic socialism.

For far too long the South African left has defined itself reactively by being "anti-Stalinist", and "anti-ANC" rather than by developing its own viewpoint and agenda and in the end inadvertently mirroring the Stalinists.

We agree with the writer that socialists in South Africa need their own programme but we do not believe that a combination of anti-Stalinism, dismissal of the COSATU left and a celebration of NACTU provides a coherent

starting point.

Bob Fine
Tom Rigby
Clive Bradley

Permanent revolution is not so limited

Clive Bradley's article "From Permanent Revolution to Permanent Confusion" in *Workers' Liberty* no. 7 was an excellent indictment of the theoretical abuse handed out in the name of Trotsky since his death in 1940. However, in exposing the confusion of latter-day "Trotskyism" I think Clive has been too quick to consign Permanent Revolution to the history books.

1917 vindicated the theory of Permanent Revolution as applied to Russia, and the Comintern's disastrous directions to the Chinese Communist Party in the late 1920s proved that Trotsky's estimation of the peasantry was correct. This is fine, but Clive gets caught by these specific events into thinking that Permanent Revolution has a limited application.

I think Trotsky developed Permanent Revolution as a *general* theory applicable to *specific* conditions. Essentially it was Marxism in action. A way to refute those who claimed that Marxism was about fixed, unbreakable stages, and were therefore prepared to contain working class power in the interests of other classes.

Trotsky introduced the national question to Permanent Revolution only when it was necessary, as it obviously was when the colonies began to struggle for independence in a serious way. But this wasn't, as Clive says, a limited extension of Permanent Revolution to cover extra suitable cases for the theory. It was an adaption of Permanent Revolution, of Marxism itself, to the practical problems posed for the proletariat by new conditions.

"Even in its generalised version," Clive says, "the theory relates to a limited range of situations"(1)

I disagree. In his desire to highlight the glaring errors of much of the left, I think Clive has lost sight of the continued relevance of Permanent Revolution.

Clive Bradley seems to be setting limits to the theory around the question of the peasantry, with a limited extension to national and democratic questions.

Only one of these questions applies to Argentina so Permanent Revolution must be meaningless here.

In applying Permanent Revolution to Argentina, it strikes me that Trotsky would stress the importance of working class leadership in the campaign for democracy, but place no limits or stages on how far the working class might go. For Trotsky the crux would be that the working class would form the axis for any justified political demand. They would not be dictated to by some mish-mash incorporating elements like the Kuomintang, shouting about American imperialism.

Permanent Revolution has a continued relevance; it can be updated, but not in the way that *ersatz* Trotskyism has performed this task. Clive himself pinpoints its continued relevance when he quotes Trotsky:

"The socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and it is completed on the world arena...it attains completion only in the final victory of the new society on our planet"(2)

This brilliant attack on "socialism in one country" combined with the importance of proletarian leadership in the revolutionary upsurge, are the central pivots of Permanent Revolution.

For international socialists the uneven development of nations is a crucial mobilising factor. Permanent Revolution was Trotsky's way of clarifying the link between Marxism and the uneven development of the world. It didn't matter, except in a strategic sense, whether the country was advanced or backward. Permanent Revolution was a necessary theoretical development because socialists inside and outside of Russia (including leading Bolsheviks) were waiting for the train of industrial, bourgeois development, before they were prepared to take action in favour of a workers' revolution.

It was the working class seizure of power that was crucial to Permanent Revolution. Lenin himself came to recognise this and was effectively carrying through the policy of Permanent Revolution in the April Theses. There was no need for Trotsky to argue that Permanent Revolution applied to advanced countries because no Marxist had developed a theoretical justification for denying the possibility of proletarian revolution in such circumstances (although some were already working against it in practice). To argue that Permanent Revolution applies only to backward countries is as negative, restrictive and undialectic as arguing that Marxism only applies to advanced countries. Unlike Marx, Trotsky and Lenin had to face the practical problem of a small, highly motivated proletariat in a sea of peasantry — hence Permanent

Revolution — Marxism in practice.

Trotsky puts Permanent Revolution straight on this matter when he says:

"Neither in India, nor in England is it possible to build an independent socialist society. Both of them will have to enter as parts of a higher whole. Upon this, and only upon this rests the unshakeable foundation of Marxist Internationalism"(3)

In the *Transitional Programme* Trotsky's arguments against sectarianism in the labour movement, and in support of a strategy to win over the petty-bourgeoisie, small traders, etc., were no less part of Permanent Revolution than his arguments in favour of an independent working class strategy in the colonies. And this approach is no less relevant today.

We still live in a world where the law of uneven development operates. The specific features of that uneven development may have changed but we still start from the specific and branch out to the general. We start where the working class struggle starts. We have learned, as Trotsky learned, that the specific conditions are central to determining the policy of the working class and its revolutionary leadership. We must also learn, as many "Trotskyists" have not, that the specific conditions change and with them change our tactics and strategy.

In Ireland this must mean that the first step towards working class leadership is working class unity, and that this will not come through the politics of Sinn Féin or by ignoring the Protestant working class. In South Africa, it means supporting the further, and hopefully, political development of the trade union movement under COSATU, rather than paying unquestioning homage to the ANC. The growing demand for a workers' charter might prove a major stepping stone in this respect.

In Palestine it means recognising that Jews and Arabs represent two nations and that working class unity will not develop without a solution that recognises the national rights of the two communities in Palestine.

These, in brief, represent the continuation of the spirit of Trotsky's Permanent Revolution. A strategy for working class power that starts by facing reality square in the face. A strategy that will not be fully vindicated until, as Trotsky says, "the final victory of the new society on our entire planet."(4)

Liam Conway

NOTES

1. 'From Permanent Revolution to Permanent Confusion', Clive Bradley, *Workers' Liberty* no. 7, p.26.
2. The Permanent Revolution, Leon Trotsky, p.155.
3. The Permanent Revolution, p26.
4. Op cit. p.155.