

Discussion Contribution on :

# The National Problem in Britain

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WHEN Bert Pearce wrote his article on *The National Future of Scotland and Wales for Marxism Today* in November 1967, it was an indication that the Communist Party recognised the growth of national consciousness in Scotland and Wales. The electoral advances made by the Scottish Nationalists and Plaid Cymru, together with a rapid growth in their membership, is a new and important political factor demanding the serious attention of all political parties in Britain.

The return of a nationalist MP in both Wales and Scotland, and the big advance in their vote at municipal elections, cannot be isolated from the political situation in both these countries. These electoral victories are not the end of the road, but the beginning of a new stage. It is now recognised that the nationalist movement in Scotland and Wales is an important and growing force to be reckoned with. This is not confined to elections, but also to the fact that the membership of the Scottish Nationalist Party is now more than 60,000, and the membership of Plaid Cymru is more than 30,000.

This is more than the individual membership of the Labour Party (as distinct from the affiliated membership) in both Scotland and Wales, and is certainly far more than the membership of the Communist Party. Moreover, in both countries the nationalist parties are politically active in many fields, including the economic and cultural life of the people no less than in the electoral field. For all these reasons the national problem in Scotland and Wales deserves the most serious political analysis, and far more attention and discussion within the Labour and progressive movement in Britain, and especially within the Communist Party.

It would be invidious on my part to try and grapple with all the aspects of this complicated problem in one article, for it involves not only matters of Welsh and Scottish history and the national feelings of their peoples, but also basic theoretical and practical issues. My remarks are therefore more in the nature of carrying the discussion a stage further in the hope of clearing up some aspects which still seem to me to be quite unclear.

## What is a Nation?

In his article in the *Morning Star* James Reid starts off with the statement that: "By whatever definition one cares to use, Scotland is a nation." This assertion is made without any attempt at a political analysis, nor does it seem to draw any conclusion, except that "The Scottish people have a right to demand and receive self-government, and realise their national aspirations."

If it is correct that Scotland is a nation, then James Reid accepts fully the claim made by the Scottish Nationalists. This being the case it follows that the Communist demand for Scotland is not merely for "self-government" but for complete independence, with its own independent state, army, civil service, and the right of separate representation in the United Nations, not to mention a separate Labour Party and a separate Communist Party of Scotland.

While in full agreement with the need for separate Parliaments in Scotland and Wales, I must disagree with an independent Scotland and Wales. The historical background of developments in both countries during recent centuries is such that they have become part of a British imperialist system and not separate nations.

In my view both Scotland and Wales were on the way to *becoming* nations before England's Act of Union with Wales in 1536 and with Scotland in 1707. Lenin often emphasised that the birth of nations takes place with developments towards a capitalist society. Before 1707 there were signs of this in Scotland, but far less in Wales. They *could* have become nations, but their rising bourgeoisie joined hands instead with the English bourgeoisie and played an important part in building a *British* capitalist system, rather than a Scottish or Welsh system.

The economic system in Wales has for over four centuries, and in Scotland for over two centuries, become integrated with the British economy. The rising capitalist elements in both countries did not have a separate existence, but became integrated with the English capitalists into a British capitalist class.

This also became the character of the working-class movement in both countries, which integrated with the English into a British working-class movement, culminating with the formation of the British TUC in 1868 and the British Labour Party in 1906. True, for historical reasons there were also a Scottish TUC and a Scottish Council of the Labour Party, but these are more in the nature of devolutionary instruments rather than completely independent organisations for Scotland.

With the resurgence of national feeling in Scotland and Wales and the growing support for separate Parliaments, it may well be that the existing nationalities in both countries will advance more rapidly towards becoming nations. Whether this is achieved within the capitalist system, or through the achievement of socialism in Britain will depend entirely on the scope and intensity of the united fight for socialism in Britain as a whole, coupled with the advance towards achieving the national demands of the peoples of Scotland and Wales.

Since his death in 1953 it has not been fashionable to quote from Stalin's writings. There is a trend in some Communist circles to condemn him for everything which went wrong in the Soviet Union and the international Communist movement, but it is useful to make the distinction between what Stalin *wrote* and his actions. When he wrote "Marxism and the National Question" in 1913 his attitude on the national problem had full support from Lenin and the Bolsheviks, and it contains much that is extremely valuable for a basic analysis of the national problem in Britain today.

When Stalin wrote on this subject he was concerned particularly with its application to the situation in European countries, though not specifically with Britain. In answer to "What is a Nation?", he gives a number of distinctive features, summed up in these words:

"A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture."

These terms are admittedly general, but Stalin's explanatory remarks are by no means dogmatic, for he went on to explain that "It goes without saying that a nation, like every other historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and end."

How do Wales and Scotland fit in to Stalin's definition. However stormy their past history, they are certainly "historically evolved", and have a community of territory, and a "psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture." But it does not seem they have a community of economic life, for this has been weakened and

disrupted from a Welsh and Scottish standpoint by the integration into the economic life of Britain as a whole.

As for community of language, this exists only in so far as English has replaced Gaelic in Scotland and Welsh in Wales. A century ago the majority of Welsh inhabitants spoke Welsh. But it has gradually declined until today just over one in four speak the language.

Stalin was extremely careful to emphasise that the character of the national struggle would vary in different conditions, and that the specific nature of every national problem must be taken into account:

"It follows from this that the solution of the national problem can be arrived at only if due consideration is paid to historical conditions in their development. The economic, political and cultural conditions of a given nation constitute the only key to the question of *how* a particular nation ought to arrange its life and *what forms* its future constitution ought to take. It is possible that a specific solution of the problem will be required for each nation. If, indeed, a dialectical approach to a question is required anywhere it is required here, in the national question."

### Character of the Struggle

Because Scotland and Wales are an integral part of the British imperialist system, which exploits both the newly-independent states and the remaining colonies, the character of their struggle differs from the liberation movements, which have long fought against British imperialism. They are part and parcel of the exploiting and oppressive machinery of imperialism, though at the same time being exploited and oppressed from the standpoint of their national rights. This is not only a matter of their inferior position within the British economic system, but is also a refusal of the democratic right of self-government, and raises barriers which prevent the growth of their culture and the enrichment of their language.

Gaelic is not so important a factor for Scotland, because of the small number of people reading and speaking the language. However, this is not a matter of arithmetical proportion, but one of principle. For example, in Wales, where 25 per cent of the people speak Welsh, all kinds of barriers have existed against the growth of the Welsh language ever since it was forbidden under the Act of Union with England in 1536.

Moreover, when it is argued that the majority of people in Wales are English-speaking, what is left out of account is that in five of the 13 Welsh counties the vast majority of people speak Welsh (ranging from 67 to 72 per cent) and in three other

counties the proportion is well above the national average. From a geographical standpoint, most of Wales is still Welsh-speaking. Even in the mainly non-Welsh-speaking counties of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire there are about 220,000 Welsh-speaking people.

In recent years there has been an awakening of Scottish interest in the Gaelic language and in many aspects of Scottish culture. In Wales the younger generation have far greater opportunities for *learning Welsh, with special schools where Welsh is the first language*. In both Wales and Scotland there has been a considerable revival on radio and television of their specific cultures.

In October 1965 the Royal Commission on the Welsh language presented its report, going a long way to offset the anti-Welsh provisions of the 1536 Act of Union, and towards providing an equal status for both English and Welsh. In this respect the report still had many serious defects, but at least it represented a big step forward for the survival of the Welsh language.

### Scottish and Welsh Nationalists

In face of this situation there has arisen in Wales since 1925, and in Scotland since 1928, national movements which set the aim of winning independence. They present the enemy as "English domination", being seemingly oblivious to the fact that the capitalists and landlords of both countries have become integrated into a *British* imperialist system, which includes both Welsh and Scottish exploiters.

Presented in this way there is no conception of the *class* nature of the struggle for Welsh and Scottish national rights, for England and the English are the enemy, and the English working class is not seen as an ally in the common struggle against the common enemy. Also, this concept diverts attention from capitalist and big business elements which still exist in a large measure in Scotland and Wales.

In neither of the two countries do the nationalists envisage taking part in a British Parliament if they succeed in getting their own Parliaments. In an interview in *The Guardian* on November 16th, 1967, Mrs. Winifred Ewing, MP, answering a question on this matter, made clear she was dead against it. Mr. Gwynfor Evans, MP, in the *Morning Star* on February 6th, 1968, was rather more nebulous on the attitude of Plaid Cymru:

"We aim for complete control of our economy, social life, defence, relations with other peoples, but it is nonsense to talk of us as separatist. Economic separation from England is impossible. A common market, a customs union with no tariffs, no passports, no frontier, freedom of movement as today, is what we envisage."

### Position of England

So far, I have dealt with the position of Scotland and Wales, and their existing relations with the system of British imperialism. In my view this is quite inadequate, for I regard the national question in Britain as a *British* problem. It cannot simply be farmed out to Scotland and Wales. In a different sense England is inseparably involved in this problem.

If and when separate Parliaments are won for Scotland and Wales, is not England to have its *separate Parliament*? From the standpoint of the nationalists it appears the British Parliament would become an *English* Parliament, for they would withdraw from the existing British Parliament.

Should this be the Marxist viewpoint? The implication in the amended version of *The British Road to Socialism* is that the British Parliament would remain substantially in its present form, except that it would deal with all-British problems and foreign relations, but *not* with the internal problems of Scotland and Wales.

As distinct from the nationalist viewpoint, I assume our programme would still provide for Welsh and Scottish MPs being elected to the British Parliament. If this is the case they would be able to intervene in the British Parliament on the problems of England, but the English MPs would have no right to intervene in the internal problems of Wales and Scotland.

*To me, this is rather a ludicrous situation. It would provide fruitful ground for sharp divisions between the people of Wales and Scotland on the one hand, and the people of England on the other. Far from cementing unity on a British level it would lead to greater disunity.*

To win the demand for separate Parliaments for Wales and Scotland presupposes overwhelming support in England. It is most unlikely this demand can ever be achieved unless it becomes an *all-British* issue. At the moment England has no stake in the fight for separate Parliaments in Wales and Scotland, unless the aim is also set for a separate English Parliament, and a *federal system* of government for the whole of Britain.

Far be it for me to claim that the federal system is an ideal one. But there are also other European countries with problems of national minorities—Belgium with the Flemings and Walloons, France with the Bretons, and Canada with the French in Quebec. Even in Czechoslovakia there are the Slovaks, Bohemians and Moravians. Yugoslavia's solution to their problem was a federal system.

Whatever the fate of "federations" set up by British imperialism (i.e. Central Africa, Malaysia, Aden and Nigeria), this is not to question the *principle* of federation, but only its *unequal* character in particular circumstances. Given satisfactory

conditions a federal system *could* be a suitable form for Britain in the present situation and could provide a satisfactory means for advancing the national aspirations of Wales, Scotland and England, while in practice strengthening the unity of Britain as a whole.

### Federal System

Lenin had occasion to make some remarks on the national problem in Britain over half a century ago. Arising from comments made by Engels in 1875 on the Gotha Programme of the German Social Democrats, he dealt with the question of democracy and a federal republic in Britain in his *State and Revolution* (August 1917), in the following words:

“Even in England, where geographical conditions, common language, and the history of many centuries would seem to have put ‘an end’ to the national question in the separate small divisions of England—even here Engels is cognisant of the patent fact that the national question has not yet been overcome, and recognises, in consequence, that the establishment of a federal republic would be a ‘step forward’. Of course, there is no trace here of refusing to criticise the defects of the federal republic or to conduct the most determined propaganda and fight for a united and centralised democratic republic.”

It will be noticed that Lenin at that time still wrote of “England” instead of Britain—a fault which is still common in many socialist countries because the size and population of England is predominant over Wales and Scotland together, with English as the common language in all three countries.

In the earlier days of the labour movement there was little or no hesitation in supporting the demand for “Home Rule” for Ireland, and also for Wales, Scotland and England, and for a British federal government. At the Labour Party Conference in June 1918 this is how the demand was presented:

“. . . it considers that some early devolution from Westminster of both legislation and administration is imperatively called for; it suggests that, along with the grant of Home Rule to Ireland, there should be constituted separate statutory legislative assemblies for Scotland, Wales, and even England, with autonomous administration in matters of local concern, and that the Parliament in Westminster should be retained in the form of a Federal Assembly for the United Kingdom . . .”

In presenting this resolution, with no opposition, Mr. Arthur Henderson, then General Secretary of the Labour Party, made it clear that:

“Personally, he saw no reason why, if they were going to give a separate Parliament to Wales and to Scotland, they should not have a similar Parliament for England.”

Of course, a great deal has happened in this past fifty years. There was the division of Ireland, and the setting up of a separate Northern Ireland Parliament under British control. Now it is not simply a matter of “Home Rule”, but a united and independent democratic Ireland, and Northern Ireland would have no part as such in a British federal system.

The principle of federalism was also embodied in the Bill which Mr. Jeremy Thorpe, MP, presented on behalf of the Liberal Party to Parliament in February this year, but still aiming to retain the Northern Ireland Parliament under British control. Despite her misgivings on federalism, Mrs. Winifred Ewing, MP, voted for it.

On the other hand, Gwynfor Evans (in a letter to *The Times* on February 12th, 1968) expressed his opposition to a federal system for Britain. His claim was that federalism is suitable for “provinces, regions, or national minorities”, but not for “autonomous nations”. He went on to argue that “Federalism would require a constitutional upheaval”, but that “The Commonwealth status demanded by the national parties of Scotland and Wales has the immeasurable advantage of leaving the English constitution untouched”.

In a sense, Bert Pearce, in his reply to Gwynfor Evans’s article in the *Morning Star*, gives a similar impression of the “complexities of a federal system and a separate English Parliament”.

Naturally, big changes of this character have their “complexities”, but to believe that a Welsh Parliament can be achieved without constitutional changes is to bury one’s head in the sand. While Scotland has already many separate rights, Wales is closely bound with England in the whole character of the legislative and administrative system of the United Kingdom.

My own view is that the struggle to fulfil the national aspirations of the people of Scotland and Wales is inseparable from the need to resist the over-centralised and bureaucratic administration in Britain. The amended programme *The British Road to Socialism* devotes only one paragraph (in the section *The Maintenance and Extension of Democratic Rights*) to the demand for separate Parliaments for Scotland and Wales. But in the next section, *Social Rights*, there is not a single word about the relation of this demand to “democratically elected regional councils” as part of the process of decentralising the top-heavy and centralised administration in Britain.

Already there are official Government proposals to transform the 13 Welsh counties into five regional councils. There would be possibly more in Scotland and even more in England. Whatever the weaknesses of the present proposals, it is evident that no real

democratic advance is possible in Britain unless the system of local government throughout Britain is transformed, and the people given greater opportunities to be more closely involved in the machinery of government from the bottom to the top. Separate Parliaments for Scotland, Wales and England, are an essential aspect of this process.

It seems to me there is no solution to the problem except by means of a federal system for Britain in which there is a separate Parliament for England, as well as for Scotland and Wales. In my view this is extremely important, for it is my belief there will never be separate Parliaments for Scotland and Wales unless England gives its backing. Otherwise, the national problem in Britain is contracted out to Wales and Scotland, doomed to linger on as a special minority issue in relation to Britain as a whole, without any hope of a solution.

It's not only in England that the Labour movement still has to be won over to support separate Parliaments, but even in Scotland and Wales. Public opinion polls are not always reliable, but the most recent in Scotland (February 1968) indicated nearly 53 per cent in favour of "Home Rule". But soon after (March 24th), at the annual conference of the Scottish Labour Party, a resolution in favour of a Scottish Parliament was overwhelmingly defeated, with only a tiny handful of votes in favour. This is also likely to be the case at the June annual conference of the Welsh region of the Labour Party. In this matter the official Labour movement is lagging far behind the growing support for separate Parliaments. So there's great need for more intensive campaigning in Scotland and Wales, as well as in England.

With a federal Parliament for Britain as a whole, and separate Parliaments for internal affairs in England, Scotland and Wales, it will be possible to combine the national rights of the three countries with the common interests of the British people as a whole.

The respective functions of the federal Parliament and the three separate Parliaments does not present a difficult constitutional problem. In general, the federal Parliament would have overall control of the economy, finance, armed forces and police, and foreign policy, and would represent Britain in the United Nations.

The separate Parliaments would plan their own economy (in mutual agreement with the federal Parliament and the general aims of the British economy as a whole), and this would also apply to the civil service, the armed forces, and policy,

all the social services, and the promotion of cultural activities.

### **United Labour and Progressive Movement**

Of course, constitutional changes in themselves do not provide an automatic solution. The most decisive factor is the growth of a united labour and progressive movement, in which the Communist Party is the driving force. This will involve a far greater concentration of the Communist Party in Scotland and Wales on the problems in their respective countries, not only in relation to economic development, but to all aspects of the struggle in their countries, including language and culture, and the fulfilment of the national aspirations of their peoples. This would dovetail into the united struggle of the British people as a whole and serve to give a new impetus to the common aim of advancing on the road to socialism.

It seems to me that in regard to both Scotland and Wales we need to attune ourselves more closely to the national aspirations of the people, not only in relation to the economic and political future, but also to the advancement of their language and national culture. While taking into account the political weakness and wrong attitude of the nationalist movement in both countries, Communists should explore every avenue for common action with them on issues of common agreement.

In this respect, instead of treating Scotland and Wales simply as districts, similar to the 17 districts in England, it would improve the political image of the Communist Party in Wales to present the district leadership as the "Welsh National Council of the Communist Party" and in Scotland as the "Scottish National Council of the Communist Party".

No one should be under the illusion that these changes in themselves will provide a solution for all our problems in Scotland and Wales. Unity of the labour and progressive movement for Britain as a whole is still the main factor which can bring about decisive changes, but this unity can be reinforced by winning over these progressive elements in Scotland and Wales who are deeply concerned with achieving their national rights.

Instead of allowing them to be isolated from association with the labour and progressive movement in Britain, we need to break new ground with a more comprehensive presentation of the relation between their demand for national rights with the struggle of the English people and throughout Britain as a whole.