

Britain: “Convention of the Left” promotes nationalism

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A measure of just how far removed Britain's various former radical groups are from socialist politics was provided by the main debate on the first day of the Convention of the Left, "The Break-up of the UK."

Pride of place was given to the Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru of Wales.

These bourgeois nationalist parties have no tradition in the workers' movement. The SNP is now the ruling party in Scotland's devolved Holyrood parliament, while Plaid Cymru is in coalition with Labour in the Cardiff Assembly.

To the extent that they have been able to reposition themselves as progressive, it is due to the putrefaction and decay of the Labour Party and the trade unions, the fiscal breathing space allotted to Scotland and Wales by the Labour government's devolution agenda, and the readiness of Britain's petty bourgeois groups to endow them with left-wing credentials.

Guaranteed, until this point at least, a proportionately higher share of central government funding, the devolved bodies in Edinburgh and Cardiff have been able to make certain popular political gestures. The Welsh Assembly, for example, has abolished medical prescription charges, while the Scottish parliament has pledged to do so.

These extremely limited reforms have not detracted from the pro-capitalist, big business agenda of the SNP and Plaid, much of which is directed towards winning the support and favour of the European Union.

With the global financial meltdown severely jeopardising the SNP's goal of establishing Scotland as a safe haven for finance capital, First Minister Alex Salmond has thrown himself into a campaign to rescue Edinburgh's place as a preferred base for the headquarters of leading financial institutions.

As for Plaid, its One Wales coalition agreement with Labour includes support for the establishment of a "Strategic Capital Investment Board" and the need to create "a positive climate for business growth" so as to meet up to the "challenges of global competition". Immediately what this means is that local businesses are to be given more favourable access to public spending contracts through an "All-Wales Purchasing Code of Practice". The One Wales agreement also commits Labour to supporting a referendum on greater powers for the Welsh Assembly, from which Plaid and its backers seek to benefit.

None of this prevented Plaid's Leanne Woods and the SNP's Chris Harvie from being welcomed by the CoL.

In 1979 Harvie co-authored with Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown a pamphlet in favour of Scottish devolution. Ten years later he jumped ship from Labour to join the SNP. Even so Harvie has maintained his membership with Germany's Social Democratic Party, responsible for the Hartz Four legislation which has savaged welfare, and which is now in coalition with Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats.

Not surprisingly, there was nothing remotely left wing about Harvie's contribution to the meeting. Sounding like a Scottish laird, he noted that the SNP's support included many people in rural areas whom no one would consider to be politically "progressive"—an admission that was

simply passed over. His statement that he liked Wales so much he had bought a second home there—nationalists have long pointed up "English colonialists" buying homes in Wales as responsible for the housing shortage-brought nervous shuffles but no more.

Nor was there any response to Woods' Malthusian prognosis that "The smaller we are the better." Woods has argued that "Food and energy self-sufficiency" is the key to Welsh "self-government". "Cuba is the only sustainable country in the world", Leanne wrote in the *Scottish Left Review*. "We could learn a lot from the Cubans".

No one other than a petty bourgeois nationalist, hostile to the real concerns of working people, could claim that Cuban-style "sustainability"—built on a collapsed economy totally reliant on tourism—would be anything but a massive step backwards for the living standards, social provision and democratic rights of working people in Wales.

This was of no concern to those in the audience. The central purpose of the debate was to insist that, with the SNP committed to pushing a referendum on independence by 2010, the entire left had to give unequivocal support for Scottish separation.

The Scottish Socialist Party's Frances Curran posed the issue directly. In the independence referendum, the question for the left was, "Whose side will you be on? With the Tories and Gordon Brown or with the SSP, SNP and the Greens?"

Typical of petty bourgeois politics, Curran's question portrayed political life as comprised of just two "camps", one or the other of which the "left" is automatically obliged to support. Excluded from both of these "sides" is the independent standpoint of the working class, which is diametrically opposed to those of the Tories, Labour, the SNP, et al.

The purpose of Curran's intervention was to insist that the "left" drop any caveats on its support for nationalism, not least its professed concern that it should not damage working class unity.

In his Socialist Unity Blog on the Convention, one of the CoL's organisers Andy Newman summed up what was required. He complained that "some of the contributions [to the Convention] seemed barely coded, in the sense that they stressed the support for the right for the Scots to secede, but spent most emphasis on stressing the downside of such a separation.

"But the English left need to wake up and smell the coffee," he wrote. "The independence referendum is probably in November 2010, and the options will be Yes or No—and no messing with Mr. in-between."

The ex-radicals gathered in Manchester proved they are more than willing to accept this—and to go one step further. The corollary of supporting Welsh and Scottish efforts at independence is the adoption and promotion of English nationalism.

Earlier in the debate Woods had complained that the "English" had a "mindblank" on their own nationalism. The participants at the convention want to overcome what they regard as an inadmissible weakness on the part of English workers.

What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander, as the saying goes. If Woods is to be applauded for her opposition to efforts to "split Wales up politically as we have far more in common as a people than differences," then the same must apply to the "English nation."

Rupa Huq, a sociologist and Labour Party member-who popped into the Convention from the Labour conference over the road-told the gathering that she was not a supporter of English nationalism, which she was concerned could take on racist dimensions.

Huq wrote disparagingly in the *Guardian* of her invite to the Convention: "I was there then as token ethnic minority, English woman, youngish type and--gulp--token unionist."

"It seems that a fair number of lefties these days reckon an English parliament and 'new' English nationalism will be the path to revolution," she continued, utilising the convention's supports for nationalism as an argument for supporting Labour as the only basis for supposedly preserving working class unity.

Besides the olive branch her presence held out to Labour, Huq's significance for the Convention was that she is a contributor to the book, *Imagined Nation: England after Britain*.

Promoted by so-called left wing nationalists, the collection of writings has as its aim, "to begin to create a new imaginary for an old country. Rejecting racialised ideas of Englishness, they outline the prospects for a hybrid nation, and offer a vision of a green and pleasant land as an alternative national future."

Newman also contributes to the book, released on St George's Day (the patron saint of England) which he complained is "not celebrated enough".

He sets up a false polemic in which the "left" is supposedly fighting a rearguard action on behalf of a socialist, inclusive English nationalism against the rise of a right-wing variant where "everyone was white and had roasts for dinner."

The truth is that English nationalism only exercises the energies and loyalties of what passes for the left. The fascists of the British National Party are opposed to the break-up of the UK, while the Conservatives have so far played only gingerly with English nationalism. Labour, although encouraging greater regionalism as the basis for transnational investment, competes to be the most consistent advocate of "Britishness".

To the extent that the CoL's participants offer any justification for their adoption of national identity politics, the rationale is that in the absence of a class consciousness-by which they mean the decline of the old Labour and trade union bureaucracies-it is necessary to promote another consciousness, a national consciousness, as a means of unifying people and supposedly encouraging a leftward move.

Just as in Scotland and Wales, the advocacy of English nationalism is hedged by references to "historical traditions" of equality, democracy, etc.

This noxious brew has been fermenting for some time. In his 2005 foreword to SSP member and *Guardian* contributor Gregor Gall's book, *The Political Economy of Scotland*, former SSP leader Tommy Sheridan demanded that the "socialist movement in England" must "get to grips with English national identity", citing "the tradition of the Tolpuddle Martyrs and Chartists" as the "radical English identity" to be counterposed to that of the fascists.

It is a theme developed by Newman who writes glowingly of the mythology of Robin Hood who stole from the rich to give to the poor, the peasant revolt of 1381, the English revolution, the Chartist movement and, "the England of the 1926 general strike, of the battle of Cable Street, the fight to free the Pentonville Five, the Anti-Nazi League and the great miners' strike."

"As a largely industrial and urban country, the Labour movement with our belief in social and economic equality, and our belief in extending democracy has made a huge and indelible impact on England's culture and history," Newman states. As an afterthought he is forced to accept that "Of course we share much of this history with our friends and cousins in

Wales and Scotland".

The themes that Newman identifies are not rooted in some national identity as he spuriously suggests, but in the struggles of working people to assert their independent class interests against the ruling elite.

His evoking of a national mythology stands firmly in the tradition of right wing reaction.

"The power of Blake's Jerusalem is that by asking whether there was once a time when England was blessed, he acknowledges that it no longer is. We lost the England of Chaucer and Shakespeare, the England of woods and glades. We put those better days of an early nation behind us to take up Empire," he writes.

"Of course we English share a beautiful and expressive language, and many of the personality traits and the values we believe in are specific to our culture," he continues.

Who is this "we" which Newman charges came "to build an Empire of pain"-burying class divisions beneath an apparently equally culpable "English nation"?

As for "our" Scottish and Welsh "friends", Newman claims that England's "loss of innocence" "was bound up with the birth of the Union" [between England and Scotland in 1707] because it brought forth "Britain". The death of the Union, therefore, will presumably return England to its former glorious state.

Reviewing *Imagined Nation* for the Stalinist *Morning Star*, Gall-who also participated in the convention debate-concurred that nations are "imagined communities", arguing that the question was whether "they are imagined in progressive or regressive ways."

"National identity can take progressive forms under certain conditions," he insisted.

Just what conditions these are, Gall did not specify, and for good reason. Especially in one of the world's most powerful imperialist centres, the claim that nationalism-either of the British variety or that of its constituent national parts-can be utilised in a progressive fashion is nothing but sophistry in the service of reaction.

It is no accident that the Campaign for an English Parliament (CEP) turned up at the convention to offer its support to efforts to define "Englishness", as part of its strategy of securing an "English referendum on the question of establishing a Parliament for the residents of England."

The CEP points out, "Ultimately, an English Parliament cannot come about without the co-operation and agreement of the House of Commons. The CEP's role is working with academics, business groups, trades unions, think tanks and the media to create the conditions where MPs see that there is no alternative to holding a referendum."

Typical of the various postings on the CEP site is the suggestion that, in response to a Scottish artist posting a "Welcome to Scotland" sign outside Carlisle in England that a "Welcome to England" sign should be posted in the Scottish capital Edinburgh as it "was once part of the Kingdom of Northumbria. Something tells me the natives wouldn't find it quite so entertaining."

In the Convention of the Left, these self-proclaimed patriotic English "democrats" have recognised kindred spirits.



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