

Corbyn urges St. George's Day national holiday

Julie Hyland
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Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn has committed any future government he heads to inaugurate St George's Day, April 23, as a national holiday.

Corbyn told the Communications Workers Union conference in Bournemouth that he would seek agreement with the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish administrations for UK-wide national holidays marking the patron saints—St David, St Andrew, St Patrick and St George. The aim would be to “give Britain's workers the break they deserve and bring our four nations together.”

Corbyn's references to “fairness”, “inclusivity” and “social justice” to describe his proposal cannot disguise the fact that it is a significant concession to the right wing, with wholly reactionary implications.

St Andrew's and St Patrick's Days are already national holidays in Scotland and Ireland. It is the proposal to restore St George's Day as a national holiday that is the most significant aspect of the proposal—and deliberately so.

St George is a Christian martyr and military figure associated with the Crusades, who is the patron saint of some 25 countries. He became the patron saint of England in the 14th century, held up as the quintessential example of English chivalry and bravery as evoked by Shakespeare in Henry V call to battle, “*Cry God for Harry, England, and Saint George!*”

A national feast day to mark the occasion was begun in 1415 but fell out of use after the Acts of Union between England and Scotland in 1707.

The most significant factor in the declining fortunes of St George was the spread of socialist ideas at the head of a militant, unified movement of the working class. Advanced workers looked not to national pride but the class struggle as the real basis for social improvement. This meant that, for much of contemporary history, St George has been associated with right-wing political extremism.

Corbyn's proposal is a repudiation of this socialist tradition and an open embrace of populist nationalism.

This is not changed one iota by Corbyn's sermonising over how Labour “will never allow people to be divided on the basis of race or religion,” or that “as the message of our movement has it, ‘unity is strength’.”

Far from overcoming the divisions between the four nations of the UK caused by the “damaging and divisive policies of this Conservative government,” the assertion of English nationalism will do the opposite.

As for ending the “pandering to a rich elite at the top and their attempts to divide the rest of us,” the adoption of national identity as the basis for social cohesiveness is designed to conceal the fundamental class issues and provide a political vehicle for an aggressive reassertion of British imperialism's interests, made all the more necessary by the crisis over Brexit.

Corbyn's proposal was made just after the English Labour Network (ELN) published a report attacking the party for being “ashamed” to assert English “national pride.”

The demand for Labour to promote an English national identity has long been made by sections of the party's right wing under the banner, “Flag, faith and family.”

Associated with the Blue Labour group led by Maurice Glasman, Liam Byrne and Jon Cruddas, it is touted as a means of dealing with the constitutional implications of Scottish and Welsh devolution, as well as combating the influence of the British National Party (BNP) and the UK Independence Party (UKIP).

Cruddas and Byrne are now leading lights in the English Labour Network, established in 2017 to promote the “distinct political identity of England” and the creation of an English parliament.

The BNP and UKIP have both collapsed. As for an English identity, the ELN report acknowledges that there is “very little real ‘English nationalism’,” and that

debates over an “English parliament are primarily about how democracy should work for all the people who live in England, not just the people who feel English.”

None of this matters to the ELN. Its authors are some of the leading figures in Tony Blair’s “New Labour,” which repudiated any connection to the working class as it was transformed into the preferred party of big business and the City of London.

Their real concern is the promotion of “national unity” under conditions in which the traditional parties and institutions of bourgeois rule are breaking down under the impact of social tensions.

For the ELN, “Englishness” is shorthand for the white, working class—who it is routinely asserted proved to be irredeemably racist and nationalist by voting to leave the European Union in the Brexit referendum. Labour, therefore, can only win over England’s equivalents of the “basket of deplorables” by adopting their supposed fixation on “national pride.”

On April 18, ELN launched a briefing for Labour Party activists, “For Labour, England and St George,” on “why national identity is important and why the left has much to gain and nothing to lose from progressive patriotism.”

Putting forward “practical suggestions on ways of engaging with English identity, including the celebration of St George’s Day,” it complained that Labour has cut itself off from a sense of “national pride” in England due to “misplaced fears that this will appeal to, or even strengthen, far right extremists.”

Trailing Corbyn’s announcement of four new national holidays, it asserted that to win government, “Labour needs to win England” and “more votes from people who have a strong sense of English identity.”

“In an insecure, uncertain world people still want a sense of shared identity. Often, people are turning to identities based on the place they live and the nation they belong to. In a very unequal society where many feel they don’t have a voice and are not listened to it can be a powerful voice for change. The sense of national identity is often strongest amongst people who feel they are doing less well in a fast-changing world: they are people Labour should not only aim to represent but to help transform their lives and opportunities.”

Changing the conditions of inequality and insecurity faced by working people would require, at its minimum, far-reaching and radical measures to break the monopoly of the super-rich over economic and political life.

The briefing acknowledges, “England is a divided nation: divided by wealth and income...by social class,

race and faith.” But on the class divide, there is not a single “practical suggestion” and not even the pretence of any redistributive measures.

Instead it insists that “the majority share a common interest in building an economy and a society that works for the common good,” and complains, “Across Europe, the populist right has been much more effective at tapping into this politics of people, nation and place.”

The left is accused of making “things too easy for the populist right by failing to respect national identity...” Labour must respect those “who identify as English” and wants Labour to “stand up for people like them.”

The briefing is interspersed with statements such as “Labour should always reflect the majority view that Englishness is not a white, ethnic, identity...” and “all communities feel welcome to participate.”

These caveats are worthless. There is nothing to distinguish the ELN’s proposals from those of France’s National Front, the Alternative for Germany or the numerous populist parties in Europe promoting “national pride.”

The real measure of Corbyn’s proposal is made clear by Nigel Farage, former UKIP leader, on his LBC radio talk show. Farage had long campaigned for St George’s Day to be a national holiday.

“A gentle form of nationalism is not a bad thing, but it is about degrees,” he opined cynically. Asking rhetorically whether Corbyn’s proposal meant he “has converted himself?” he said, “We should reclaim it [St Georges Day] and be proud of it, regardless of what our intellectual classes think.”



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