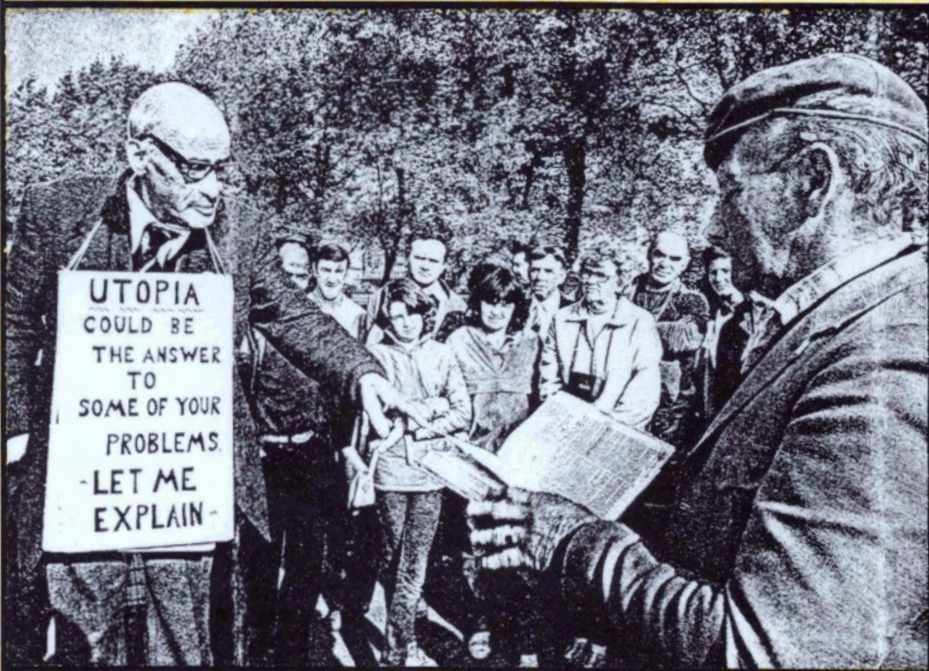


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Journal of Edinburgh Conference of Socialist Economists



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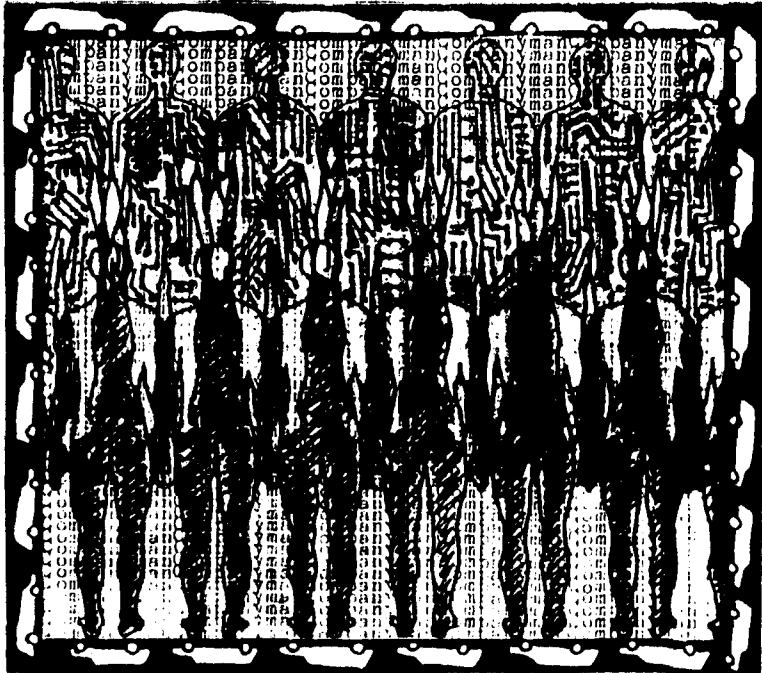
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The General Election and the Break-Up of the U.K. - A Republican Response

REACTIONS TO APRIL 9th.

The election results in Scotland first produced disbelief, then according to the importance people placed in British 'democracy', either despair or anger. S.N.P. voter, Muriel Gray said, " it is the people's fault and nobody else", whilst Labour voting Kenneth Roy said, "we had had our chance and had muffed it. We don't deserve another.....One comes close to despair" ('Scotland on Sunday' 12.4.92).

And over a week later Jim Sillars was berating the people of Scotland saying, "There is a serious question in my mind about the character and ability of the Scottish people" ('The Scotsman' 24.4.92). The people had let down the S.N.P.'s populist deputy leader! He would go off in a huff and take up the business consultancy job he had before Govan.

Here we have the voices of the middle class whose hopes and ambitions have been dashed, but who can retreat into apolitical comfort and nurse their wounds, whilst blaming "the people"! But other members of the middle class, whose personal futures are more closely tied to working class aspirations, knew that something more was required. There would be widespread working class anger, and a feeling of being cheated by the politicians, S.N.P. and Labour, but especially Labour, who had promised them real change. When Labour's official 'New Realism' is found wanting, the 'New Tokenists' await in the wings, to attempt to divert any possible movement from below into safe and constitutionalist channels.

And 5000 angry people turned up on April 11th., at 24 hours notice, in Glasgow's George Square, to be regaled by such stalwarts of 'New Tokenism' as John McAllion and George Galloway (ex- 'Committee of 100'). 'Scotland United/75%' had learned the lesson of the Anti-Poll Tax struggle. If you don't want to be by-passed you must be in at the beginning and offer the prospect of activity.

Meanwhile 2 other groups have come to public attention. The first, 'Common Cause', is linked to people supporting 'Charter '88' and the Scottish Constitutional

Convention - advocates of advanced liberal reform of the British constitution. They are cross party 'popular front' and show middle class disdain for economic and social issues, believing that Labour, Liberal Democrats and nationalists should unite around constitutional reform. Their likely limits were highlighted by the Scottish Constitutional Convention's attitude to the mass civil disobedience of the Anti-Poll Tax resistance - a lofty abstentionism. The working class actually exercising its right to self determination in practice, through united action, is too much for these advocates of parliamentary reform.

The other group, 'Democracy for Scotland', seems to owe its inspiration to the Anti-Nuclear movement and the Greens. It appears to be anti-political party and seeks publicity through vigils - protest rather than resistance.

THE NEED FOR A REPUBLICAN PERSPECTIVE

All those opposing the U.K. state with its monarchist Unionist constitution, must take stock of the General Election result and the post election response of different groups and classes. James Naughtie is one political commentator, who has managed to keep his feet firmly on the ground. He quite rightly stated that, "The election result was not the end of the prospects of change, as weary and grey-faced opposition politicians may feel but the start....Six months from now, very little is going to look the same.....Who would be Donald Dewar in the next few months?....And who would be Ian Lang?....The Scottish question is certainly going to stay, whatever the rest of the U.K. thinks. In a way its the heart of this election result; the debate hasn't been concluded, but is going to become more urgent" ('Scotland on Sunday' 12.4.92).

However, we must have a much more strategic vision, based on a thorough understanding of the real nature of the beast we are up against. Any group which merely reacts to the shock of the General Election result, will not be properly preparing people for the long drawn out struggle ahead. We must see both the strengths and weaknesses of the British state, and see how different classes and national movements throughout the U.K. are likely to act. An examination of the historical evidence will show that any long term strategy for national self determination will have to be Republican in orientation. For behind Westminster's parliamentary facade lies a vast accumulation of powers - powers held in the name of the Crown, but wielded in practice by the ruling class.

An earlier movement for Civil Rights in 'Northern Ireland' naively believed that you could press for political and social reform without challenging the constitution and uprooting the hidden Crown powers. And in pressing for social and political change together, they were far in advance of the liberals of the Scottish Constitutional Convention and 'Charter '88', whatever illusions they may hold of themselves as being latter day '1848ers' or Chartists!

Those radicals and populists involved in 'Scotland for Democracy', who show

understandable scorn for contesting the arena of official politics, and even more understandable contempt for party politics (much heightened by the antics of Labour, Liberal Democrats and the S.N.P., in the run-up to the election) will not be able to politically survive the forthcoming events. Tensions within the state machinery, splits within the 'official' parties, and new political parties will all become the focus for working and middle class aspirations as the constitutional crisis develops.

THOSE VOTING ON APRIL 9TH.

It is clear that interest in the General Election remained high, even amongst the working class. Taking Scotland, there was a 74.5% turnout. The middle class constituencies experienced the greatest increase in participation. This undoubtedly benefited the Tories. There was a small decline in voting turnout in some working class constituencies. In most other working class constituencies the turnout remained largely the same or marginally up on 1987. Against this it must be remembered that considerable numbers of workers have disappeared from the electoral register, because of their opposition to, or fear of the poll tax. It has been estimated that 80,000 have 'disappeared' in Strathclyde.

WHAT DID WORKERS WANT FROM THE ELECTION?

Most obviously they wanted rid of the Tories and the 13 years of increasing misery - high unemployment, homelessness, the poll tax, deteriorating public services, increasing insecurity, health hazards and stress at work - in short a very real feeling of loss of control.

And in Scotland there has been a growing feeling that part of the drive to reassert control will involve some form of national self-determination. Politically this has meant a decline in working class support for the Unionist status quo. Not even the ultra-Unionist Orange Order, is prepared to unequivocally back the Unionist status quo. This has been left to the sects of the radical Right and Left - the B.N.P. on one side and the R.C.P. and 'The Leninist', on the other.

Other 'independent' Left groups have an essentially abstentionist position, which oscillates between support for the Unionist status quo and Unionist Devolution, depending on either the official Labour position, or how they perceive working class Labourist supporters to be moving (Scottish Militant Labour, the Socialist Workers Party and 'Socialist Organiser'). At present only Scottish Militant Labour have any significant support amongst workers, and they have longest held to a formal Unionist devolution stance, although downplaying this in practice, preferring emphasis on economic issues.

Support for Scottish independence has undoubtedly grown amongst workers. However, this does not necessarily equate with support for the S.N.P..

However neither can working class support for the Labour Party be wholly equated with support for the official Devolution policy. Many workers have different expectations from Devolution, to those of the middle class, who see increased career opportunities and defence of privilege. And the Labour version of Devolution would favour the middle class, creating an expanding bureaucracy - a Strathclyde Region writ-large. Many workers see devolution merely as a surer step to independence than the S.N.P.'s "Free in '93" - the political equivalent of Ally Macleod's Scotland 1978 World Cup strategy!

WHAT DID THE MIDDLE CLASS WANT FROM THE ELECTION?

The middle class is always casting its eyes forwards and then backwards, over its shoulder. Looking forwards it sees new career opportunities, increased personal status and rising living standards. Looking backwards, it sees increased job insecurity, thwarted ambitions and indebtedness, even possible unemployment and house repossession - but above all, the danger of falling down the social ladder.

The middle class is varied. In Scotland the key component is found in the large public sector. This public sector has suffered many assaults and reorganisations, beginning under the last Labour government, but stepped up by the Tories. Nearly every reorganisation has resulted in job loss or reduced job security for manual and lower grade white collar workers. However, this has disguised the creation of an increasing number of middle class jobs, in elaborate managerial hierarchies, with greatly enhanced incomes. This has offered many new career prospects and helped to create a bigger managerial middle class. There has also been an increase in para-state agencies and 'independent' consultancies, serving the public sector, offering similar career prospects. Increasingly this 'new' middle class has moulded the Labour Party to meet its needs.

Even the trade unions, which have seen a massive attack on their rank and file, through job loss, productivity drives, short term contracts, dangerous and stressful working conditions and most obviously on their ability to fight back, through anti-trade union laws, have nurtured this 'new' middle class. This has been done either directly, from their own increasingly career minded officials, or by supporting increased managerial power, especially in the public sector. One of the best kept secrets of the years of Tory union bashing has been the increased amounts of state money channelled to the trade unions, entirely for the benefit of their bureaucrats. This money has financed courses and conferences in the same style and premises as those organised by business. This helps to further widen the gulf between the officials and office bearers on one side, and the ordinary membership on the other. The money also gives increased scope for bureaucratic patronage, helping them to silence lay office bearers and conference delegates with the prospect of weeks at smart hotels, overseas trips and general junketing. This has gone along with attempts to reduce membership participation. Instead union leaderships try to arrange sweetheart deals with private and public sector management, offering themselves as a cheap personnel management service.

When it serves its interests (usually to hoodwink workers) the middle class will verbally attack the Tories - sometimes with great ferocity. However, its actions are what counts. The reality has been growing active collaboration between Labour/trade union leaders and the Tories. This was most spectacularly shown in Glasgow's 'City of Culture' Year - a bonanza for the Labour supporting middle class, epitomised by Jeremy Spalding, Director of Museums, and for a host of (no doubt, Tory supporting) Scottish Office backed private contractors and rip-off merchants. Businesses, big and small, and the public sector middle class got the profits or the enhanced career opportunities; workers got a few low paid, mainly temporary jobs and carefully controlled entertainment.

Therefore the issue of political self determination is quite different for the middle class compared to the working class. For the middle class the emphasis is much more on the individual 'self'. Thus the ideal policy for the middle class is Devolution. Devolution offers the middle class protection for existing, or the prospects of new jobs and career opportunities in Scotland, at the same time as preserving the possibility of individual promotion at the U.K. level.

However, due to the two-faced nature of the middle class, there is a constant battle for their souls. If they can be persuaded that their existing living standards under the Union are threatened by moves towards self determination, then this desire is relegated, whilst they defend their more immediate economic self interest. But if they see a growing movement for self determination as being unstoppable, then they will support advanced Devolutionary proposals and even make the break to supporting full state independence, if this looks more likely to save or enhance their prospects.

The General Election results revealed this instability amongst the middle class. They were most susceptible to an Establishment Unionist offensive (especially when coupled to taxation 'threats' from both parties of Unionist Devolution - Labour and the Liberals).

WHAT THE RULING CLASS WANTED FROM THE ELECTION

The British ruling class wants social stability above all. It realises that change may be necessary in the face of E.C. pressure from above, and the growing economic and social pressures from below. However, over centuries, it has perfected a state flexible enough for its own needs, but with ample reserve powers to either coerce and discipline, or buy off and incorporate threats from below. The finely honed political device, summed up in the formula of "sovereignty of the Crown in parliament", gives the ruling class such a formidable and largely hidden arsenal of powers, that it would not even find it necessary to resort to a military coup, if faced with a severe threat. Extreme dictatorial powers could be achieved quite constitutionally, including the

suspension of parliament itself! Gough Whitlam's mildly reformist Australian Labour government felt the long reach of these dictatorial powers in 1975, when his government was dismissed by the Governor General - and that's in an 'independent' country. No need for vulgar military coups, such as in Greece and Chile!

However, central to fronting this anti-democratic state machine is a 2 party system based on 'first-past-the-post' elections. This gives the ruling class both the advantage of providing a semblance of democracy, and gives the political system great stability, without the inflexibility of a 1 party system, or the unpredictability of a multi-party system.

The ruling class, the Tories and Her Majesty's Loyal 'Opposition'

It is important to realise that the ruling class and the Tories are not the same thing. Certainly the Tories are the ruling class's most favoured party, since there are many ties of class, schooling, club and sentiment. The ruling class has its radical Right, conservative and liberal wings. The Tory Party itself is divided into several factions, which reflect the different politics of sections of the ruling and middle class. At different periods of time different factions may receive the active or acquiescent backing of the majority of the ruling class, depending on the balance of class forces at the time.

In order to have greater flexibility the ruling class go to considerable trouble to ensure that there is also Her Majesty's Loyal 'Opposition'. This can act as additional support, either as an open or tacit coalition, or even an alternative government-in-waiting, should their services be needed in times of greater social unrest.

For example, in 1974, key figures from the Establishment - Campbell Adamson (then leader of the C.B.I.) and Enoch Powell signalled that it was time for the ruling class to transfer their allegiance to Labour, in the face of a massive working class counter-offensive, led by the Miners. And how right they proved to be! Under the guise of 'The Social Con-trick' Labour launched an assault on workers, that led to a massive fall in living standards; divided the working class, so allowing fascists to make their first serious inroads since the '30s; and effectively handed the running of part of the U.K. state - 'The Six Counties' to the military and intelligence services!

After this the ruling class returned their full allegiance to the Tories, who took advantage of a demoralised and disorientated working class, to step up their offensive to new levels.

Ruling class divisions over Europe

Throughout most of the '80s, the ruling class were united behind Thatcher's aggressive non-consensus political approach, at least when it came to dealing with workers and national movements. But there were deep divisions over attitudes to Europe.

