

Britain is not like France. The Union Jack is quite different from the Tricolour. But the Left still has to come to terms with the 'nation'

Robert Gray

Left holding the Flag



The Left was ill-equipped to respond to the Falklands war. The popular chauvinism which Thatcher elicited and directed was not simply the product of manipulation by the Tories and the media. It had deeper historical roots, and appealed to areas of experience the Left has largely failed to address. Whatever the longer term effects of the Falklands adventure, it surely illustrates the capacity of the Right to mobilise national feeling and the weakness of the Left in countering this.

This failure reflects real difficulties. The dominant definitions of national interest were composed from a long history not of our making. In Britain, perhaps more than most European countries, national identity belongs to the Establishment, and creates effective links between it and the people. To break these links, and to create a new sense of identity will involve a response to the reality of the nation rather than what Dimitrov called 'national nihilism' in the name of an abstract internationalism.' Such nihilism serves only to reinforce the identification of the ruling class with the interests of the nation. Not only does this leave open the possibility of further episodes of military adventurism, with all its attendant dangers, it also impoverishes our ability to offer a meaningful vision of the future. For it is partly through conceptions of the nation and its future that people form their social aspirations. A re-definition of the interests of the nation around the alternative leadership of the working class is thus central if the working class is to 'fulfil its role of the leading force in society'.²

If there are great difficulties in this area, there are also important opportunities. The long crisis of British imperialism has also thrown into crisis a sense of nationhood normally mobilised by the Right. This presents the Left with an opportunity to challenge the claim of its opponents to speak for the nation. The condition of seizing that opportunity is that we begin to address seriously the reality of British nationhood and its historical determinants.

Empire, Patriotism and Chauvinism

The Falklands war was simply the latest expression of the historic capacity of the Right to deploy popular nationalism for its own political ends. This has been a marked feature of British history, and one that distinguishes Britain from other countries. Episodes of right-ring popular nationalism can of course be found throughout Europe — most dramatically in the shape of fascism — but the Right's claim to speak for the nation has rarely gone uncontested; the histories of revolution and counter-revolution, fascism, occupation and resistance have produced symbols of national identity to which the Left can lay claim.

The association of national identity with the Right is thus a product of history, not a law of nature. And that history is more complex than simple manipulation from above. The ruling class has been largely successful, down to the present, in incorporating the mass of the population through a sense of national community and loyalty. But this process has involved conflicts, both about class, gender and other social relationships within the national community, and about the problems encountered by ruling groups in sustaining their definition of Britain's place in the world. These conflicts have grown more acute with the long crisis of British imperialism.

Continuity and stability

The surface continuity and stability of the English, and subsequently British state and its key institutions since the late seventeenth century is one determinant of the inherited identity of the British people. Problems of territorial unification or rigid institutional barriers to the emergence of a modern state which faced most other European nations had, historically, been resolved by the nineteenth century emergence of nationalism as a political force. The process of 'nation-building', the construction of national identities through the contention of rival social classes and ideologies is close to the surface in many European nations; in Britain, similar processes occurred, but in a characteristically gradualist manner, masked by the facade of institutional continuity.

The collective memory of the seventeenth-century revolution was purged of its radical overtones, assimilated to Victorian moderate liberalism. Although the growth of industrial capitalism brought bitter conflicts, and moments of deep crisis, the resulting changes in the political system were presented within the facade of continuity and gradual adaptation. The subsequent extension of political rights to parts of the adult male working class maintained the tra-

dition of gradualism. Thus the incorporation of new groups — male members of the urban middle classes in the 1830s, some male workers from the late 1860s, all adult men and then women in the inter-war years — modified but did not dramatically displace existing institutions and elites.

Popular

If the potentially radical implications of political democracy were successfully contained down to the present, it was nevertheless not simply managed from above. A deep-rooted and tenacious sense of popular rights and liberties was formed in the ferment of the seventeenth-century revolution, ran half-underground through the eighteenth-century and surfaced as a broad stream in the popular radicalism of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There was thus a popular version of English constitutionalism, expressed in a long struggle for free organisations, self-expression, and above all the vote. In this respect the feeling of membership of the nation cannot be separated from the demand, often sharply expressed, to participate in its affairs. As Hugh Cunningham has shown, 'patriotism' in the late eighteenth and early to mid-nineteenth centuries had oppositional and radical, and sometimes even republican and internationalist overtones.³

With the mid-nineteenth century stabilisation of British society, appeals to popular patriotism figured in the rhetoric of political leaders, incorporating elements of the popular radical tradition into the established political parties. This kind of incorporation could, and did precede the extension of the vote. Thus Lord Palmerston in the 1850s and 60s, an aristocratic whig and staunch opponent of democratic reform, was a notable exponent of appeals to popular patriotic feeling. Libertarianism and sympathy for national and democratic struggles abroad were bound up with maritime isolationism and a sense of national superiority, the image of a free, progressive protestant nation contrasted to despotic, backward regimes elsewhere. Thus popular libertarianism and popular chauvinism, the 'good' and 'bad' sides of the national character, are hard to disentangle from each other; it is a potent ideological mix, as can be seen as recently as the Falklands war.

Empire

Popular chauvinism is related to the way that British society has been deeply penetrated, at every level, by successive phases of imperial expansion, from colonial plunder, the slave-trade and plantations in the seventeenth centuries to industrial supremacy,

free trade and overseas investment in the nineteenth century; and to the activities of British-based multinationals in more recent years. The very making of a nation-state, in the Tudor period and then in the crucible of the English Revolution, belongs to the first of these phases. Indeed the fusion of popular libertarianism and popular chauvinism can perhaps be traced back to the notion of a free protestant island people — mythologically presented as the underdogs, outclassed in everything except skill, courage and divine favour — defying the empires of continental despots. In doing so the English, and increasingly their Scottish junior partners were of course quite consciously and deliberately seizing a still greater empire for themselves.

The heyday of empire from the 1880s to the First World War represents a later phase, to which Lenin referred in his *Imperialism*. In the British case this was superimposed, partly in response to the rival imperialism of new competitors, on a long prior history of colonial expansion.⁴ This intensifying imperialist rivalry coincided with the partial democratisation of the political system, and the growth of working-class

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organisation and political self-assertion. Historians continue to debate the impact of various attempts to win enthusiastic popular support for the imperial state.⁵ The strongest support for ultra-jingoism seems to have come from the growing white collar strata, who gave the Tories a suburban popular electoral base; the high noon of empire also saw a continuing sense of working class alienation and some bitter industrial confrontations. On the other hand, the working class could not but be affected by the imperialist orientation of British capital and its state; there was significant complicity in, if not positive enthusiasm for, the empire and its real or imagined economic benefits.

If working people maintained a healthy scepticism and failed to transform them-

¹ *Report to the Seventh Congress of the Communist International* (1935).

² *British Road to Socialism*, p33.

³ H Cunningham, 'The Language of Patriotism', *History Workshop Journal* 12 (autumn 1981).

⁴ Lenin's account does not entirely fit the British case, which had for example the greatest empire but the least development of trusts and cartels prior to 1914.

⁵ See Cunningham, *op cit*, pp23-27 for a perceptive summary and assessment.

selves into model subjects of the imperial state, there was nevertheless an effective level of consent enabling the ruling class to mobilise popular support. This support rested on a variety of appeals and loyalties — of class, region, community, Scottish or Welsh identity — bound together by a diffuse sense of loyalty and civic duty, a 'willingness to accept what the state demanded of you'.¹ As became clear in the First World War, this did not override the commitments of class, but defined a framework within which class interests were expressed. The war years saw both a 'reformist' re-negotiation of the place of organised labour in society and politics, bringing real gains, and the emergence of a more cohesive Marxist left.

The national identity formed by imperialist rivalry and crisis and the entry of the masses into political life was reinforced and perpetuated by the success in two world wars, and more recently in the series of military actions which have policed the dismantling of the formal empire since 1945. With the long crisis of decline, the imperial national identity has been eroded and undermined, but never displaced, still less subjected to any thorough critique. Decline has been 'a history of graduated decay, relatively unmarked by trauma'.⁷ There have been a number of debacles and crises of confidence, of which the radicalism evoked by the Second World War and widespread revulsion from the disasters of the 30s was the most important. But the establishment never suffered a catastrophe comparable to that of military defeat and occupation elsewhere in Europe.

There three elements — the continuity of the state and key institutions, combined with gradual adaptation and incorporation of new social classes; the strong sense of popular rights; and the long history of empire — mark off the British experience from that of countries where the Left has been able to incorporate into its politics symbols of national identity. The tricolour, from 1793 to 1848 to the Paris Commune in 1871, to the wartime resistance has been the property of the Left, while the *Marseillaise* was sung as a revolutionary anthem by radicals and socialists everywhere throughout the nineteenth century. The union jack and *God Save the Queen* have rarely evoked comparable enthusiasms! Rather, the British Left has been caught between a justifiable, but isolating sense of distance from popular chauvinism and attempts to address national feeling that slide into an uncritical assimilation of dominant traditions.

THE POST-IMPERIAL CRISIS

To transform the sense of identity composed

out of this history is not easy. Yet the construction of that identity has never been complete, or without contradictions. And the problems surrounding national identity have multiplied with the decline of British economic and military power, the incoherence of various attempts to adapt to this, and the economic and social costs, borne by working people, of ruling class policies. The crisis of national identity is an expression of the crisis of British capitalism, and it is this form of expression, as well as the underlying economic crisis, which the Left must address to set Britain on a new course.

Britain and the world

The central strategy since 1945 has been adaptation to the augmented economic and military power of the USA, as a means to the perpetuation of Britain's independent status as a 'great power'.⁸ More recently, and hesitantly, as this strategy failed to resolve the underlying weakness of the domestic economy, there has been the move into the EEC; this again has been combined with the maintenance of 'great power' military postures. Attempts at adaptation have thus gone hand in hand with maintaining the orientation of British capital to overseas investment and the military presence of Britain as a world power and the main lieutenant of the US in 'containing communism' and policing the Third World.

This posture has not always been a coherent one, and there have been a number of debacles reflecting the gulf between military pretension and economic capability, the contradictions of independent 'great power' status bought at the price of subservience to US policies, and so on. The Suez affair, which marked the beginnings of a reappraisal, is perhaps the clearest example of these problems. With the slowing down of the long boom in the mid to late 1960s and growing instability in the international economic system, it became harder to ignore the underlying weaknesses of the British economy, or the hollowness of British claims to an imperial role. The 60s saw a wave of agonised introspection about the 'British disease', the need to find a new, more realistic role, etc, which contributed to the Labour victories of 1964 and 1966 under the banner of 'modernisation'.

So far as Britain's place in the world was concerned, the main alternatives to a hollow and bankrupt imperial role were defined by a 'modernising' technocratic political centre, pushing 'Atlanticist' and/or 'European' options. These policies would have abandoned British independent 'great power' status in favour of closer integration in NATO and/or the EEC. These strategies

of adaptation to diminished power were not consistently pursued. This was partly because of conflict between an emphasis on the 'Atlantic' (ie, NATO/USA) or 'European' (ie, EEC) connections. (De Gaulle's veto on British entry to the EEC was partly based on fears that Britain would represent American interests in Europe). Perhaps more important was the lack of a sufficiently strong drive within British politics; both major parties were at that time divided over the EEC — and in the Labour Party the



division was not simply between Left and Right — and there was a determination in influential circles to hold on to the 'independent deterrent' and a world power role. Eventual entry to the EEC reinforced the international orientation of British capital, rather than bringing about the promised regeneration of British industry. The failure of the state-led 'modernising' strategy of the 1960s, then of Heath's attempt to stimulate growth through the market, left the field clear for Thatcherism. The Left in this period played an important part in opposition to the EEC, as well as to NATO and nuclear weapons. But these campaigns were

not integrated into a coherent alternative course for a post-imperial Britain.

Internal cohesion and the national question

The other aspect of post-imperial crisis has been the challenge to traditional definitions of the British nation-state: Ireland, the national movements in Scotland and Wales, racism and black resistance. The emergence of national movements within the UK reflects the particularly catastrophic impact



on Scotland and Wales of the decline of British capitalism, but also the politicisation of a sense of cultural identity which had historically been a component of the unitary British state and of British political parties (notably the Liberals in the late nineteenth century, to a lesser extent Labour since the First World War). This earlier period was one of boom and expansion for British industry, with the industrial regions of Scotland and Wales riding the crest of the wave. In more recent years the decline of British industry, the growth of state intervention and the centralisation of political and economic decision-making have threatened to

erode the communities on which Scottish and Welsh nationhood are based. National aspirations have therefore found separate political expression.

Thus, 'although the national movements are related to the economic crisis, they cannot be reduced to it. National feeling is more than a protest vote based on economic discontents, acute as these are. It will not melt away with the rising sun of a Labour government implementing the alternative economic strategy. Indeed the growth of national consciousness, which is by no means confined to people who vote SNP or Plaid Cymru, is in part an attempt to influence the very shape of any economic recovery, the form and direction of investment and its impact on communities and cultures. The national movements have specific political and cultural dimensions. They are questioning the historic institutional form of the association between the component nations of the UK, and the capacity of parties, parliament and other central institutions to represent the aspirations of the Scottish and Welsh peoples.

RECONSTRUCTING THE NATION

The pressures and challenges of the later twentieth century have made inherent common sense definitions of the British nation problematical. The ruling class, and political leaders of both major parties, long clung to an obsolescent imperialist posture as a 'great power' and world financial centre. As cracks appeared in this edifice — for example the crisis of confidence that followed Suez — there was much agonised introspection, but a failure, in the dominant parts of the political spectrum, to define a coherent and realistic alternative to the imperial role. Ordinary people felt a sense of drift, disintegration and decline.

There has been a breakdown of traditional definitions of British national identity. These traditional definitions, which were formed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and retained their broad appeal at least down to the 1950s, gave space for the expression of a plurality of identities and loyalties while organising them around the policies of an imperial ruling class. Since the 1960s, this central national identity has become less effective in expressing the diverse identities and cultures of Britain's peoples. The main UK political parties are no longer credible vehicles for Scottish and Welsh national feelings. The crisis of Northern Ireland has shattered the unity of the loyalist Unionist bloc and its integration into UK Conservatism. Black communities have struggled both against the overt racism expressed in police practice and successive

changes in citizenship laws, and against the more subtle racism of the liberal Centre, which offers blacks the prospects of an illusory honorary British status at the price of shedding their own cultural identities and loyalties. The women's movement has challenged patriarchal definitions of citizenship, which subsume women under a male provider/protector (for example in welfare provision). At the same time, intertwined with the internal crisis, Britain's position in the world has steadily declined.

Thatcherism and the nation

As yet the Right has been more effective than the Left in addressing this sense of crisis. Thatcherism appeals, on both economic and political issues, by its emphasis on restoring simple, 'traditional' white anglo-saxon protestant virtues: the free market and self help, 'living within our means', respect for authority, the family, national pride and loyalty. Like all ideological appeals to restore vanished virtues, this is in fact the creation of something new; the mythologised Britain of Victorian entrepreneurs never really existed, and certainly can never be re-created. The Thatcherite appeal to nationhood contains a hysterical note, because it invokes a false unity in a deeply divided nation. Even parts of the establishment — including, one suspects in the armed forces, who are usually less jingoistic than armchair patriots — were disturbed by Thatcher's recent attempt to hi-jack the Church of England.⁹ Thatcherism can resolve neither the economic problems associated with imperial decline, nor the ideological crisis of British nationhood. It would however be a mistake to underestimate the extent to which the Tories can paper over the cracks, perhaps claim the credit for some perceived economic 'improvement',¹⁰ police the crisis and engineer the necessary degree of consensus in support of these pseudo-solutions.

The note of jingoistic hysteria over the Falklands, which understandably horrified and frightened many people on the Left, reflects the potential fragility as well as the actual strength of the new Right. To exploit

⁶ *Ibid*

⁷ T Nairn, 'Britain's Living Legacy', *Marxism Today* July 1982.

⁸ See A. Gamble, *Britain in Decline* (1981) ch4.

⁹ See K Leech, 'Is the Church of England Really Moving to the Left', *Marxism Today*, Oct. 1982, p16.

¹⁰ Any such 'improvement' would of course be relative to the catastrophic decline, and correspondingly lowered expectations, of recent years; it may nevertheless be the *perception* of things 'getting better' that counts for a sufficient proportion of electors.

the multiplying contradictions of Thatcherism the Left will need to build various forms of struggle into a new popular majority. An alternative vision of Britain as a nation can be a central reference-point for building alliances around the labour movement. This will not be easy. Thatcher's politics, despite a populist style, draw on the ideological traditions with which the British ruling class has protected its position over a long history — in particular, the identification of the nation with the establishment and the political Right. A new popular majority will have to break through these in-depth defences.

1945

There is a historical precedent for this, though not a precise one, nor one that can be mechanically reproduced in the 1980s. 1945 was perhaps the moment when the labour movement and the Left came closest to undermining their opponents' claim to speak for the higher interests of the nation as a whole. The crimes and errors of appeasement, then the popular politics of national unity during the war, to which the Communist Party made a significant contribution, discredited the image of the Conservatives as the party of the 'national interest'. To this day, socialists and communists of the war generation get particu-

larly angry at Conservative claims to a political monopoly on patriotism. Even the national flag became for a time the property of the Left, as well as the Tories. The identification of ordinary people as the backbone of the national effort; popular initiatives in civil defence and voluntary services; the production drive in the factories; the opportunities for discussion and the expanding influence of radical ideas — all contributed to a democratic egalitarian atmosphere and demands for a better post-war society. Labour was the principal electoral expression of these aspirations. The Labour victory was not simply as the party of the organised working class, but as the political force to which a variety of strata and groups, many of them by tradition hostile to socialism, looked for leadership in post-war reconstruction.

The new majority against Thatcher will not be a simple re-run of this experience. Circumstances are quite different. Moreover the limitations of 1945 are indicated by the relative ease with which the Tories bounced back as the managers of the post-war social democratic consensus. 1945 does however suggest that the association of the Right with the 'national interest' and the political consensus defining that interest is not an inexorable law of nature. Any sub-

stantial political advance will involve some shift in the meaning of nationhood as popularly perceived. The struggle to defeat Thatcher must have such a shift as one of its essential parts.

But the defeat of Thatcher and the advent of a Labour government of a new type will not, in itself, reverse the three centuries or so of history from which dominant definitions of the nation have been composed. In the longer term, as the struggle for socialism develops, changing common sense views of the nation will be one guarantee of further political advance. The first step along this road is a majority against Thatcher, centred on the labour movement as the real alternative, and re-defining the interests of the nation around that alternative.

Signs of change

This re-definition cannot of course be made up in the abstract. Its elements are present in all the forms of popular struggle which have emerged in British society. These need to be given more coherent expression, linked together in a vision of the possible future. A new conception of nationhood will make sense and grip people's minds, in so far as it is associated with concrete prospects of a better future. The jingoistic hysteria we have witnessed over the Falklands is the

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morbid reflex of widespread cynicism and despair about the future; a more progressive and humane outlook will be the reflex of new hope for a credible way out of the crisis.

There are some positive signs that the Left is learning, from bitter experience, to think strategically about the building of broad alliances, to recognise the diversity of experiences and issues that can contribute to this, and to address these issues with programmes that offer some immediate prospect of change, rather than the abstract 'instant socialism' still on offer in some quarters. The discussion around the strategy of the British and other European Communist Parties is one significant influence in this respect, as is the new 'Bennite' Left in the Labour Party. Both these have in common an attempt to map out the middle ground between where we are and the vision of a socialist future.

To cross this middle ground demands a creative political response to all the problems of imperial decline. Recent years have seen a range of new movements and struggles which have renewed, but also in important respects challenged the politics of the Left. The Left has developed to a greater extent than before, concrete policies like the alternative economic strategy (AES) or the new European perspective of the peace movement. But these movements and policies remain fragmented and sectionalised. The project of re-defining the essential interests of the nation around the working class could provide a missing centre for the political programmes of the Left.

The English problem

The absence of that centre is damaging, in two immediate and obvious respects. First, the response of the labour movement to the national question has on the whole — with very important exceptions including the Communist Party — been incoherent and opportunistic. This is obviously true of the last Labour government, but it also applies to the broader movement, including many who belong to the Left. There is little awareness of the issues outside Scotland and Wales themselves, and no mobilisation around them. To win the labour movement throughout the UK to understand and actively champion national rights for Scotland and Wales is a central political task.

The incoherent response of the movement to date is no doubt in part a reflection of the deep ambiguities and dilemmas of British/English national identity. It is difficult to define a coherent approach to Scottish or Welsh national feeling without some clearer idea of what Britain as a nation is, and what we would wish it to become. The Left will



have to confront the issue of creating a 'British' identity that is not simply the expression of a centralist, English-based imperial state. If Britain, as a unitary nation-state, is to exist — and there are strong socialist grounds for wishing it to exist in some form — it can only be in the context of radical changes in the institutional form of the relationship between its component nations and peoples.

Secondly, the AES and the peace movement's policies for European disarmament both have important implications for Britain's future position in the world. To implement these policies will require a clearer view of how that position will change. This can start from the simple fact, which the Left must surely welcome, that Britain can no longer pretend to be the banker, policeman or moral missionary of the world, but is now one medium European country among several, to which more modest, but also perhaps more constructive ambitions are appropriate. Britain's location in western Europe is a necessary component in any realistic Left strategy; the way to socialism will be opened in the context of a European approach — which is of course not at all the same thing as an EEC approach — to peace, disarmament, international cooperation for economic and cultural progress. If we are to offer the British people a credible alternative some attention will have to be given to the concrete forms in which this might develop.

A long haul

A more coherent view of Britain as a nation, its composition, and the essential common interests of its peoples could fill a damaging gap in the politics of the Left. This is not simply a matter of short term political programmes, but of a wider struggle for political and cultural leadership in society.

This will be a protracted 'long haul', developing over many changes of government and swings in popular opinion, and no doubt suffering set-backs as well as making advances. The Left cannot expect to undo three centuries or so of history quickly or easily. The very strong residues of empire and chauvinism in popular common sense will make our relationship to British nationhood an uneasy one for the foreseeable future.

Yet there are more positive elements in popular tradition — above all, the deep attachment to democratic norms and practices. Linked to new forms of democratic struggle, these traditions can set in motion a dynamic change in popular conceptions. This change will be towards a more open, democratic view of the nation and its components, one that can encompass new identities and aspirations in different sections of the people. The nation will thus appear in a more open-ended way, as historically produced and in process of change. Its traditions are to be constructed and reconstructed in each generation, rather than a sacred patrimony to be handed on intact.

Such a conception of the British nation is perhaps remote from the actual Britain of Thatcher's war in the South Atlantic, the new cold war, and repression in the inner cities and Ireland. But it may nevertheless be useful, given that the nation-state will be a significant arena of political struggle for the foreseeable future, to consider what kind of popular view of the nation would correspond to socialist advance. And there are many positive developments which point towards such a conception. If we can finally grasp the nettle of British nationhood, we can begin to move along that road.