

the next step

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The poll tax in Scotland: how Labour stopped a fight see pages 4 and 5

SIX WAYS TO STOP THE POLL TAX

There is tremendous anger among working class people at the prospect of having to pay the poll tax. If that anger was organised around a few basic principles we could still stop the Tories in their tracks.

1 BREAK THE LAW

We will never stop the poll tax unless we are prepared to break the law. The Tories have shown they mean business by giving poll tax bailiffs new court powers to squeeze the last penny out of us. They have also made sure that any effective protest against the tax is illegal. We need to be as ruthless as the Tories. We will get no joy by looking to the courts for redress or by sticking to legal protests. Only a hard-hitting campaign of non-implementation will force the government to back down.

2 BUILD A WORKING CLASS CAMPAIGN

The only effective campaign will be one organised and led by the people who will bear the brunt of the new Tory tax—workers, housewives, the unemployed. The official opposition to the tax has looked to churchmen, political notables and Tory wets to put the case against the tax. This is obviously a dead end. Nor will we get anywhere by looking to Labour councils or union leaders to take up the fight. They are more concerned to come across as respectable and to keep within the law than to stick their necks out by standing up for our rights. We only stand a chance of winning if we take control of the campaign ourselves and organise whatever action is necessary to win.

3 ORGANISE COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE

Many people in Scotland have expressed their anger by burning their registration forms or filling them in incorrectly. Thousands more in England and Wales will do the same over the next year. But as isolated individuals we are powerless. The Tories will simply send in the bailiffs and haul us up in court. The only way to stop the

Tories is through collective resistance. People who want to fight the poll tax should get together in their own areas to agree on a collective response to registration, and more importantly to discuss how to build a campaign of non-implementation. If we act together we can maximise our impact.

4 REFUSE TO IMPLEMENT THE TAX

The people with the real power to break the Tory tax are council workers, especially those who have the job of implementing it. Across the country local councils are employing workers to process forms, operate computers and provide information to snoopers. If council workers refused to cooperate the whole tax-collecting machinery would grind to a halt. Council employees should black all work to do with the poll tax. Workers drafted in to process registrations should refuse to cooperate. No poll tax information should be fed into the computers. We should demand the redeployment of poll tax workers into departments that are overworked and understaffed. And we have to organise to ensure that the government and the councils cannot victimise workers who refuse to act as poll-tax scabs.

5 BUILD A UNITED CAMPAIGN

The best way to prevent council workers from being victimised, and tax defaulters from being hauled up in court, is by organising a united campaign across the whole community. Within councils we must organise across departments and unions. We also need to ensure unity between council workers and the wider community—especially those outside the organised labour movement such as women working in the home and the unemployed.

6 STOP THE SNOOPERS AND BAILIFFS

Council workers should release information when snoopers or bailiffs are about to hit certain areas so that local anti-poll tax groups can organise against them. Snoopers

and bailiffs are scabs and should be treated as such. In many areas of Scotland local people organised hostile reception committees for the snoopers. When bailiffs come we need to ensure that they too meet with organised resistance. From the Clyde to the East End of London the working class has a history of standing up to the state's bully boys. We need to revive this tradition of organising direct action in defence of our rights.



Pandora Anderson

editorial

17 March • No 9 • Editor: Joan Phillips

BACKS AGAINST THE WALL

LAST year chancellor Nigel Lawson's tax-cutting budget was widely acclaimed as the masterstroke of an economic genius. It did much to enhance Lawson's reputation for defying the expectations of the pundits with innovative, risk-taking changes in the government's revenue and expenditure plans. This time around the chancellor heeded advice that tax cuts would be the worst thing that could happen to the British economy, facing huge trade deficits and rising inflation. In fact, he leaned further to the side of caution than most commentators either advocated or expected.

The explanation for this shift from the brash 1988 budget to the boring 1989 offering cannot be located at the level of the specific measures contained in them. Taking tuppence off the basic income tax rate, as Lawson did last year, is not the sort of measure to make or break an economy. Likewise, the prudence displayed in this year's budget is only one factor influencing broader economic trends. The 1989 budget is significant because it amounts to an admission on the part of the government that all is not well with British capitalism.

The 1988 budget received such praise because it came at a time when economic reality seemed to confirm the wisdom of Thatcherite economics. After the arduous years of recession in the early eighties, and limited revival thereafter, the economy experienced a sudden growth spurt from 1986. The Tories were able to claim that their original prescription of harsh medicine to remedy Britain's economic ills had worked wonders.

It seemed as if sustainable, low-inflationary growth had replaced the stagflation of the seventies. It was in this celebratory atmosphere that accolades were heaped upon the budget. The 25 per cent basic income tax rate it established was something of a milestone, since it was an aim originally outlined in Thatcher's 1979 manifesto.

Aside from the favourable economic conditions, the political climate added to the Tory euphoria. Still dazed from a third election defeat in June 1987, the opposition was busy appropriating the essentials of Tory economics in the vain hope that such a move would enable it to compete. But this plagiarism simply made the government's arguments seem all the more compelling.

The circumstances in which the chancellor prepared this latest budget stand in stark contrast. Inflation, which was pronounced dead a year ago, has returned with a vengeance. The trade deficit, as a proportion of output, now rivals that of the USA.

The 1989 budget looks more like a last-ditch effort to stave off potential crisis, than a set of positive measures designed to encourage an economic renaissance. The government's expressed aim of achieving a soft-landing for the economy is an admission that the triumphalism of a year ago was without foundation. The aim now is simply to avoid a repeat of the early eighties.

With the economy faltering, the government has found it increasingly difficult to keep up the appearance of being in control. The once-lionised Lawson has been made to look especially

inept, after calling each monthly hike in inflation a 'blip' and every monthly trade deficit an 'exception'. His attempt to cut inflation by arguing that rising interest costs on mortgages do not count can only invite ridicule.

In fact, Lawson is fortunate that one price not recorded in the official retail price index is the price of housing. Last year's price boom in the housing market would otherwise make today's 7.5 per cent inflation figure seem positively good. Undaunted, the chancellor has been trying to persuade the Central Statistical Office to revise the way that it computes the trade deficit. This blatant attempt to massage the figures downwards was too much even for the numbers men in Whitehall. They have revised the figures, but upwards.

Suspensions that behind the Tory show of confidence lies trepidation about the future are confirmed by the confusing signals from the party hierarchy. Norman Tebbit and Cecil Parkinson have criticised the present high interest rate policy. They fear that the burden of mortgage payments and the spending crackdown implied by high rates, as well as the dangers for growth and employment, contain the seeds of a major electoral setback for the Tories.

Conflicts about 1992 and European economic unity are another indication of a loss of confidence in Tory ranks. In her now infamous Bruges speech last September, Thatcher lambasted the European Community for interventionist, anti-market leanings. The same view was expressed in strident terms by the retiring chairman of the Institute of Directors, Sir John Hoskyns, one of Thatcher's closest advisers in the first Tory administration.

Meanwhile, Lawson and others, like foreign office minister Lynda Chalker, are sympathetic to pressing on with European-oriented economic reforms. Lawson has lately made a show of opposition to placing the pound inside the regulatory framework of the European Monetary System. But this is a tactical ploy to scotch continued speculation that he is at odds with Thatcher, after the prime minister warned him not to buck the currency markets last year.

Disagreements about Britain's role inside a more integrated Europe do not yet prefigure a major breach in Tory ranks. But Thatcher's outspokenness suggests insecurity about the economy and Britain's future status.

The fact that the chancellor has had to sacrifice his budget-reforming reputation is a sign of economic problems in the offing. In the weeks before the budget, Lawson tried to keep up an appearance of continuity in Tory policy by insisting that there would be no fiscal measures to tackle inflation. By this he meant that the government would not seek to reduce consumer spending through raising taxes. According to the government's own figures, however, a budget package which keeps an extra £2 billion out of the hands of the taxman will still raise total tax revenues as a proportion of national output. Even if it does not amount to an open retreat, Lawson's budget is a significant concession to the argument that tax-cutting can damage economic health.

The main motive behind the

moderation of the 1989 budget is the need to reassure the money markets of the government's determination to confront Britain's economic problems. In recent weeks overseas holders of UK financial assets, worried about inflation and the slowdown of the British economy, have hinted at their readiness to send the pound reeling by selling up.

Lawson likes to pretend that overseas investors have supreme confidence in the British economy and are unconcerned about inflation and trade deficits. Yet he has spent months promising the money men higher interest rates on their investments every time they show signs of losing faith. In effect, overseas money has stayed because the chancellor keeps offering a one-way bet. It is these fears about a possible run on the pound which explain the chancellor's concern to avoid a budget that might in any way be construed as soft when it comes to tackling inflation. So sensitive was he to international fears about inflation that he even avoided raising excise duties on alcohol and tobacco since these would affect prices.

The Tories insist that getting inflation down is the litmus test of their economic strategy. Thatcher even went so far as to claim that her ultimate aim is nought per cent inflation. And her chancellor seems to have rediscovered the hard-nosed monetarist convictions that he shed a few years back. Lawson has justified his strategy of relying exclusively on high interest rates to counter inflation by arguing that inflation is 'a disease of money and monetary policy is the cure'.

It is likely, however, that economic and political considerations will lead the Tories to pursue a more pragmatic approach. As the 1992 general election already starts to figure in policy calculations, the government will prefer to maintain growth rather than launch a wholesale offensive against inflation.

As the economy slows down, the government's commitment to raising interest rates further to tackle inflation cannot last. Leading analysts in the City expect that inflation will be harder to control than the chancellor lets on. They doubt that the government will risk plunging an already slowing economy into recession with even higher interest rates. In the coming months the government is likely to quietly relax its interest rate-led anti-inflation policy, and opt instead for sustaining a respectable level of growth. This will inevitably mean accepting a lower pound. Here, the Tories have the option of using Britain's record foreign currency reserves to prevent the pound's fall turning into a rout.

Tory claims about transforming British capitalism are much less convincing than they seemed a year ago. Today the man who earned his reputation as an economic maestro by creating the impression of wanting to get things done, now appears to be concerned only with putting off the day when he or somebody else is forced to confront pressing problems. Given the growing disorientation of the world economy, the government is unlikely to have that much time on its hands. It may not be long before emergency measures replace boring budgets as the mainstay of Tory policy.

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letters

PEASANTS REVOLT AGAINST THE POLL TAX?

CAMPAIGNS against the poll tax are springing up across England at the moment. I went along to one, looking for ways to fight against the latest Tory attack. What struck me was the frightening inability of the left to learn from its mistakes.

To come to grips with the failure of anti-poll tax campaigns so far must involve an examination of the Scottish experience, where the Labour Party has stifled effective resistance to the tax. Yet these lessons have not come home.

Instead of discussing how to mount real pressure against the tax, we were treated to calls for moderation and the glorification of

past defeats. Somebody from Greenwich Against the Poll Tax Campaign gave a glowing account of a carnival on Blackheath earlier this year commemorating Wat Tyler's fourteenth-century revolt against the poll tax. They were slaughtered 600 years ago. Surely we can come up with something better than that in the here and now.

To talk of a broad-based campaign, including bishops, Labour MPs and Tory voters is all well and good, but at what cost? All the left seems to be able to come up with at the moment is parades of VIPs and pleading.

To beat the poll tax, to even begin fighting, we must look to our strength and avoid past mistakes. Independent militant action by local government unions is the only way we can stand up to the Tory law. This is where discussion must begin if we are to escape the past cycle of defeat which the Labour Party has left us.

Tom Morgan
London



Students must fight for the right to organise independently

TURKISH LESSONS FOR STUDENTS

I WAS talking to some Turkish students recently and they were shocked that students in Britain wanted to defend a state-funded student union. In Turkey, students organised their own unions and campaigned politically for membership, despite facing huge obstacles like police spies and the threat of arrest. There are similar repressive tendencies in this country; the great difference is in the response.

In Turkey, independent student unions recognise that they can't oppose the regime by moderate pleading about narrow student issues: they build support around issues like Turkey's treatment of

the Kurdish minority. The difference in attitudes to the police struck me when NUS president Maevie Sherlock agreed with the police that the recent demonstration against the loans scheme was a great success because it had been quiet, well-behaved and bore no relationship to challenging the government.

In 1987 when the Turkish government tried to impose a state-run union (similar to that which renders students here impotent) students organised pirate demos and canteen occupations, and refused to disperse until the police did. This determined resistance forced the Turkish authorities to shelve their plans. Students in Britain must do the same: only by fighting for our right to organise independently can we pose any serious threat to the government.

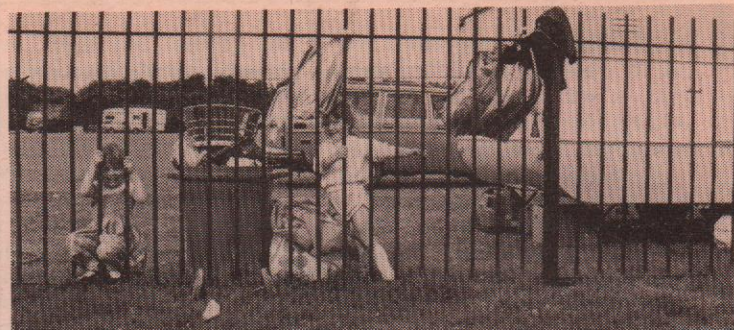
Suzie Eales
Brighton

Write to
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censorship
racism
poll tax

ARE GYPSIES OPPRESSED?

I ENCLOSE an article from a recent *Diario 16* on hassles faced by gypsies in Madrid. In recent weeks there have been demonstrations against their rehousing to live among Spanish workers on the estates adjacent to the groups of shanty towns that surround the capital. I recall that you do not regard gypsies as an



oppressed group in Britain. Would you say the same about gypsies in Spain? Are they victims of racism? Their victimisation certainly seems

to be more institutionalised here.
Gareth King
Madrid

CLOUD CUCKOO LAND ON CENSORSHIP

WITH regard to your article 'An outrage against our rights' (*the next step*, 17 February), I would like to say that regarding the fetus earring trial, the outrage was against the fetus, the women from whose bodies these fetuses were removed, and the sensibilities of all decent people who found this shocking, disturbing and totally unacceptable. I was angered by the fact that this was deemed to be 'irrelevant' by Kenan Malik.

I am not discussing the rights and wrongs of abortion itself, but as a woman I feel that to display a fetus—a potential human being—in this way degraded women and degrades life, as we all started out like this. You, who claim to be opposed to women's oppression, say that it is 'irrelevant' that many people are opposed to the fact that human reproduction is debased in this fashion, and laid open to sniggers and ridicule. The article talks of intolerance; I would argue that this attitude is intolerant of the many people who support my view.

With regard to the *Oz* trial, I think I am correct in saying that the offending material was a drawing of a man having sexual intercourse with a dog. I hardly think this is in the same league as these earrings. I don't believe that at any time, whether in the 'swinging sixties' or now, the earrings would be acceptable. Books, pictures and publications are one thing, but dead fetuses taken from the bodies of women are another.

I am opposed to repression, and the Tory government, but I have a moral code, which I have the right to express, and I am glad that the two gentlemen responsible for those appalling earrings were convicted. You don't have to have Victorian values to take this view, nor do you have to be a narrow-minded bigot.

Your attitude seems to be 'wait for the revolution, then we'll decide what our standards of decency are'. Well, that's living in cloud cuckoo land. We are living in the present, and you cannot dismiss the here and now.

Susan M Taylor
Liverpool

I WANTED to make just one point about Louis Ryan's letter to last week's *the next step*. He says that the article on the fetus earring trial should have addressed the secondary question of the artistic merit of the work, as well as pointing out the primary importance of the case in the context of growing state censorship. It would seem to me that these are very much separate issues, which it would be impossible to tackle in the context of a short article whose primary function was to spell out the dangers of making any concessions to censorship.

There is nothing patronising in this: it is simply a matter of how best to present a clear line of argument on an issue which urgently demands some clarification. I agree that there is a need to advance a revolutionary approach to the broader questions of art and aesthetics, but I believe that the RCP was right in this instance to tackle the censorship issue head-on.

Liam Cassidy
Watford

IN their criticisms of my article on the fetus earrings trial (letters, 10 March), John Devlin and Louis Ryan both end up fudging the issue of opposition to censorship.

Devlin thinks that our argument against censorship would have been stronger if we

had selected the issue more carefully or had made clear our distaste for the earrings.

In fact this case was chosen very carefully as a test case for censorship, *not by us but by the establishment*, precisely because it could be relied upon to excite great distaste. That many people who are opposed to censorship in general came round to supporting it in this particular instance only underlined the need for an unequivocal approach. An unequivocal approach is one that rejects state censorship irrespective of who is calling for it and on what grounds. By pursuing this stance on an unpopular issue I would have thought our argument against all censorship would have been strengthened rather than undermined.

Ryan thinks it patronising that *the next step* article concentrated on the issue of censorship at the expense of commenting on the artistic value of the work.

It was not simply a rhetorical flourish to dismiss the question of the work's offensive character as irrelevant: it was a deliberate device to emphasise that which is relevant in this debate—the advance of state censorship. Similarly, in our coverage of the controversy over *The Satanic Verses*, we were more concerned to take a clear stand on the question of censorship than to present a critique of Salman Rushdie's use of magical realism in his novel.

The golliwog is as culturally degenerate as a fetus earring. But calling for state censorship endangers the fight for equal rights



The fetus earrings sculpture is undoubtedly fatuous as a work of art. But, as a work of art, the earrings would not have been worth a mention in *the next step*. Their only relevance lies in the fact that they became the focus for a new manifestation of state censorship.

Ryan's argument that in order to create a new vision of humanity we have to challenge bourgeois cultural values is a truism that nobody could disagree with. But it is one thing to say we must develop an alternative vision on every issue: it is another to give all such considerations equal political weight. The artistic merit of the fetus earrings has as much relevance to the fight against censorship as the cultural meaning of the golliwog—another 'iconograph of degradation'—has to the fight against racism. The left has long sought to use its criticisms of the cultural manifestations of bourgeois degradation as a refuge from taking up the struggle against its political effects.

Devlin accuses us of sensationalism and fanaticism for publishing a photograph of the banned earrings, and says our uncompromising stand against censorship can in this case only earn us the title of 'loony left'. It is now considered a sign of fanaticism to dare to stand up to the state censors? Its silence and equivocation over the fetus earring affair shows that the real danger for the left lies not in being branded as loony, but in adapting to the prejudices of the right.

Kenan Malik
London

what we fight for

New
readers
start here

THE WORKING CLASS in Britain and throughout the West has suffered a series of setbacks in recent years. These setbacks have strengthened those who argue for moderation, 'realism' and a strategy of defensiveness. The Revolutionary Communist Party takes a different view.

We believe that these setbacks are the responsibility of the old parties and union machines of the official labour movement. In Britain the Labourist tradition has exhausted itself and can no longer relate to even the most modest aspiration of the working class. The exhaustion of Labourism in no way undermines the potential of the working class to change the world.

The RCP is committed to the construction of an independent working class movement. Only a movement which recognises that the interests of the workers are irreconcilably opposed to those of the employers can fight effectively in the struggles ahead.

For the RCP, working class politics cannot be reduced to trade unionism or the affairs of the workplace. Workers must take a stand on every issue and express an independent point of view if we are to liberate ourselves. The fatal flaw of British Labourism is that it restricts workers' horizons to economic matters, while it allows the employer class to monopolise political debate. Workers must define every problem from our point of view and fight for the rights of every section of society if we are to constitute a politically independent class.

While the RCP supports the fight for real reform or improvements in the lives of the working class, we believe that no durable gains can be won within capitalism. The RCP argues that the overthrow of capitalism provides the necessary precondition for the liberation of the working class and of society as a whole.

The British state exists to protect the wealth and privilege of the capitalist class. The RCP aims to destroy the state, which maintains the conditions for exploitation. We believe that the state cannot be used for progressive ends. Any attempt to use the 'soft' side of the state, such as local government, inner-city partnership, or police authorities, lends legitimacy to the entire state apparatus. It can only strengthen the authority of the capitalists' coercive machine.

The RCP believes that workers have no nation. British workers share the same interests as the exploited in other countries. British workers have nothing in common with the employers and must resist the appeals of patriotism and chauvinism. As internationalists we recognise that the enemy is at home. Since Britain remains an imperialist power around the world, the only international role it can play is that of the oppressor.

The class struggle is inextricably linked to the struggle against imperialism. The RCP supports all anti-imperialist struggles. Workers who live in the imperialist heartland have a

special duty to back those fighting against the British oppressor. Thus we fight for the immediate withdrawal of British troops from Ireland and for Irish self-determination. We opposed Britain's colonial war in the South Atlantic, and support the return of the Malvinas islands to Argentina. We oppose British and Western interference in the Middle East. We support the destruction of the Zionist state in Palestine and of the apartheid regime in South Africa. We uphold the same principles in every struggle against imperialism. The RCP is a fervent opponent of all forms of British militarism, nuclear, and 'non-nuclear' alike.

The RCP believes that the fight against oppression is central to the construction of an independent working class movement. Workers must defend the oppressed if we are to fight for our own liberation. This is why the RCP is wholeheartedly committed to the fight against racism. The struggle for the emancipation of women is another fundamental issue for the working class. We unreservedly oppose any form of discrimination against lesbians and gays and call for the decriminalisation of homosexuality. Workers must take a stand on these issues, not out of altruism, but because it is in our class interest to fight for the fullest extension of democratic rights.

Workers need combat organisations capable of defending our interests. The existing organisations of the labour movement are singularly unsuited for this task. The RCP believes that the Labour Party is a bosses' organisation that should be fought and exposed. Despite its working class constituency the Labour Party has always followed the dictates of the capitalists. Whenever Labour has been in office, it has always betrayed the hopes of workers. The RCP is against giving any electoral support to Labour. Workers need a party that is 100 per cent our own and only responsive to proletarian interests.

The existing trade unions are heavily bureaucratised and incapable of representing the aspirations of their members. The RCP argues that rank and file trade unionists should fight to take control of the movement. Trade unionists should organise across the workplace and industry and demand that we run our own affairs. Rank and file committees organised on an industry-wide basis could ensure that the unions truly belong to their members.

The RCP's aim is social revolution in Britain and internationally. We believe that this perspective is no less essential in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union than in the West. Only the working class has the capacity to liberate humanity. Our job is to contribute practically to the realisation of this objective.

If you would like to discuss these issues further, please write to: RCP, BM RCP, London WC1N 3XX, or phone (01) 375 1702.

The poll tax has not only provided a focus for angry outbursts against the Tories in Scotland. It has also been the foremost issue on which people have judged the Labour Party and found it wanting. Significantly, when Jim Sillars overturned a 19 500 Labour majority to win November's Govan by-election for the Scottish National Party, his ballot paper declared 'No Poll Tax'. The fact that the SNP had been equally guilty of setting up the machinery for the tax in the rural areas where it held or shared power was not common knowledge to the Govan voters.

Hypocrisy

It was fitting that Labour should get its come-uppance in Govan. After all, it was in Govan town hall two months earlier that the Scottish Labour Party's recall conference had voted against a non-payment campaign. The motion which was passed objected that such a campaign would bring people into conflict with local government. 'This is not to say we fail to recognise that many individuals view this tax to be so abhorrent, the introduction to be so vindictive, that they may make their own stand by not paying it. We recognise their right to do so.' (quoted in *the next step*, 23 September 1988).

The hypocrisy of this statement becomes clear when we remember that to bring people into conflict with local government in Scotland is to bring them into conflict with Labour, the political establishment up here. The hypocrisy becomes more astonishing when Labour recognises the right to take individual action against the poll tax, at the same time as the party is committed to enforcing the Tory law and, therefore, to prosecuting individuals who refuse to pay.

The electoral dangers of this position did not escape Labour politicians. Scottish executive member Ian Smart remarked that 'people who refuse to pay will not rush out at the next general election to vote Labour'. The Govan by-election, held in the home of one of the best organised anti-poll tax campaigns, meant that voters did not have to wait for the general election to pass judgement.

Snoopers

The more naive among us might have thought that a solution to Labour's problem was at hand. Why not fight the poll tax? But Neil Kinnock had ruled this out as early as January 1988 at the local government conference in Edinburgh: 'I do not think non-payment is a feasible option. It's a council of despair. Fruitless.' It was fruitless for Kinnock, because it would undermine his overriding concern: the attempt to construct an image of Labour as a respectable party of government. Labour was aware that, in failing to fight the poll tax, it risked a serious loss of support in Scotland. Yet it could do nothing about it, for fear of looking militant in the eyes of the establishment.

The Labour Party's commitment to the law was bound to come into conflict with popular hatred of the poll tax.

It did so in the spring and early summer of 1988 because Labour councils had to compile a registration list to facilitate the implementation of the poll tax in April 1989. They are obliged by law to implement the poll tax. This involves Scottish regional councils compiling a register of all adults liable to pay, and pursuing payment of both the tax and any fines for non-compliance.

In Strathclyde the regional council took on an extra 200 staff to do a door-to-door canvass of every home. Glasgow district council is not directly responsible for implementing the tax, but also

Fighting the poll tax in Scotland

WHY LABOUR COULDN'T 'STOP IT'

What lessons can we learn from the experience

of fighting the poll tax in Scotland? Alan

Harding and Carol Taggart have some advice

for the anti-poll tax opposition in England

implicated itself by allowing its premises to be used for briefing sessions for these snoopers. The snoopers made doorstep deliveries of the registration form, followed by collection visits or interviews. Strathclyde advised snoopers that the best results would be obtained between 5pm and 9pm and at weekends. They paid 40p for each completed form. The aim of the game was to establish a 'responsible person' for each household.

Offence

A 'responsible person' is fined for failing to provide information or giving incorrect information on all the adults in the household. The fine is £50 for the first offence and £200 for each subsequent offence. If an individual fails to register he or she is liable to pay a) the tax, retrospectively from the time they moved into the area, and b) an automatic penalty of £50 or 30 per cent of the poll tax, whichever is higher.

The council has the power to sue us, arrest our wages and sell off our possessions to raise the poll tax.

Despite protestations from individual councillors, there is no question that this is what is going to happen. Labour-controlled Central regional council has already been freezing bank accounts and removing the £50 fine and £11 interest from those who have not registered. This happened to a single mother with five children. What did the embarrassed council do? Return the money and apologise? It said it would donate the equivalent amount to charity!

Strathclyde regional council tried to disguise its role as the Tories' tax collector by laying all the blame on Jack Wood, its poll tax registration officer. Labour claims that Wood has special powers under the poll tax legislation

which means that he is not under council control. In fact the council has made life easy for Wood. He had full run of council facilities including telephones, computers, and secretaries. The council even allowed Wood to circulate an initial letter to every department inviting council employees to become official scabs.

Councillors claimed that they were monitoring Wood's expenditure, and when he overspent the money allocated under the legislation, they would put the brakes on. At the same time the council itself voted to spend £520 000 on two high-capacity folding and enveloping machines, voucher-making equipment and refurbishment of a depot—all for poll tax work.

Popular

The Labour council did not have everything its own way. The hit squads of paid snoopers met determined and inventive resistance from working class communities in the housing schemes and closes not only of Glasgow but throughout Scotland. Anti-poll tax protesters blocked letter-boxes and strung barbed wire round doors, while others preceded the invaders down streets using megaphones to warn residents to keep their doors shut.

In Maryhill, Glasgow, protesters burnt registration cards every week in the spring and early summer. The police were powerless to stop it.

When firefighters arrived on one such occasion they discovered what was being burnt, told the participants it was a pity they hadn't brought their own forms, told police that the blaze constituted no risk, and went.

In response to popular opposition, the poll tax registration office orchestrated a campaign of

harassment. Police shadowed the snoopers, who targeted very small areas at a time. This made it difficult to build up collective resistance, since everybody experienced the problem as an isolated individual. Older people especially were bullied and cajoled on their doorsteps, with the physical presence of the snooper and the threat of a fine looming over them. But people refused to be intimidated.

Culprit

Throughout Scotland, meetings often hundreds-strong voiced hostility to the tax and all those associated with it. In many cases they set up their own rank and file campaigns, outside the control of the official structures of opposition.

This direct action could frustrate attempts to enforce registration but it couldn't stop the council compiling the list in many other ways. The working class resistance was the precondition for beating the poll tax but not enough in itself. Only by stopping the poll tax at source through a campaign of non-implementation, which could unite the campaigns in the localities with the council workers who wanted to black the snoopers' work, could we guarantee success.

It seems almost an insult to the intelligence to record the pathetic Labour attempts to get off the hook.

Labour councillors even took legal advice to see if the penalty letters which they issued could contain a note of protest as a PS. They also wanted the council's logo taken off the fine letters. Any Labour politician hardened in the school of political survival would know this was not sufficient to save Labour's neck. Just such a man is Scottish Labour MP Brian Wilson, who became chair of the official anti-poll tax campaign Stop It!.

The purpose of this campaign was not to stop the poll tax, but as Wilson himself spelled out, to stop people seeing the Labour Party as the culprit: 'There is a very narrow difference in public perception between the government which introduces the legislation and the local authority which implements it. And it seemed to me to be a matter of greatest urgency to our party that we should be distancing ourselves a great deal more from the legislation.' This was straight from the horse's mouth. Stop It! was a campaign to save the face of the party which was primarily responsible for implementing the poll tax in Scotland. As such it could not fight the poll tax at all.

Gimmicks

All that Stop It! could offer was a succession of gimmicks, the most prominent being the 'Return to Sender' initiative. The campaign advised the recipient of the poll tax registration form to send it back asking for more information and so bung up the system. Delighted with their wit and invention Labour Party members parodied the old Elvis number:

*'I'll write upon it,
Return to sender,
I want some facts,
I just don't want it,
This mad poll tax.'*

Never mind that this doesn't scan. The scheme didn't work either.

While the Labour Party was advising people to foul up the registration process, Labour councils were piling the pressure on their snooper squads to get results. A Strathclyde regional council memo noted: 'It is essential that the duties allocated be undertaken with the utmost diligence and quite frankly anything less will not be accepted or tolerated. Poor and sub-standard work will or may result in termination of employment or withdrawal or reduction of payment.' So much for our caring Labour councils!

People who did return their form to sender received a four-page document giving all the

answers to 14 questions they might have thought up and a warning of a £50 fine for non-registration. On receiving this document one woman phoned up the Stop It! advice line to ask what she should do next. It went quiet at the other end of the line.

The woman summed up the situation by threatening to take the campaign to the Advertising Standards Authority because it should have been called 'Delay It!'.

Stop It!'s advice was to fill in the form and have faith in the Scottish TUC's week of action planned for September which culminated in the '11th Hour': an 11-minute stoppage at 11am on Tuesday 13 September, when church bells would ring, cars would sound their horns and the nation would say 'NO POLL TAX HERE'. Needless to say it didn't.

Winning

If Stop It! put a stop to anything it was to people's desire to fight, through its insistence that there was no possibility of collective action, no possibility of illegality, and no possibility of winning. The campaign's emphasis on an individualistic approach exposed activists to victimisation and demoralised people who wanted to go all the way. But despite the official labour movement's capacity to demobilise, disorganise and demoralise resistance, it was touch and go whether it would be able to keep the spontaneous anger in check. But the bureaucrats managed it, with a little help from the left.

'You sold us out again' was on the banner outside the Labour Party conference in Govan town hall in September 1988. The sell-out had come as no surprise to the left-wing groups gathered outside the conference; they had even prepared their banners in anticipation of the inevitable betrayal. Yet throughout the summer they had insisted on orienting the anti-poll tax campaign around the very people they were so sure would sell out. The role of the left was to keep up the charade of official opposition to the poll tax by channelling the energies of activists into a fruitless campaign to persuade the Labour Party and the Scottish TUC to take a stand.

Cynical

The left has a very low opinion of itself: it has no conception of having any independence. It clings to the life support system of the labour bureaucracy, and casts itself in the role of a pressure group. As a consequence, the left's starting point is not how to fight for what the working class needs, but how to put pressure on the labour movement leaders to do our fighting for us. Thus *Militant* urged the union bureaucrats to turn their 11-minute token gesture into a one-day general strike (26 August), while *Socialist Worker* said it was necessary to 'make the most of the 13 September strike' by calling on the bureaucrats to extend the action (27 August).

This attitude of forever subordinating leadership of the struggle to the official bureaucrats who were forever sabotaging rank and file action was unpardonable.

Militant was explicit in its sycophancy, calling on the Scottish Labour Party to lead a mass campaign of non-payment, and the SWP which once championed the self-activity of the working class, was scarcely better: 'Wilson, Christie, et al, alone have the capabilities and the responsibility to lead a mass campaign of non-payment, industrial action and non-cooperation.' Instead of organising independent working class resistance, the left preferred to sow illusions in the labour bureaucracy's bag of cynical con-tricks.

For the left, rank and file action is not something to be organised in opposition to the strategy of the

labour bureaucracy, but something to be mobilised to put pressure on the bureaucrats to implement their strategy. It was the left's unyielding commitment to the labour bureaucracy that made it possible for the professional charlatans at the head of the labour movement to extinguish working class resistance to the poll tax. Indeed, the left itself made no small contribution to stifling independent rank and file initiatives.

In 1988 representatives of more than 50 anti-poll tax groups decided to convene a conference on 10 July to plan the next stage of the campaign. This proved to be the high-point of the anti-poll tax campaign.

The common ground was a campaign of non-payment, non-collection and non-implementation.

The possibility of a conference to share experiences, air problems and make an honest appraisal of what lay ahead was on the agenda. That conference never happened: it was stitched up and stage-managed by the left, so that only 13 of the original 50 groups showed up for a subsequent pre-conference meeting.

Craven

The left's orientation towards the bureaucracy was apparent at the original meeting which discussed the conference, where some suggested that Campbell Christie, the secretary of STUC and organiser of Stop It!, should be the main

speaker. After this meeting the left's embrace with the bureaucracy was reinforced by the exclusion of the rank and file. At a crowded meeting in the huge working class housing scheme of Castlemilk, Larry Flanagan, a Labour councillor and Militant supporter, blithely announced that he and his cronies were the delegates to the conference.

The establishment of a left-wing campaign other than the official one did not represent a political break. Tommy Sheridan, a Militant supporter and the secretary of the new Federation, confirmed this point when he was accused of instigating a breakaway group at a public meeting in Govanhill. 'We haven't broken away from anything', said Sheridan, 'we're not trying to break away at all'. This craven submission to the official labour bureaucrats was the hallmark of the left's campaign against the poll tax in Scotland.

Resistance

At the beginning of 1988 Derek Owen of the RCP's Smash the Poll Tax Campaign argued in an interview in *the next step* that there was nobody to look to in the battle against the poll tax except the working class. 'The battle against the poll tax is not in the future. A campaign of non-payment will not materialise in April 1989, when the poll tax comes in. The time to organise resistance is now, before

the Tories have the machinery in place.' (22 January) Many on the left played lip-service to this perspective, but their concept of a mass campaign meant urging the powers that be to do something.

The working class was reduced to the role of a hapless bystander.

In the same issue of *the next step*, left-wing Lothian Labour councillor Tony Kinder put forward his strategy for fighting the poll tax. He criticised the Smash the Poll Tax Campaign in the following terms: 'We don't have any petit-bourgeois impatience with the pace at which the working class picks up the cudgels in order to fight and win the battle. We recognise that, with lack of confidence prevailing among many sections of the working class, both in and out of work, what people need is their confidence built up so that they can successfully defeat the poll tax.' (22 January) The 'petit-bourgeois impatience' which Kinder objected to was our demand that Labour councillors who say they want to fight the poll tax should resign and fight against the council.

Battles

Kinder believed that the problem could be resolved inside Lothian regional Labour Party. 'It is my view that as the campaign against the poll tax increases in strength... then so will Lothian regional Labour Party reassess its position and perhaps advise members on the council to alter the position towards one of non-cooperation and therefore non-collection of the poll tax. But these are all battles that exist in the future and I have every confidence that we will arrive at the position where the poll tax is not implemented in Lothian region.' The situation we have arrived at one year later is that Tony Kinder and Lothian regional council have set the rate for the poll tax and are going to implement it.

Kinder and 10 other Lothian councillors have announced that they personally will not be paying the tax. This smacks of petit-bourgeois conscience-salving of the most transparent kind. Not transparent enough for the left though. It would be pointless to lay the blame at the door of individual Labour councillors. We advocated their resignation not as a magical formula for beating the tax, but to emphasise that the struggle against the poll tax could only succeed if it was organised against the local state.

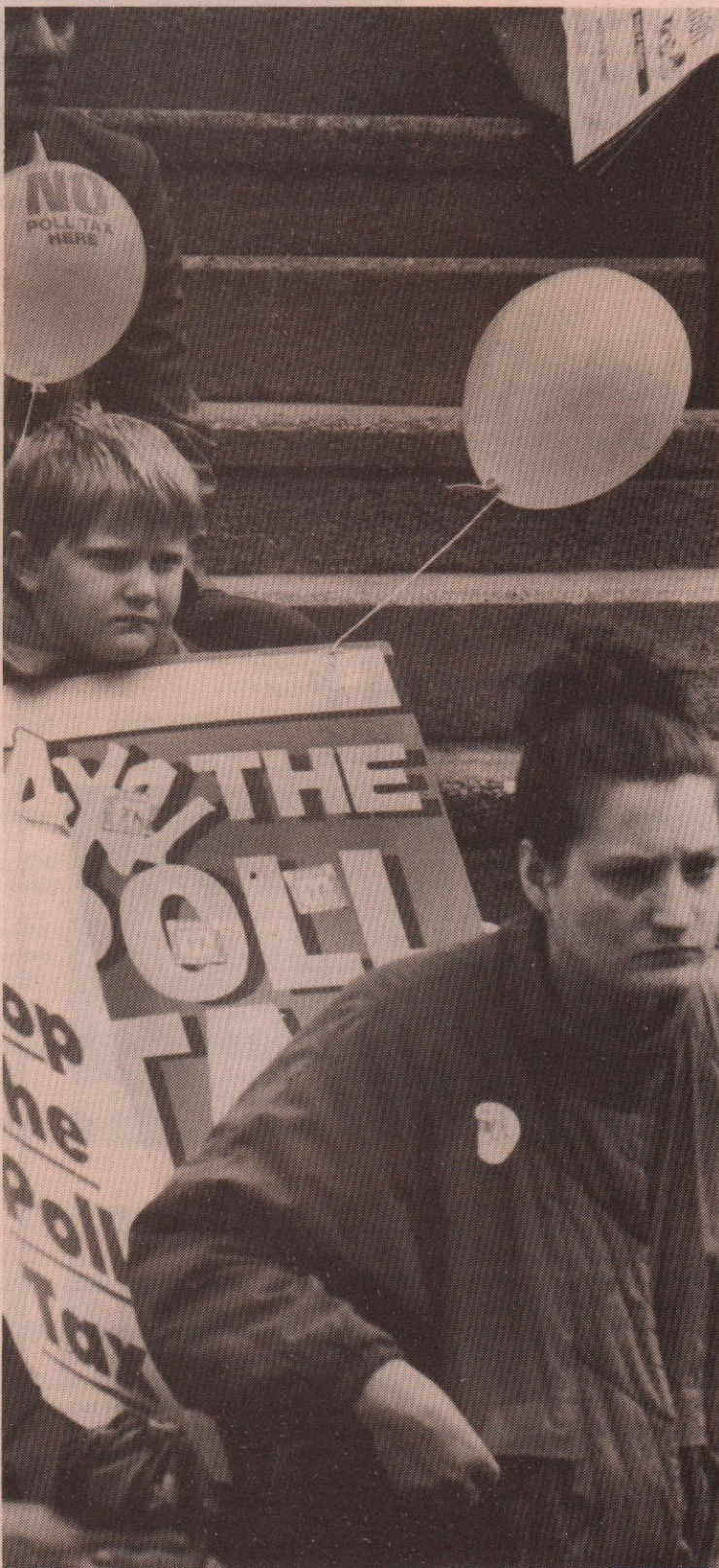
The foremost obstacle to organising such a campaign in Scotland was the left's insistence on looking to the local state and trade union bureaucracy to fight our battles for us.

Against all this we argued from the start that it was necessary to switch the focus of the anti-poll tax campaign to organising action in the working class. The demands of the Smash the Poll Tax Campaign are the basic requirements of an effective movement, which need to be taken up in Scotland, and now in England too.

United

A commitment to break the Tory law must be the starting point of any opposition to the scheme. Such opposition must be based on working class action, not appeals to middle class sympathy, and should involve trade unionists, community groups, women and the unemployed. Above all, the campaign must be built around united action to block the implementation of the tax by the council workers who are being told to implement the poll tax procedures, and working class people who are expected to pay it.

The experience of fighting the poll tax so far is that the spirit of resistance and creative organisation is there. The barrier to success is the left's allegiance to the institutions which helped to get us into this mess.



Labour's resistance to the poll tax was as lightweight as its campaign balloons. United action under working class control is the only way to win

In January a broadsheet appeared on the streets of Scotland with the emphatic headline: *Break the deadlock! Build a Scottish Socialist Party!* The Movement for a Socialist Scotland which produced this ringing statement had agreed a draft constitution for the new party and called a meeting for 25 February to finalise its inauguration. At least the motivators of the new party had the merit of taking themselves seriously, stating boldly that membership of the SSP was incompatible with support for any other political party. The party's draft constitution contained a refreshing anti-monarchist commitment, a welcome rejection of the notion that the capitalist state is neutral and a pledge to support all anti-imperialist struggles, including those which challenge the British state.

The party's founders questioned whether the Labour Party has ever been an adequate vehicle for achieving working class emancipation: 'The Labour Party has always been a two-edged weapon. It articulated the socialist aspirations of its working class base. It also, however, reflected the conservatism of the culture within which it functioned.'

Inheritor

In these days of left-wing subservience to the Labour Party, it makes a change to hear somebody say that Neil Kinnock does not deserve an exclusive franchise on the allegiance of the working class.

In the midst of a nationalist revival it is also gratifying to see left wingers dismissing the Scottish National Party as a viable alternative. In particular, the SSP has pointed out the duplicity of the SNP on the poll tax, an issue on which it has sought to accrue electoral advantage by criticising the capitulation of the Labour Party, while itself being complicit in the implementation of the tax in councils where it wields some influence. The SNP is still all things to all people, the Tartan chameleon of Scottish politics: an alternative Liberal Party in the Borders; an alternative Tory Party in the Highlands.

However, the SSP is very much the product of the two traditions it

Scottish Socialist Party STILLBORN BIRTH

Alan Harding thinks that the problem with the Scottish Socialist Party is that it is more Labourist than the Labour Party and more Scottish than the Scottish National Party

claims to reject. Thus it attempts to offer a critique of the Labour Party by invoking a distinct Scottish heritage, and tries to take up the SNP by invoking a left Labourist alternative.

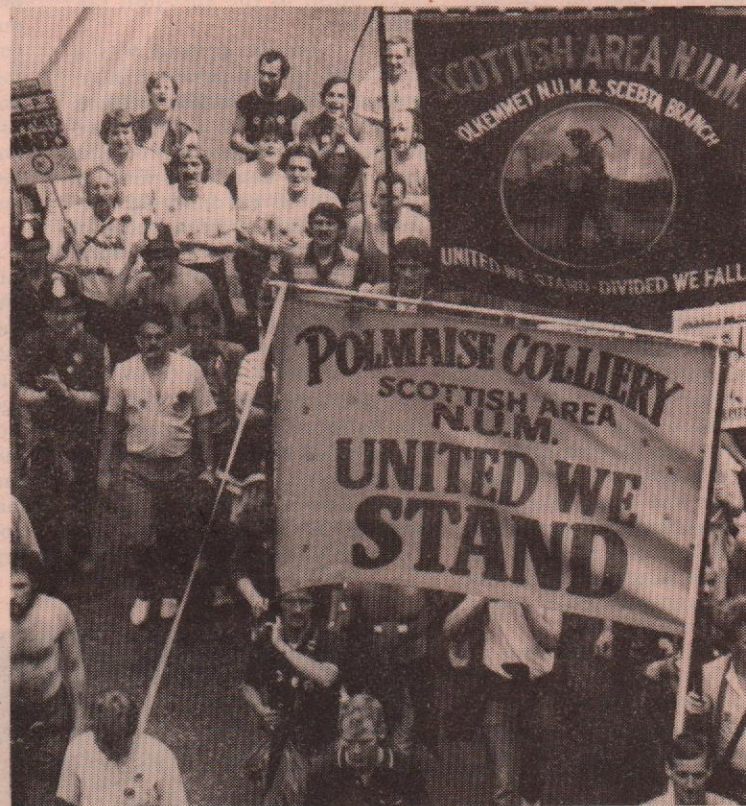
For the SSP the shift to the right in the Labour Party has made it impossible for socialists to operate effectively within it: 'Although Labour has never been a socialist party, it has hitherto accepted that the socialist minority of its membership has been a legitimate and powerful current within it. That is no longer the case.' The SSP sees itself as the inheritor of the stifled left tradition of the Labour Party. Its opposition to the Labour Party is based on a frustration with the leadership's unwillingness to fight, not on a critique of the party's anti-working class programme.

Confusion

Thus the SSP tries to forge an identity for itself, not by asserting an independent political alternative, but by embracing a mythical Scottish socialist tradition. 'The Scottish people in general and the working class in particular remain committed to a more socialist view of society, reject the legitimacy of Tory rule and are willing to fight back.' Of course Scottish workers fight back, but, as the struggles of printers, seafarers, nurses, post-workers and others in England confirm, they are not alone in this.

In fact, what distinguishes the Scottish working class today is not a stronger commitment to socialism, but a stronger allegiance to Labourism.

In Scotland, the exhaustion of the Labour Party project has



Scottish workers' commitment to Labourism is a problem, not a virtue

proceeded at a slower pace than in England, although Govan showed that the fragmentary trends so advanced in England are evident here too. Instead of trying to find something progressive in the resilience of working class support for the Labour Party in Scotland, the SSP should be struggling to root out the influence of Labourism. A party which aspires to offer an anti-capitalist alternative, as the SSP says it does, cannot advance

unless it challenges the Labour Party.

Yet nothing better illustrates the SSP's lack of a political alternative than its unwillingness to countenance a party-to-party electoral struggle with the Labour Party. Alex Wood said that the SSP would stand against Labour, but immediately qualified this by admitting that it would not challenge Labour where the SSP vote might let in the Tories. At the

25 February conference this equivocation was given a new expression, when SSP speakers stated that the party would not stand if this caused confusion. The confusion about the SSP project evidently exists already in the ranks of the party.

While the SSP uses Scottishness to attack the Labour Party, it uses Labourism to attack the SNP. The SSP is rightly contemptuous of the SNP's new demand for 'Independence within Europe', separate membership for Scotland within the EEC. Since European nations such as France, Spain and Italy would see Scotland's claims as an invitation to Corsicans, Basques and Sicilians to press their own claims, the SNP's policy is a non-starter. Its acceptance of the Treaty of Rome also exposes the SNP's claim to a socialist identity. Even if the policy could be taken seriously, it presumes a socialist Scotland isolated within a hostile Europe.

Rehash

Instead of rejecting this utopia, the SSP takes it one step further, imagining a socialist economy functioning in isolation. In so far as it is possible to isolate the SSP's economic programme, it is a rehash of the traditional prejudices of the Labour left. Speaking in the Scottish economy workshop at the SSP's 25 February conference, Douglas Thompson characterised the multinationals as the new lairds of Scotland and their attitude to Scotland as one of financial terrorism.

The SSP's Scottish variation on the theme of the left Alternative Economic Strategy reveals that it is still tied to the traditional state socialist strategy of the Labour left.

The two dozen or so people at its founding conference indicates that the SSP is less influential than the breakaway Scottish Labour Party which the SNP's Jim Sillars formed in the 1970s. But size is a secondary issue for any new party if it has something distinctive to offer the working class. SSP members are angry at Labour's betrayals and scathing of the SNP's all-class approach, but that's about as far as their political alternative goes.

Alan Harding

'Memorable' was Donald Dewar's verdict on the Labour Party's Scottish conference which met in Inverness last weekend. The conference voted unanimously in favour of a convention to examine the constitutional steps towards a Scottish assembly. Dewar, Labour's shadow secretary of state for Scotland, said that the convention gave 'new shape, new direction and new drive' to Scottish politics.

The convention may have rallied Labour's troops but the most obvious objection to it is its impracticability. The convention will meet in Edinburgh on 30 March, but it has to deal with the government to secure approval for an assembly. Since Thatcher has given an emphatic thumbs down to devolution, a Scottish assembly could only be introduced after the electoral defeat of the Conservative Party.

Faith

To get around this problem the Labour left, led by the Scottish Labour Action Group, suggested that, in the event of a Tory victory, Labour should go ahead anyway and establish a provisional assembly. At the next general election Labour should seek a 'dual mandate'. George Galloway, MP for Hillhead, explained that the dual mandate was a 'supervote' for 'Neil Kinnock into Downing Street' and at the same time a 'referendum result to the British state'.

Kinnock dubbed the proposal 'defeatist'. He promised that 'upon

Scottish Labour Party conference FORGETTABLE

Hugh Cameron



Donald Dewar talks constitutional pipe-dreams

election the Labour government will introduce legislation to establish and empower the assembly in Edinburgh'. Dewar said that the dual mandate could be interpreted as 'a lack of confidence in the future'.

Supporters of the proposal argued that although they believed that Labour would win the next election, the problem was 'the lack of faith amongst the people of Scotland that Labour will win'. Galloway added that the dual mandate was 'a positive idea which will give Labour voters an assurance that voting Labour in 1992 is not a wasted vote'.

The motion on the dual mandate was remitted back to the Scottish executive. There was no opposition

to the remit. As Galloway put it, the idea was 'not shelved nor actively pursued'—it is 'an idea whose time is coming rather than has arrived'.

At a time when poll tax bills are dropping through letter-boxes all over Scotland, the conference avoided discussion of the poll tax except to say it would be abolished if Labour got back into government. The chorus of calls for constitutional reform—conventions, assemblies, dual mandates, supervotes—is an attempt to disguise the fact that Labour has little to offer those concerned about how to stop the Tories now.

Carol Taggart



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LIVING MARXISM

Whither Scotland? This is the subject of a round-table discussion with some prominent political figures in Scotland in the March issue of *Living Marxism*.

The Scottish question fits in well with the focus of the magazine this month on the debate about constitutional reform and civil liberties. Frank Richards looks at how Margaret Thatcher has exploited the strengths of the British establishment and the weaknesses of its opponents to

monopolise modern British politics. Mike Freeman raises some important problems with the opposition's response to the Thatcher dictatorship.

Plus Safe sex and abortion booms; Rent boys: victims or villains?; An ozone-free zone?; That Petrol Emotion; The British monarchy; What's gone wrong with the German Greens?; The killing of Marie Kane; and much more.

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Eastern Airlines strike

A BLOODY NOSE FOR BUSH

George Bush is becoming the fastest lame-duck president in American history. His habit of turning every issue into a test of strength for his presidency, and underestimating the strength of feeling ranged against him, has already cost him dear in lost prestige. He stuck his neck out to get John Tower confirmed as defence secretary, and was forced to endure the humiliation of being the first president to have his request rejected. Then he aligned himself with Eastern Airlines boss Frank Lorenzo's attempt to smash his workforce, and was made to look a fool when striking workers forced the firm into the bankruptcy courts.

If the Eastern Airlines strike shows that the Bush administration is already dead on its feet, it also shows that the American working class is still alive and kicking. The 8500 workers who went on strike over Eastern's attempt to impose \$150m in wage cuts knew that they were taking on a ruthless boss,

whose asset-stripping, union-busting activities make Gordon's Gekko's destruction of the fictional Blue Arrow airlines in *Wall Street* look positively friendly. Some 21 000 Eastern workers had already accepted wage cuts, but the machinists dug in their heels and refused to surrender. The support they got on the picket lines from the company's 3500 pilots and 5900 flight attendants brought business to a virtual standstill.

In ignoring a mediation board recommendation to intervene in the dispute, Bush was trying to emulate the confrontational style of his predecessor Ronald Reagan. Early on in his first term, Reagan fired 11 000 Patco air traffic controllers, and ordered pickets to be taken away in chains. The busting of Patco set the tough-guy tone for the rest of the Reagan years.

George Bush has confirmed his reputation as the wimp of US politics

But Bush seriously underestimated the anger of the Eastern strikers, and the support they could muster from fellow workers. If the success of the strikers encourages other workers to stand and fight, then there is a good chance that the bloody nose they inflicted on Bush will set the tone for the rest of his administration. James Malone



The British way to burn a book

British censors could teach the Iranians a thing or two about how to ban books. In recent weeks the British authorities have condemned Tehran as the world centre for censorship as a result of its intervention over Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Yet, while ministers were spouting about free speech, the government's D-Notice Committee was issuing instructions to the publishers Bodley Head Ltd to prevent the publication of a book critical of Britain's role in the Second World War.

Codebreaker Extraordinary, by former intelligence operatives Eric Nave and James Rusbridger, is an exposé of British warmongering. The authors reveal that the Japanese naval code was broken by the British in 1939. They accuse British prime minister Winston Churchill of withholding information about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941 in order to draw America into the war. One point the authors do not make is that US president Frank-

lin D Roosevelt was almost certainly aware of Japan's intentions too. He did nothing to stop Japan making the first strike in the knowledge that this would give him the leverage he needed to pull American public opinion behind the USA's entry into the war.

Image

Operation Codebreaker was selected for censorship because it undermines the heroic image of the war that the establishment is increasingly anxious to promote. Five or 10 years ago books dealing with the same subjects were published without official comment. But in the culture of militarism which flourishes today, the D-Notice Committee was taking no chances with *Operation Codebreaker*: 'Revelations of this kind can, despite their age, still damage national security.' The only thing that this book damages is the orchestrated campaign to popularise British militarism. Jackie Reynolds

IN an unprecedented move the government seems set to introduce legislation after the summer recess reducing the time-limit for abortions from 28 to 24 weeks. This is a significant break with the convention that governments should not intervene on matters of private morality such as abortion. Until now attempts to lower the abortion limit have been left to private member's bills, and governments have always played a backseat role. The fact that this move has been greeted with equanimity on both sides of the house of commons shows how far the climate of opinion has shifted to the right on the abortion issue.

Rights

Over the past decade attempts to restrict the availability of abortion have become a permanent feature of political life. The campaign by Liberal MP David Alton to reduce the time-limit to 18 weeks became the focus for a fundamentalist attack on abortion rights in 1987-8. However, while Alton's supporters made no secret of their desire to make all abortions illegal, supporters of abortion rights failed to pursue an equally unequivocal approach. Instead of taking a firm stand in favour of free abortion on demand, the women's movement and the left focused on special cases, conceding the argument that abortion should be restricted according to particular medical or social criteria.

The response to the government's latest announcement shows that

Abortion after Alton



Tory anti-abortion plans show that Alton's setback was no victory for women's rights

while the Alton Bill might have been defeated in parliament, the arguments of the anti-abortionists had made headway. Indeed, immediately after Alton's Bill had been thrown out, some of those who had opposed it expressed their support for a compromise which would set the limit at 24 weeks, in line with mainstream opinion and medical practice. The parliamentary consensus in support of a 24-week limit is a sure sign that the conciliatory approach of the official anti-Alton campaigners did not work.

In order to defeat the forthcoming anti-abortion

legislation the issue of women's rights must be at the centre of the campaign. For women the question of abortion cannot be negotiated according to the mood of public opinion at any particular time. All women need to be able to have an abortion if and when they need one, to give them the freedom to be able to go out to work, to be active in a trade union or in political life outside the home. Any evasion of the issue of women's rights can only concede the argument on abortion to the right. Jon Hann

Margaret Thatcher

'OFF HER ROCKER'?

'She's gone off her rocker' was the comment of one anonymous Tory MP on the spate of bizarre public utterances by Margaret Thatcher. 'We have become a grandmother' she pronounced with regal grandeur on the news of an addition to the Thatcher brood. Then she urged us all to forgo the new fridge until the ozone-friendly freezer reaches the shops some time around the year 2000. She can't seem to decide whether environment secretary Nicholas Ridley is out of it or outstanding. After disparaging him as an oaf and an idiot, Thatcher retracted and said that he was superb in every respect.

Contempt

Many media commentators have taken Thatcher's gaffes as a sign that her government is losing its grip. On a wide variety of issues—rail crashes, food scares, the environment, health reforms and privatisation—the Tories appear out of control. The decline in Tory support suggested by recent opinion polls and the setback in the Richmond by-election has led to speculation about serious political difficulties in the offing. Some commentators have even ventured so far as to suggest that Neil Kinnock may at last have matured into a potential leader of the nation.

On the surface it does appear as if the Tories have become complacent

in their handling of many issues. But in one sense their aloofness signifies strength. After nearly a decade in office, and faced with an incoherent and disunited opposition, it is not surprising that the Tories exhibit a certain contempt for the cut and thrust of political debate which is supposed to be the hallmark of Britain's two-party system. The increasing formality of the democratic process underlines the irrelevance of the opposition and the ascendancy of the government.

Issues

The most striking feature of British politics today is the issues that dominate. Some, like food and the environment, play on personal fears and reinforce the apolitical climate. Others, like the channel tunnel dispute and the revolt of the legal and medical professionals, highlight the extent to which political conflict is confined to the concerns of the middle classes. On the fundamental issues of militarism, capitalist economics, racism or unemployment, there is a broad consensus around the Thatcherite view. It matters little whether Thatcher is going off her head, when the opposition's idea of having a go at the government is to defend the royal 'we' against its usage by commoners like Thatcher. Tony Kennedy

Anti-Irish scares

HAVE YOU HEARD THE ONE ABOUT...?

The lengths to which the Tories are prepared to go to invent an IRA threat has led to increasingly contrived scare stories. A chance discovery of an arms and explosives cache by a man gathering leaf-mould for his garden was paraded as proof that an IRA cell was about to plant a bomb at a Conservative conference which nobody knew about in nearby Scarborough. The media issued

chilling stories about how a plot to murder the prime minister in a repeat of the Brighton bombing had been foiled. The police appealed to the public to report their suspicions about anybody with an Irish accent seen anywhere in the vicinity of Britain.

To capitalise on the Scarborough sensation, Scotland Yard released what was supposed to be an IRA hit-list of top people. It was funny

how the police only saw fit to divulge this information after the Scarborough scare, since the list was supposed to have been found in an IRA bomb factory in Clapham last December. The scene was set for the most hysterical anti-terrorist hunt in Britain since the Brighton bomb in 1984. Soon the media sleuths were claiming that there was not one but four IRA units roaming the country seeking to rub out the

cabinet in general and Thatcher in particular.

The *Sunday Times* Insight team, whose creative capacities were used to smear the main witnesses in the Gibraltar inquest, once again rose to the occasion. The intrepid reporters based their entire investigation on the plot of Frederick Forsyth's *Day of the Jackal*. That the media are prepared to weave fact and fiction together as if they

are one and the same says a lot about the standards of journalism tolerated on the Irish issue. It says even more about the way in which the establishment has come to rely on such panics to sustain the anti-Irish consensus it has built up over the years. It has got to such a stage that even if an IRA unit did not exist it would be necessary for the Tories to invent one.

the next step

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Julius Alexander has just received the judgement of the adjudicator following his December 1988 appeal against deportation to St Vincent. The appeal hearing, originally on 17 November 1988, had been adjourned until 23 December. This followed a submission by lawyers that his deportation order was not valid because it had been signed by an immigration officer rather than the home office. On 23 December the adjudicator, having listened to the case, reserved judgement and retired for two months to consider his verdict. The outcome is disturbing for anyone concerned with the mounting attacks on immigrants.

It was ruled that immigration officers *can* issue deportation orders and that the home secretary has a right to delegate such powers to immigration staff. This is the legal equivalent of giving police officers the right to carry out punishments against those they think are criminals. It marks a major advance in the repressive powers available to immigration officials. The Julius Alexander case is being used to establish a precedent that will affect thousands more in the years ahead.

In the written findings of the adjudicator it was revealed that 'the secretary of state with effect from 1 August 1988 had delegated his power to issue a notice of intention to deport to members of the immigration service at not less than inspector level' ('Findings of the immigration appeals tribunal in the case of Julius Alexander', 20 February 1989). The order to

Julius Alexander

A TEST CASE FOR BRITISH RACISM

deport Julius Alexander had been signed by an immigration official below inspector level. Yet the adjudicator inferred that the decision to deport him had been taken by an inspector.

This only confirms that the law exists to uphold the interests of the state, and can be twisted to mean anything which serves the purposes of the establishment. The adjudicator's decision in the Julius Alexander case shows that the home office is intent on winning the right of immigration

officials to impose deportation notices on those they consider to be illegal immigrants. The Julius Alexander case has become a test case to establish new powers for immigration officers.

The campaign launched by Workers Against Racism to fight the deportation has discussed its response to the latest developments. In similar situations other deportation campaigns have made the mistake of allowing the legalities of the deportation case to dominate the arguments

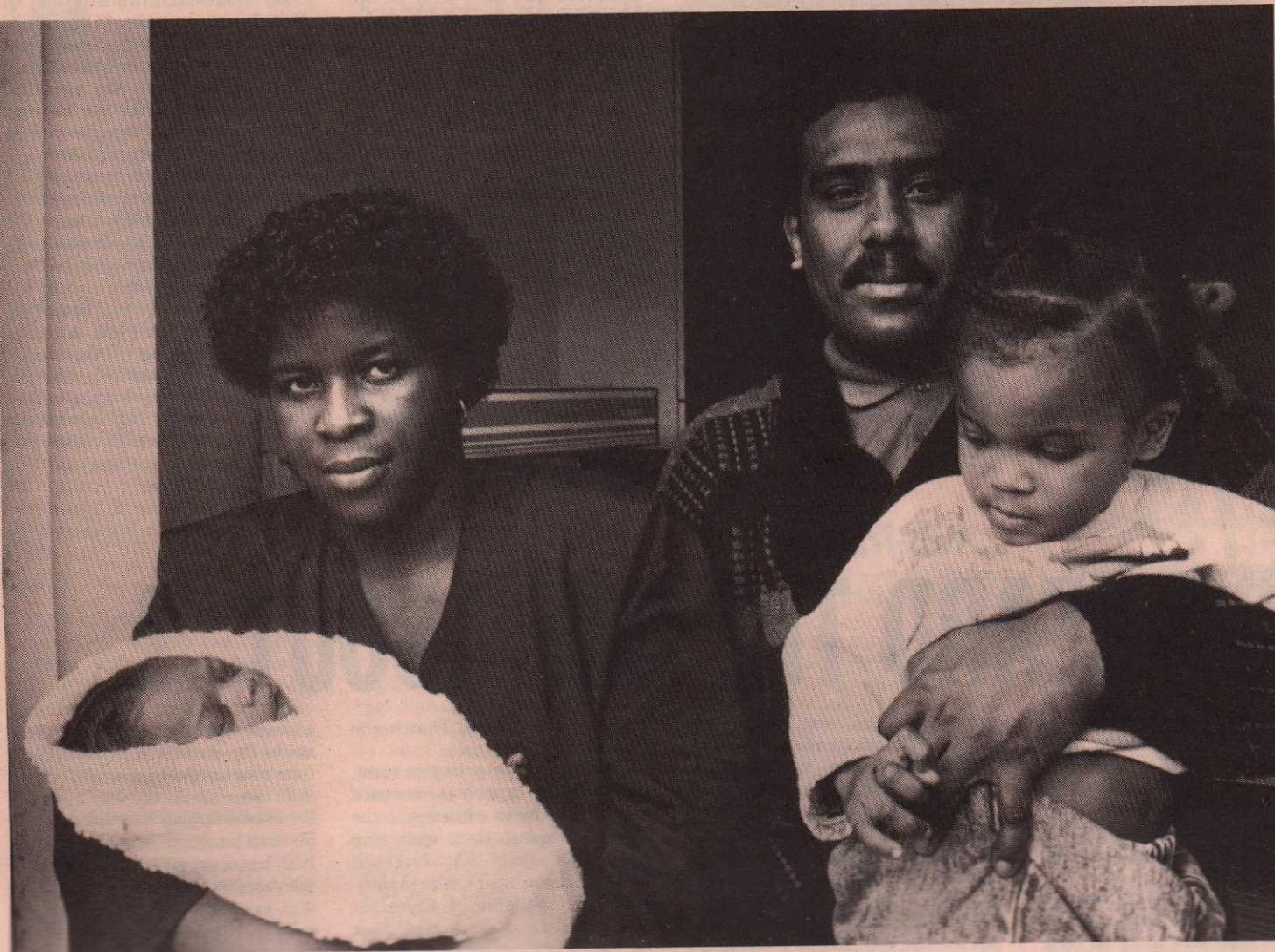
put forward by the campaign. Thus supporters of Viraj Mendis made the argument that he would be in danger in Sri Lanka central to his legal appeal. It soon seemed as if it was a third world regime he was resisting rather than Britain's racist immigration legislation. This gave the home office a way of winning the argument: all it had to do was prove to its own satisfaction that deportation would not be life-threatening.

In the case of Julius Alexander a similar mistake would be fatal. Were the campaign to focus on who signed the deportation order it would be easy, once the legal process was completed, for the home office to issue a new one signed by the home secretary himself. Julius would then be deported for being an overstayer and would have no recourse to any legal defence.

The lesson is that to be successful in 1989, any campaign against deportation must focus on the racism of the immigration laws and their effect on the particular victim. Our support for the right of an immigrant to stay has nothing to do with the conditions under which they may be forced to live if they were deported, nor with the legal intricacies of who signed their deportation order. We oppose deportations because we are for the right of all who wish to live in Britain to be able to do so. We are also for full and equal rights for all those who already live here.

Julius Alexander is a victim of a repressive state which allowed his mother and two brothers to emigrate from St Vincent in the 1950s when labour was in short supply, but which rejected his attempts to join them in the 1970s when the labour market was saturated. The only hope for Julius Alexander, his fiancée, and their children is for a campaign to mobilise large numbers in his defence. The legal process is not a reliable instrument: the weight of numbers of ordinary people counts for everything. Keith Tompson

• If you would like to help the campaign ring us on (01) 375 1702. Workers Against Racism meets at 7.30pm every Wednesday evening in London. The meetings are in Room A144, Main Building, London School of Economics, Houghton Street, WC2.



Julius Alexander is one of the first people to be threatened with deportation since the government introduced new immigration appeal regulations in August 1988. Workers Against Racism is campaigning to prevent his expulsion from the country and his separation from his fiancée and children.