

**MICHAEL McCREERY**

**The  
National  
Question  
in Britain**

***ORIGINS OF THE  
BRITISH STATE***



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#### PUBLISHER'S NOTE

This edition of Michael McCreery's 'The National Question in Britain' & 'Origins of the British State' is photo-reproduced from 'Vanguard' - periodical of the Committee to Defeat Revisionism for Communist Unity - of July 1964, pages 12 & 16. The second article does not appear to have been continued in any later edition and it may be that comrade McCreery's ill health prevented its completion.

#### Other articles by McCreery available

'Destroy the Old to Build the New' - a commentary on the state, revolution and the CPGB; 'The Patriots' - the overseas operations of British finance capital and the national liberation struggle; 'The Way Forward' - the need to establish a Communist Party in England, Scotland & Wales; 'Organise at the Place of Work'; 'Notes on the Lower Middle Class & the Semi-proletariat in Britain'.

Also works by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tsetung, Enver Hoxha, John MacLean, James Connolly and others.

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# The National Question

IN *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, Stalin wrote:

"What is a nation?"

"A nation is primarily a community, a definite community of people.

"This community is not racial, nor is it tribal. The modern Italian nation was formed from Romans, Teutons, Etruscans, Greeks, Arabs and so forth. The French nation was formed from Gauls, Romans, Britons, Teutons, and so on. The same should be said of the British, the Germans and others, who were formed into nations from peoples of different races and tribes.

"Thus, a nation is not a racial or tribal, but a historically constituted community of people.

"On the other hand, it is unquestionable that the great empires of Cyrus and Alexander could not be called nations, although they came to be constituted historically and were formed out of different tribes and races. They were not nations, but casual and loosely-connected conglomerations of groups, which fell apart or joined together depending upon the victories or defeats of this or that conqueror.

"Thus a nation is not a casual or ephemeral conglomeration, but a stable community of people.

## COMMUNITY OF LANGUAGE

"But not every stable community constitutes a nation. Austria and Russia are also stable communities, but nobody calls them nations. What distinguishes a national community from a political community? One of the distinguishing features is that a national community is inconceivable without a common language. The Czech nation in Austria and the Polish in Russia would be impossible if each did not have a common language, whereas the integrity of Russia and Austria is not affected by the fact that there are several different languages within their borders. We are referring, of course, to the colloquial language of the people and not to the official government language.

"Thus *community of language* is one of the characteristic features of a nation.

"This of course, does not mean that different nations always and everywhere necessarily speak different languages, or that all who speak one language necessarily constitutes one nation. A *common language* for every nation, but not necessarily different languages for different nations. There is no nation which at one and the same time speaks several languages, but this does not mean that there

may not be two nations speaking the same language. Englishmen and Americans speak one language, but they do not constitute one nation. The same is true of the Norwegians and the Danes, the English and the Irish.

"But *why*, for instance, do not the English and the Americans constitute one nation in spite of their common language?

"Firstly, because they do not live together, but inhabit different territories. A nation is formed only as a result of lengthy and systematic intercourse, as a result of the fact that people live together from generation to generation. But people cannot live together for lengthy periods unless they have a common territory. Englishmen and Americans originally inhabited the same territory, England, and constituted one nation. Later, one section of the English emigrated from England to a new territory, America, and here, in the new territory, in the course of time came to form the new American nation.

"Thus *community of territory* is one of the characteristic features of a nation.

"But this is not all. *Community of territory* in itself does not create a nation. This requires, in addition, an internal economic bond which welds the various parts of a nation into a single whole. There is no such bond between England and America, and so they constitute two different nations. But the Americans themselves would not deserve to be called a nation were not the different parts of America bound together into an economic whole, as a result of division of labour between them, the development of means of communication and so forth.

"Take the Georgians, for instance. The Georgians before the Reform (the abolition of serfdom in 1861) inhabited a common territory and spoke one language. Nevertheless, they did not, strictly speaking, constitute one nation, for, being split up in a number of disconnected principalities, they could not

share a common economic life; for centuries they waged war against each other and pillaged each other by inciting the Persians and Turks against each other. . . . Georgia came on the scene as a nation only in the latter half of the 19th century, when the fall of serfdom and the growth of economic life of the country, the development of means of communication and the rise of capitalism, instituted a division of labour between the various districts of Georgia, completely shattered the economic self-sufficiency of the principalities and bound them together into a single whole.

"The same must be said of the other nations which have passed through the stage of feudalism and have developed capitalism.

"Thus community of economic life, economic cohesion, is one of the characteristic features of a nation.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL MAKE-UP

"But even this is not all. Apart from the foregoing, one must take into consideration the specific spiritual complexion of the people constituting a nation. Nations differ not only in their conditions of life, but also in spiritual complexion, which manifests itself in peculiarities of national culture. If England, America and Ireland, which speak one language, nevertheless constitute three distinct nations, it is in no small measure due to the peculiar psychological make-up which they developed from generation to generation as a result of dissimilar conditions of existence.

"Of course, by itself the psychological make-up, or, as it is otherwise called, the 'national character,' is something indefinable to the observer, but inasmuch as it manifests itself in a distinctive culture common to the nation it is definable and cannot be ignored. 'Needless to say, national character' is not a thing that is fixed once and for all, but is modified by changes in the conditions of life; but since it exists at every given moment, it leaves its imprint on the physiognomy of the nation.

"Thus community of psychological make-up, which manifests itself in a community of culture, is one of the characteristic features of a nation.

"A nation is a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture.

"It goes without saying that a nation, like every other historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and end.

"It must be emphasised that none of

the above characteristics is by itself sufficient to define a nation. On the other hand it is sufficient for a single one of these characteristics to be absent and the nation ceases to be a nation."

Stalin's general analysis, made in 1913, remains correct. His teaching on the national and colonial question, and its relationship to the struggle against capitalism, and for proletarian dictatorship and Socialism, must be mastered by all Communists. And particularly by those in Britain, for our rulers still exploit half the world. It needs driving home again and again that the struggle in other lands for complete national liberation from imperialism is an essential part of the struggle to weaken, and finally overthrow, the political power of our own ruling class.

But it is all too often forgotten that there is a national problem *within* the boundaries of the British state. The Irish struggle for national liberation continues. Ireland remains divided. And in Great Britain itself there are not one, but *three* nations; the English, the Scottish, and the Welsh. Each one is "a historically evolved, stable community of language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture." To ignore this fact is to ignore a basic feature of British society.

### STALIN'S ERROR

Stalin himself, in the passage quoted above, and elsewhere in *Marxism and the National and Colonial Question*, confuses "British" and "English." In one passage he refers to "the British nation," in the next to "the English nation." There is, in fact, *no* British nation, but a British state, within which three nations, and part of a fourth, are oppressed and exploited by a ruling class drawn from all four nations. There are British capitalists and British workers. These are British people. But there is *no* British nation.

For the revolutionary working class movement in Britain to ignore this basic feature of British society is to ensure the defeat of the revolution. A correct strategy for the struggle against British capitalism, and for its final overthrow, can only be evolved by taking into account the national problem within, as well as without, the boundaries of the British state. But the measure of our rulers' ability to smother the revolutionary aims of the working class, and remove the national question from the minds of militant workers, particularly in England, is seen in the *British Road to Socialism*. This programme of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 39

pages long, does not once refer to the need for a revolution in Britain. The word "revolution" is not even mentioned! Nor is the word "England" once used! And Scotland and Wales receive just this one reference. "Scotland and Wales need to have their own Parliaments, with powers to ensure the balanced development of their economies within the general plan for Britain as well as to satisfy the wider national aspirations of their peoples." But is this not the exact and happy position which the Irish in Northern Ireland have already achieved?

It is, of course, no coincidence that this programme ignores both the national question, and the need for a revolution in Britain. For "the wider national aspirations" of the Scots and the Welsh can never be achieved within the framework of the British capitalist state, but only with the break-up of that State. And the end of exploitation in Britain, equally, can never be achieved within the framework of the British capitalist state, but only by smashing that state. Yet the main argument of the *British Road* is that the needs of the people in Britain can be met in full within a reformed British state. The aims of revolution, and of national liberation, must therefore be abandoned in this programme.

This British state came into existence to serve the interests of the rising capitalist class, has been continuously developed and strengthened, to serve their interests at each stage in the development of the capitalist system, and will be used by them, and no other class, until they are finally overthrown. The need to establish one market in Britain led the capitalists of England to incorporate Scotland and Wales, within the one British state ruled from Whitehall. In this task they were assisted by the dominant sections of Scottish and Welsh capital, who collaborated with them against the interests of their own people. The need to extend this British market led to the conquest of Ireland, and of half the world.

## JOHN McLEAN

British capitalism is now in decline. The imperialist stage of capitalist development, in which we now live, is the final stage. Beyond Imperialism lies Socialism. But capitalism will not die a natural death. It must be overthrown. It is for this reason that Communists in Britain, and particularly in England, must master the national question. That great Scottish Communist, John McLean, wrote, a short while before his death in November 1923.

"Russia could not produce the world revolution. Neither can we in the Gorbals, in Scotland, in Great Britain. Before England is ready I am sure the next war will be on us. I therefore consider that Scotland's wisest policy is to declare for a Republic in Scotland, so that the youths of Scotland will not be forced out to die for England's markets.

If Baldwin's capitalist policy is to bind the Empire closer together to fight American capitalism, and incidentally keep the workers enslaved, then the working class policy ought to be to break up the Empire to avert war and enable the workers to triumph in every country and colony. Scottish separation is part of the process of England's Imperial disintegration and is a help towards the ultimate triumph of the workers of the world."

What was true in 1923 is true today. John McLean, "the bitterest enemy of the British Government," "the beloved leader of the Scottish workers" as Lenin described him, was right, and those who fought him on this issue, who still lead the Communist Party of Great Britain, and produced the *British Road* to Socialism, were wrong. The British ruling class killed John McLean, through the treatment they meted out to him in prison. They murdered James Connolly in Ireland. Both men were indeed too dangerous to the capitalists. They had grasped the need to link the national question with the struggle for working class power, the struggle to smash the British state, through which the capitalists maintain their evil system.

MICHAEL MCCREERY

# THE BRITISH STATE

A WELSHMAN became King of England and Wales in 1485, and the Act of Union followed in 1536. This union served the interests of the rising capitalist class. The creation of a strong, centralised state power, uniting the two countries, was essential for the development of the new capitalist mode of production, which demanded one unified home market. "Capital comes dripping into the world with blood and dirt," wrote Marx in *Capital*, and this is how he describes the birth of the system.

"The capitalist era dates from the 16th century. . . . The prelude of the revolution that laid the foundation of the capitalist mode of production was played in the last third of the 15th, and the final decade of the 16th century. A mass of free proletarians was hurled on the labour market by the breaking-up of the bands of feudal retainers, who, as Sir James Steuart well says, 'everywhere uselessly filled house and castle.' Although the royal power, *itself a product of bourgeois development* (my italics, M.McC.) in its strife after absolute sovereignty forcibly hastened on the dissolution of these bands of retainers, it was by no means the sole cause of it. In insolent conflict with king and parliament, the great feudal lords created an incomparably larger proletariat by the forcible driving of the peasantry from the land, to which the latter had the same feudal rights as the lord himself, and by the usurpation of the common lands. The rapid rise of the Flemish wool manufacturers, and the corresponding rise of the price of wool in England, gave the direct impulse to these evictions. The old nobility had been devoured by the great feudal wars. *The new nobility was the child of its time, for which money was the power of all powers.*" (My italics, M.McC.).

### THE STATE AN ECONOMIC POWER

The union of England and Wales was a deal struck between the "new nobility" of both countries, for whom "money was the power of all powers," who produced on their great estates wool, and other commodities, which were sold in the market for profit; or alternatively extracted rents from tenants whose incomes were obtained in the same way. These landlords were the decisive force which broke the back of the old feudal system of production. It was they who employed "the power of the State, the concentrated and organised force of society, to hasten, hot-house fashion, the process of transformation of the feudal mode of production into the capitalist mode, and to shorten the transition." Marx continued "Force is the mid-wife of every society pregnant with a new one. It is itself an economic power."

The "new nobility" of England and Wales, and the "new nobility" of Scotland came to terms in 1603, when a Scotsman became King of England as well as Scotland. Henceforth Scotland was ruled from Whitehall. But full legislative, and thus economic, union, although proposed by the King and his Chancellor Francis Bacon in 1604, was not finally achieved until 1707, with the Act of Union.

Meanwhile, the Civil War in the 1640s, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688, had established the political supremacy of the rising merchant capitalists over the "new nobility," the great landlords, who had controlled the state, through the monarchy, since the 16th century. It is important to recognise that these revolutions were *not* directed against the feudal mode of production, against a feudal nobility. The feudal system, and with it the feudal nobility, had been destroyed, with the Tudor state playing a full part, by the 16th century. The capitalist era had been in existence for a hundred years before the outbreak of the Civil War.

The first stage in the development of capitalism, which Marx called the manufacturing period, lasted "roughly speaking . . . from the middle of the 16th to the last third of the 18th century." The basis of capitalist production during this period remained handicraft skills. For example, "cloth manufacture, as also a whole series of other manufactures, arise by combining different handicrafts together under the control of a single capitalist." This mode of production is referred to by most bourgeois historians as the "domestic" or "putting-out, system." The capitalist bought wool in bulk from the landlord, or tenant farmer, and put it out to the spinners, the weavers, etc. [who worked in their own homes, and were paid by the piece], then sold the finished product to merchants, who organised its sale at home and overseas.

Both the landlords, who produced the raw materials which were demanded by the manufacturers and the merchants who disposed of the finished products, were part and parcel of the same capitalist mode of production, members of the same exploiting class. During the 16th century it was the landlords who were the decisive force making for economic advance as they broke up the old feudal order, and laid the basis for capitalist production. But as the 17th century advanced, they and the monarchy which represented their interests, began to act as a retarding force upon the further development of capitalism. The Crown's policies favoured the great landlords at the expense of trade and industry. In a variety of ways the state prevented capital accumulated by the merchants and manufacturers from being reinvested in commerce and manufacture.

### OLIVER CROMWELL

Oliver Cromwell, who led the revolutionary forces which overthrew the political power of the great landlords,

came himself from the radical section of the Gentry, or smaller landowners, whose own interests had been hard hit by economic depression and the policies of the Crown. But the decisive backing for Cromwell came from that section of the capitalist class whose wealth derived mainly from trade and manufacture, and in particular the great merchants, concerned with overseas trade, and centred on London, and other ports. It was necessary for a wide section of the people to be mobilised in order to break the political power of the landlords. Cromwell appealed to the petty-bourgeoisie—small traders, artisans, and yeoman farmers—who provided the backbone of his armies. But immediately victory over the "new nobility" had been achieved Cromwell turned upon the Levellers, who represented the interests of the petty-bourgeoisie, and smashed them in battle. He returned to be feasted by the merchants of the City of London.

These great merchants were the real victors of the Civil War. Even Cromwell was too radical for their liking, once his task was done. The Restoration of a tamed monarchy in 1660, and the ousting of another who attempted to put back the clock, in the "Glorious" Revolution of 1688, confirmed them in their political supremacy. Parliament replaced the monarchy as the decisive institution of state. The policies of state, and the laws, were adjusted to meet the needs of the new rulers of Britain. An aggressive imperial policy led to a series of wars against foreign rivals, from which the British capitalists emerged, in the main, victorious; and by the late 18th century Britain's mercantile empire was the largest in the world. The merchants of London, Bristol, Liverpool, and Glasgow, waxed fat on the huge profits obtained from colonial trade and looting throughout the world. The African slave trade, the trade with the American plantations, based on slavery, and producing raw materials and foodstuffs for the British market and for re-export, the trade with, and outright looting of India, and other Asian countries, left a trail of suffering and death among the peoples of Asia, Africa, and America, and accumulated vast quantities of capital for the British ruling class. The Navigation Acts, and others, protected this colonial trade and loot from all foreign rivals.

#### SCOTLAND

Scottish armies had played a part, in the early stages of the Civil War, in smashing the absolute power of the monarchy. But those Scottish merchants

and landowners who were prepared to do a deal with Cromwell and the English capitalists at the expense of their own country and people were too weak to enforce their will upon Scotland unaided. Between 1648 and 1650 Cromwell's English troops smashed three Scottish armies, and occupied Scotland, as they did Wales and Ireland. The economic union Cromwell imposed upon the country benefited the Scottish merchants, who could now share in England's looting of other lands, but was bitterly opposed by the people as a whole. It was ended with the Restoration of 1660. Not until 1707, with the Act of Union, were the merchant capitalists of Scotland, and those landowners who produced for the British market, able finally to achieve their goal of full economic union with England and Wales. There was bitter opposition from the people, as before. There were uprisings in Edinburgh and Glasgow. Three regiments had to be called in to restore "order" in the capital, and the people held Glasgow for more than a month. But the opposition to this betrayal was not united, and the dominant sections of Scottish capital achieved their aim. Henceforth the English capitalists, and their Scottish "partners" could develop the capitalist mode of production within one, united British market. With the abandonment of protection most Scottish manufacturing industries were ruined, and great suffering was inflicted on the people, as English goods flooded into the country, but the Scottish merchants prospered on their share of the colonial loot. They had earned their 30 pieces of silver.

The way in which the British state was used to speed the development of capitalism in the Scottish Highlands is described by Marx in *Capital*. The peasants were "cleared" from their lands in tens of thousands during the 18th and early 19th centuries, so that the clan chiefs could turn the land of the clans into great capitalist estates, producing for the British market. "The hunted out Gaels were forbidden to emigrate from the country, with a view to driving them by force to Glasgow, and other manufacturing towns." This conquest of the Highlands by capitalism completed the task initiated under the Tudor monarchy in the late 15th century. Throughout England, Scotland, and Wales money was now "the power of all powers."

[To be continued]

MICHAEL MCCREERY



Michael McCreery was the founder and secretary of the Marxist-Leninist organisation the Committee to Defeat Revisionism for Communist Unity formed in 1963, and editor of its paper 'Vanguard'. For over a decade he and other communists had struggled to save the Communist Party of Great Britain as the proletarian vanguard party and to defend the revolutionary principles of Marxism-Leninism from the attacks of the modern revisionists - those anti-working class opportunists who were revising Marxism into bourgeois reformism and destroying the Party. But the Party bureaucrats repeatedly refused to publish or discuss his principled criticisms leading him in 1963 to address his 'Appeal to All Communists' in England, Scotland & Wales to break politically, ideologically and organisationally with the CPGB, unite with the Marxist-Leninists internationally headed by the Albanian and Chinese Parties against Khrushchev revisionism and form a new revolutionary leadership. This outstanding Marxist-Leninist died of cancer in 1965 aged 36. In 1966 the Scottish Committee of the CDRCU founded the Workers' Party of Scotland (Marxist-Leninist).

Publisher's Explanatory Note to the 1977 edition.

Pages 4-5 contain references to the 1958 edition of "the British Road to Socialism", the revisionist (anti-Marxist) programme of the C.P.G.B. which was first adopted in 1951 - replacing the previous revolutionary programme "For a Soviet Britain" (which McCreery reproduced in the C.D.R.C.U. Vanguard). The "British Road to Socialism" was revised again in 1968 and is now undergoing further revision, with the introduction of some revolutionary phrase-mongering as well as a few more references to the national question, simply to cover up its complete departure from the revolutionary principles of Marxism-Leninism. The CPGB continues to support the British capitalist state by advocating its 'reform' (leading to state monopoly capitalism) and is opposed to its destruction through the revolutionary seizure of power by the working class, national independence and the dictatorship of the proletariat. So although the particularly glaring features he refers to may have been changed, McCreery's general analysis remains valid. Nor can the anti-Marxist essence of the CPGB and its programme be altered simply through further transfusions of Marxist terminology and more or less support for the Soviet social-imperialists (socialism in words, imperialism in deeds). "Opportunism can be expressed in the terms of any kind of doctrine, including that of Marxism.....Marxian words have in our days become a cover for the absolute renunciation of Marxism." (Lenin).

In the same section in references to northern Ireland McCreery is of course talking about the old colonial parliament at Stormont since abandoned in favour of direct rule from the Westminster imperial parliament.