

Scotland : Why is the British state so undemocratic - « It has its roots in the partial character of England's seventeenth century revolution »

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The massive surge in support for Scottish independence in the recent referendum was motivated more by democratic than nationalist sentiment. It was an expression of long term working class alienation from the political decision-making process. The spur was a Tory-imposed austerity the Scots hadn't voted for, following years of disastrous warmongering, neo-liberal economic crisis and growing inequality.

This movement represents something new in the recent politics of the British state : mass action for democracy in continuity with Chartism, the suffragettes and the radicalisations following both world wars.

Those tempted by current promises of devolution need reminding that the political forces making them led the 1980s assault on local government democracy. Centred on left Labour administrations running Liverpool, Lambeth and the Greater London Council, this was the last major fight over state democracy. All subsequent Labour leaderships are the rotten fruit of this tree.

A relentless attack on civil liberties has kept the defence of basic rights against state oppression centre stage since the Thatcher era. And there have been campaigns calling for a democratic renewal - like Charter 88.

But unlike most of them, the 2014 Yes campaign was mass, inclusive and activist in character - with a 97% voter registration and 85% turn-out. For all its strengths, Charter 88 and its successors tended to be top down and abstract, ending up focussed on a shift of power from one branch of the state (the executive) to another (the judiciary).

The grossly undemocratic character of the British state has its roots in the partial character of England's seventeenth century revolution. The nascent bourgeoisie stabilised its position by evolving a powerful state. The developing industrial capitalist economy was welded on to a monarchy, an unelected parliamentary second chamber and an unwritten constitution - bolstered by union with Scotland, the occupation of Ireland and a growing empire. The trappings of global power have more recently been entrenched through nuclear weapons, military and intelligence co-operation with the USA and a permanent UN Security Council seat - all carrying profoundly undemocratic baggage.

House of Lords reform has been on the agenda for over a century, during which Labour has been in government five times. The electoral system is still saddled by the anti-democratic first past the post system and a Catholic head of state remains a constitutional impossibility.

Archaic constitution

Yet, despite widespread acceptance that Britain's archaic constitution is over-ripe for reform, it hasn't happened. The ruling class is loath to meddle with the nexus of ideology and institutions on which its hegemony has rested for so long. And there is simply no consensus as to what might replace it. The frenzied talk of a new "constitutional settlement" is a sham. This is the last thing any significant section of the establishment wants. The Scottish independence movement has exposed a potential weak point in this log-jam.

Although the new democratic impulse is firmly rooted in Scotland and its working class, there are the seedlings of similar consciousness elsewhere in the "United" Kingdom. Anger at the "democratic deficit" helped fuel the anti-war movement (hence the slogan "not in our name"), the student revolt against the tuition fee hike, campaigns against Academies and "Free Schools" and many anti-austerity struggles. However, radical alienation from the status quo has also been to the right, as the growth of UKIP shows.

The referendum has thrown up a crisis of legitimacy for Labour, not just the British state. 60 Labour MPs were bussed into Glasgow and major trade unions used their apparatuses (in defiance of or without consulting their Scottish memberships) in a bid to shore up the union. Yet every single Glasgow constituency (a pre-eminently "Labour city") voted yes by a majority. As tens of thousands of Scottish members tear up their party cards – the need for accountability and democracy within the labour movement itself is posed.

Left Unity is well placed to be at the heart of a rejuvenation of the left, based on an appeal to today's youth for radical democratic change. The Scottish Yes vote showed the potential, with votes for 16 and 17 year olds – 70% of whom were pro-Yes. The popular resonance of comedian Russell Brand's calls for revolution are another example. His radical democratic propaganda in support of the Yes vote got half a million hits on YouTube.

In tandem with the struggles against austerity, war and racism, a fight is required for democracy, accountability and transparency to ensure that decisions are made in the interests of and accountable to the majority. Proportional representation would be an essential first step.

The abolition of the monarchy, the Lords and the Corporation of the City of London ; votes for 16 year olds and prisoners ; positive action for women in politics ; local democracy and regional devolution with substance ; trade union rights ; civil liberties ; radical reform of media control and accountability ; Britain out of NATO and off the UN Security Council ; handing over Gibraltar and the Falklands/Malvinas to Spain and Argentina ; and (not least) Irish, Scottish and Welsh self-determination are demands that should also be on the table.

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* <http://internationalviewpoint.org/>