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Power to the Provinces!

The large disparities in levels of employment and wealth between regions and nations in Britain, especially between 'North' and 'South', and the polarisation of voting between Left and Right which these have increasingly given rise to, have yet to generate a coherent political response on the Left. The outmanoeuvring and defeat of the Nationalists in the devolution debates in the 1970s seemed to have killed the national question as a political issue. The Thatcher government has been a militantly centralising force, and has been able to recover its whole political position through the acting out of the extraordinary fantasy of English nationalism in the Falklands adventure. While there are signs of some revival of nationalist support in Scotland, and of a renewed interest in regional and national questions within the labour movement, this falls far short of a strategy which gives proper weight to the importance of territorial inequality and division in the British Isles. This article argues the case for such a 'territorial strategy' for the Left in Britain. It will present the advantages of regionalism, and peripheral nationalism, in terms of their possible consequences for the balance of class forces, and for the opportunities it may provide to increase the influence of the working class and its allies over the Right.

LABOUR'S TRADITION

The advantages of regional devolution have been debated in one form or another for the last two decades in British politics (and before the war by GDH Cole). Redressing the disadvantages of the regions was part of the programme of Wilsonian 'modernisation' around the election of the 1964 Labour government. Regional disparities of income and employment had of course been preoccupations of governments since the 1930s. The Labour Party was particularly sensitive to the problems of the relatively deprived regions of the North, South Wales and Scotland, from which so much of its support has always come. Labour's programme of 'technological modernisation' was also rooted in some kind of critique of Britain's hereditary and ascriptive class system, with its bias towards rentier incomes and the financial sector, and its subordination of those of productive industry. This critique reflected the outlook and interests of rising segments of the middle class¹, frustrated by upper class recruitment to and monopoly of top positions, more than it advanced working class interests. Wilson's well-projected northern origins made him an effective critic of social exclusiveness, for which, in this early period, he was able to mobilise support from working class people too, who were glad to see 'them' for once roundly and wittily denounced. The inclusion of a regional dimension in Labour's National Plan was therefore a natural step, and should have been a means of enhancing the influence of those committed to industrial growth in the regions, both local capital and trade unions, against the national financial sector and international economic pressures. But the regional planning agencies established² as part of the National Plan were given little power at this time, and never became central to Labour's strategy of economic reconstruction. In any case, this strategy rapidly collapsed.

Regional economic disparities remained a preoccupation of all governments of the postwar consensus, prior to Thatcher's, for reasons of national as well as local economic interest. It was held that the economy 'overheated' through shortages of skilled labour and consequent wage-led inflation whenever full employment was

achieved in the most prosperous areas of the Midlands and the South-East. Consequently, high levels of unemployment in other regions could be viewed as 'merely' waste. Resources could theoretically be brought into production in these areas without inflationary consequences anywhere else, and some measure of economic support could be justified as in effect self-financing. A whole panoply of regulatory devices, both positive and negative, were therefore deployed to try to redress regional economic disparities. These have included controls on industrial location, subsidies to private investment and direct investment by the state, regional employment premium, and policies to improve transport and communication. The Thatcher government has abandoned most of these.

New municipal energy

The need for rationalising reforms in the apparatus of government was a developing preoccupation during the 1960s and 1970s, and was another aspect of the programme of managerialist modernisation which provided a dominant agenda for governments in this period. The reorganisations of local government, the health service, and social services, were among the major changes effected; one might also see the comprehensive reorganisation of secondary education as part of the same general programme for setting up larger, more universalist and professionalised structures. During this debate, there were some persuasive advocacies of regionalisation of government, mostly from the social democratic and 'managerialist' wing of the Labour Party. John MacKintosh's *The Devolution of Power* (1968), Derek Senior's Dissenting Memorandum to the Redcliffe-Maud Report on Local Government (1971), and Lord Crowther Hunt and Alan Peacock's Memorandum of Dissent from the Kilbrandon Report on Devolution (1973) were the most important statements of position.³ These argued the case for regional devolution, on grounds of consistency with the proposed devolution of powers to Scotland and Wales, the desirability of reversing the centralisation of the British state apparatus and civil service (whose potential has been further revealed under Thatcher and Heseltine), and, in Derek Senior's proposal for city-regions, to resolve the harmful administrative division between borough and county, town and country, which has been so powerful an instrument for the long term defence of Tory interests against Labour municipal policies, and has confounded any potential regional challenges to metropolitan policy. But while intellectually these writers were able to present a powerful case, its political influence remained small. No connection was made between the economic plight of the regions, of which Labour governments were well aware, and the Westminster-dominated system of government, which gave them so little political leverage. Perhaps as a result, the relationship between state expenditure in the regions and their relative need has not been consistent or close.⁴ Labour's own political apparatus was highly centralised, the result of a history of fear of grass roots activity, infiltration and extra-parliamentary militancy which has similarly stifled the local trades councils. The party's slender bureaucracy of regional organisers for many years had as one of its main preoccupations to monitor the provinces for signs of heresy and rebellion, and to step in and 'dissolve' errant parties where this occurred. So weak a structure was in no state to welcome the new currents of nationalist feeling when they emerged in Scotland and Wales, and turn them into a socialist resource. The Labour Party has always had great difficulty in creating any apparatus of its own which does not correspond directly to the functions dictated by the existing parliamentary constitution, which is indeed fetishised to this day.

Municipal political interests did, on the other hand, have some persisting weight in Labour's policies towards the state. Labour's efforts at local government reform, modified by the Conservatives

after the 1970 election defeat, attempted to achieve some strengthening of the powers of its big city bases against those of the Tory counties. But the reform of local government, already diluted by the Tories in the interests of the shires in 1972, has proved quite insufficient to arrest the decline of local government in face of the financial and political powers of the centralised state which have been used so determinedly against them by the Thatcher government. While there has been an important influx of new energies and ideas into municipal socialism in the past years (for example through the establishment of industrial development agencies in the GLC, West Midlands and Sheffield, and the attempt to institute popular and radical transport policies in South Yorkshire and Greater London) it is clear that a hostile central government can now deploy overwhelming juridical and financial resources against socialist city governments.

Scottish and Welsh nationalism

If industrial decline in backward English regions, and the arguments for a more rationalised and decentralised structure of government was one element in the debate about regional devolution in the 1960s and 1970s, its real political force came from a different quarter — the threat to the British state posed by Scottish and Welsh nationalism. These currents made their first major impact in disillusion with the same Labour government which was toying in the early 1960s with these half-hearted regionalist notions: the first Plaid Cymru election victory was at Carmarthen in 1966, the first Scottish Nationalist victory at Hamilton in 1967. The Labour Party, especially in areas where it was directly threatened by nationalist support (Scotland), or indirectly threatened, as it thought, by competition for the largesse of the British state (the North East) reacted with hostility to the emergence of what might in other circumstances have been perceived as potential allies against the metropolitan state, and Southern Tory domination.

Consequently, the arguments, reinforced by the rise of nationalism, for generalising the claims of regional identity and autonomy to the English regions as well as Scotland and Wales fell on deaf ears in the English labour movement. English regional Labour parties are in any case vestigial structures without the roots in patronage and local power which characterise municipal parties. Leading British politicians characteristically do not emerge from a local base, as do politicians in the USA, France, West Germany or Italy, but are mostly metropolitan carpet-baggers who settle on a constituency and then make it their own after rather than before adoption as candidates. So nationalism was perceived largely as a threat to the hegemony of the British Parliament, and to the tenure of power of the Labour and Conservative Parties. Those with access to power in Whitehall showed little interest in conceding it to political forces based elsewhere.

The devolution debate seemed to many in England during the last Labour governments to be merely a wearisome distraction, a slow wearing down by attrition of the nationalist movements. In fact it had fateful consequences, diverting the attentions of the government from more important matters, and perhaps unwittingly preparing the ground for the Thatcherite reassertion of the power of the metropolitan (and imperial) State. Where subordinate classes have been divided and in conflict with one another (as over immigration and ethnic divisions, among the Protestants and Catholics of Northern Ireland, and in the majority of the British labour movement's response to peripheral nationalism), the beneficiaries have been the regressive elements of the bourgeoisie represented by Thatcherism, who are most traditionally identified with the English state.

The heartland of Thatcherism in 1979 was after all the South East and West Midlands: polarisation in the electoral geography of Brit-

ain, between North and South, has never been more marked. Thatcherism spoke loudly to English identity, against immigrants and against class, criminal, terrorist, and military threats to the nation. The Falklands crisis has now shown the potential strength of old imperial sentiments, reminding us of a history many on the Left had preferred to forget. Characteristically, this patriotic feeling was reported to be less rampant in Scotland and Wales. So far, regional nationalist threats to the British state have worked to the advantage of the Right, through the inability of the Left to bring these challenges together in any coherent programme for the reconstruction of the state. The neglect of potential territorial bases for organising support (Labour's election campaigns are distinctively national in organisation and presentation) distinguishes the British Left from more locally rooted formations elsewhere (France, West Germany, Italy, the USA).

A centralist view

The local response to nationalism by the Left has inevitably been conditioned by the social characteristics of the nationalist leadership in Scotland and Wales. Representing in large part the local professional class and small capital, this leadership, especially in Scotland, has been often anti-socialist. For this reason, local hostility to petty-bourgeois and often regressive social forces has masked for many working-class leaderships, especially in the Labour Party, the potential advantages of a wider geography of regional class alliances on a United Kingdom scale. The most socialist elements in the Labour Party have characteristically, in both their 'old Left' and 'new Left' variants, taken too centralist a view of the potentiality of the British state. The old Left has been parliamentarist and constitutionalist (Michael Foot's recent *Observer* articles in the summer restated this view in unregenerate form), holding that working class representation could achieve socialist changes through the agency of a 'neutral' state apparatus, whose centralisation would be a means of carrying through reforms on a universal basis. While the 'new Left' in the Labour Party perceives clearly that this state apparatus is not benign or neutral, and must first be transformed before other reforms are possible, here there is an undue preoccupation with what the central state apparatus, once in working class hands, *could* do, even if it takes a less naive attitude to its present dispositions.

These perspectives lead to an over-reliance on narrowly working class institutions (which are often themselves politically weak, and sometimes working class mainly in name) and a neglect of the other bases of organic support which a socialist party now needs. The long neglect of the dimensions of gender, race, community and cultural activity in the Labour Party is consistent with a lack of appreciation of local and geographical dimensions, of the probable necessity to make alliances with other class strata in particular regions to meet

¹ This literature of 'modernisation' was reviewed and criticised by Perry Anderson in his influential 'Origins of the Present Crisis', *New Left Review*, 23 (1964). While the stratum of scientific and technical workers to whom Wilson's 'technological' rhetoric was addressed were often working in new industries located in the Midlands and South East, the broad 'industrial' emphasis of this strategy linked these interests with the older provincial bases of British manufacturing.

² J P MacKintosh, *The Devolution of Power* (1968) discussed the fate of these agencies. Regional economic policy is discussed also by Stuart Holland, *The Regional Problem* (1976), and H Armstrong and J Taylor, *Regional Economic Policy* (1978).

³ Further guidance to the literature on this topic can be obtained from E Craven (ed) *Regional Devolution and Social Policy* (1975). The Buchanan Report, *Traffic in Towns*, was among the other important documents of this period which recommended regional planning.

⁴ See Table 1 of the SDP Green Paper *Decentralising Government* (1982).

⁵ This development was discussed by Cynthia Cockburn in *The Local State* (1978).

the overwhelming power of the metropolitan bourgeoisie. The failure to find some common ground with the social forces represented by Scottish and Welsh nationalisms (if not with their political leaderships) through developing a regional programme for reducing the power of the central state, was the outcome of this. On more specific terrains (the defence of jobs in a particular town, the work of the Scottish and Welsh Development Agencies) these local imperatives are more often recognised, and possible conjunctions of interest between local capital and labour recognised and acted upon. But it has not yet been seen to be necessary to translate this necessary flexibility in class strategy to a national plane.

THE SDP AND DECENTRALISATION

The case for regional devolution has now surfaced again in the recent publication of a Social Democrat Party Green Paper, *Decentralising Government*, which recommends the establishment of elected regional authorities and the reconstitution of the House of Lords on a basis of regional representation, in some ways analogous to the American Senate or the West Germany Bundesrat. This paper not surprisingly takes up many of the arguments expounded by former Labour advocates of devolution such as JP MacKintosh. Its argument is presented largely in administrative terms, in relation to liberal democratic principles of accountability, wider participation in decision making, and efficiency. Like earlier advocates, the SDP Decentralisation Group draw attention to the enormous accretion of bureaucratic power to central government in recent years, through regional department offices, appointed bodies such as the Health and Water Authorities (many of whose powers were originally taken from elected local government), and through ever-tighter financial control of local government. From the point of view of liberal principles and more accountable administration, these arguments are well made and many socialists might support them as such, given an alternative of authoritarian state bureaucracy.

Neither the SDP Green Paper nor the earlier advocates of regional devolution in England address themselves to the possible implications of this change in state forms for the relative powers of class interest in Britain. On the assumption that party politics is largely about the advancement of class interests, this is a dimension that needs to be made explicit. It is characteristic of Social Democrat thinking that it represses this level of politics, seeking to present its own interest in the universalist terms of ethical principles and efficiency.

One may conjecture that the SDP interest in decentralisation continues the earlier managerial interests of the Labour 'modernisers' in creating forms of administration which are both more amenable to rational professionalised control, and more responsive to the needs and interests of those they administer, (and thus better able to secure consensus and social harmony). In the 1960s and 1970s, major reorganisations of local government⁵, social services, and the National Health Service were substantially influenced by the 'system theories' of corporate management, imported into the public sector from the most sophisticated thinking of the private corporate sector. These theories of corporate planning, while slow to change the actual practices of public bureaucracies, can be seen to be congruent with the interests of new strata of graduate managers and planners, seeking legitimisation of their power through more 'scientific' managerial techniques.

Middle class attitudes

But the SDP-Liberal Alliance also brings to its attitudes to government the perspective of outsiders to power, who have an interest in creating new centres of power to offset their relative exclusion from the old ones. An emphasis on legal procedures, participation and

decentralisation also serves the more specific aptitudes of this credential-holding middle class stratum, and is adapted to its own distinctive resources in the contest for power. Possessing cultural rather than material capital, it is potentially the most effective operator of participatory procedures. Characteristic institutions of this stratum are the Consumers' Association, the pre-school play group movement, parent-teachers' associations, and certain kinds of association for conservation, environmental improvement, or collective 'gentrification'. These are typical social movements of the educated middle class, and are means of organising their access to benefits from the means of consumption, both individual and collective. Extension of rights of participation in administration, and its professionalisation through the creation of more paid expert roles for both administrators and politicians, are means of extending the influence of the representatives of this social stratum. The more participatory politics of the United States (far more elective offices, community control of schools, a tradition of community- and issue-rather than class-based mobilisation) is a model for British Social Democrats, and Liberals of the newer sort, and the USA also favours those with the greater participatory resources and skills. This seems to be the 'hidden agenda' of the SDP's commitment to decentralisation, just as a corresponding emphasis on parliamentary forms reflected the occupational and cultural advantages of earlier generations of European liberals whose typical callings were said to be journalism and the law.

There is perhaps another interest in the SDP's proposal for regional political power, also reflecting its current role as an outside challenger for political power. This is the probable benefit to the Alliance of achieving a secure regional base of power, where it believes that national political power may be difficult to attain. The Alliance is also particularly preoccupied with gaining some power of veto over the decisions of the class forces on either side of it, seeing its most feasible (or at least minimal) role as to limit the 'extremism' of left and right. The Green Paper's proposal for a Second Chamber elected from regional constituencies (representing the proposed regions equally regardless of their unequal populations) seems designed to secure such a veto power by regional coalitions over national majorities, in the same way that proportional representation is designed to make centre parties indispensable to any governing majority. This particular proposal, for equal representation of regions of grossly unequal size in the Second Chamber is the most pointedly self-interested in the SDP document. Its intended effect seems likely to be that of shoring up the influence of the strongest Alliance regions (the peripheral areas of traditional Liberal strength) against that of the Tory South East and Labour North. Socialists do not share the SDP's interest in a centrist veto, and while therefore the proposal for a regionally-elected Second Chamber should be seriously considered (it is much more likely to win support than the simple abolition of the Lords), departure from the principle of representation in proportion to population should not be.

A common interest?

While the SDP brings its own specific perspectives and interests to the regional issue, which are different from those of the labour movement, it does not follow that there may not also be some advantage to the Left in this proposed restructuring of the state. For one thing, the disproportionate power conferred on the electoral winner in the existing 'first past the post' system has in the past four years been exercised effectively by a strong government of the Right, and with little of the resistance from 'civil society' which a left government similarly elected on a minority vote would have met. It can no longer be assumed that untrammelled power from parliamentary majorities is a resource only for the Left. What has to be

balanced, in discussions about regional devolution or proportional representation, is the effects which these changes might have in strengthening the political centre, against the possible benefits to the Left of a more widely representative and open political structure, in which minorities and parties of the Left (including the Communist Party) would be more able to achieve representation in regional or national assemblies. It may be that a more pluralistic structure of class and cultural allegiances in Britain today would be better reflected in a correspondingly more pluralist electoral system, than through the unrepresentative and dinosaurian machinery of the Labour Party.

This indeed seems to be one of the few areas of radical change that might be opened up by the SDP 'break', and such opportunities, in a society as immobile and conservative as Britain's, should not be spurned without careful consideration. It would be myopic to repeat the sad experience of the devolution debate, when a chance to weaken the grip of the dominant classes was ignored through traditionalist Labour Party and 'constitutional' reflexes. Labour's natural inclination in discussions of decentralisation is to favour its municipal strongholds; a recent Labour proposal to devolve the powers of the Water Authorities on to local authorities suggests that this preference continues. But while the prospects for a new kind of socialist city authority under a Labour central government need to be carefully weighed in this debate, as an alternative to regional power, the lessons of the Thatcher period cannot now be ignored. In the last three years, the local authorities on their own have been no match for a determined central government, and even more to the point have been unable to rally much popular support in their defence.

Labour may also now be wise to take account of its relative weakness, and no longer assume that it is an inevitable 'alternative government' able to treat all other political formations, Left and Centre, as enemies to be ignored or crushed. Labour too, as a potential minority party, may have an interest in acquiring some powerful regional bases, to provide a source of patronage and power to sustain its strength when it is not in national office. Without the experience of such power, parties tend to drift into sectarianism, other-worldliness, and impossibilist programmes. Occupancy of local (or regional) office provides training for party cadres, patronage for its apparatus, the opportunity to sustain support for democratic cultural forms, and a record of success in office which the party can use in its national campaigns. A significant analogy is that of postwar Italy, where the Italian Communist Party has made effective use of regional political bases (in Emilia-Romagna and Umbria for example) while so far excluded from national political office. Doubts about the prospects of central state power in Britain in the near future (leaving aside any misgivings one might have about the likelihood of the Labour Party using it effectively) might sensibly lead the Left to look into the potential advantages of power in regional and peripheral-national authorities.

From this point of view, the most significant fact about the SDP proposal is that it has been put on the table, and therefore makes more feasible a public debate on these questions. However, the mixed response this proposal received at the SDP Conference in the autumn makes it clear that no progress can be made without the mobilisation of support in the regions themselves for a real measure of devolution. The preference of many Social Democrats and Liberals for local rather than regional government power indicates in fact a difference of class interests in alignments on this issue. One might suggest that local government autonomy is most closely adapted to the democratic control of the means of collective consumption, but concentrates power insufficiently to assert control of the means of production or capital. It thus reproduces the essential strength and

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weakness of social democratic politics. Whereas regional government, while less 'decentralising' and democratic in its implications for local services (and this is a serious problem) could concentrate powers sufficient to make coordinated planning and substantial capital investment possible. Regional government therefore ought to make sense to those committed to a socialisation of the means of production (if only to deal with regional economic disasters) and to those managerial strata committed to more rational forms of planning in general. Unfortunately, however, the Left in the Labour Party are mostly still centralisers in their thinking, and the waverings and uncertainties in the SDP since Roy Jenkins' election as leader suggest that it is a long way from becoming a party of rational modernisation.

Pressure from the Left

The attitude of most socialists to the Social Democrats is understandably one of unmitigated hostility. Enmity towards former allies (however antagonistic was the former alliance) tends to be all the greater because of former ties, and because of the bitterness which preceded separation. For these reasons even tactical cooperation with the SDP over a specific issue such as regional devolution difficult to contemplate. But from the point of view of political realism and the sanguine appreciation of class interests, there could be wider benefits, in certain circumstances, from a parallel commitment on the regional issue. If Labour failed to achieve majority support on its own, the question of its relationship with the political centre would have to be evaluated issue by issue, and if there were commonalities of interest on substantive questions, it would be sensible to recognise them. The defeat of Thatcherism and the discrediting of the politics of the Right is the highest priority at the present time, and while the Left will wish to deflect this debate in the most socialist direction that is possible, it may have to recognise that the centre parties are a lesser evil who may need to be treated with accordingly to stave off a worse one.

The Labour Party has hitherto consisted of an alliance of segments of the salaried, rationalising middle class, and the working class movement, as Gareth Stedman Jones recently reminded us⁶. The move to the right in British politics is in large part the result of the failure and collapse of this 'modernising middle class', and the formation of the SDP was one response of representatives of this class to this failure. It was, perhaps still is, possible to imagine this Social Democratic middle-class leadership being successful in recomposing a large fraction of the electorate, including many working class voters, into support for the new party. The counter-attack within the Labour Party by trade union traditionalism of the Right, and its sustenance of the remaining right wing parliamentary leadership within the Labour Party, however makes this now a very complex and fluid situation, in which 'old Labourism' appears to be staging an unexpected if limited revival. What is certain is that any left strategy must now reckon with a plurality of class interests, and the difficulty of achieving power only on the basis of Labour's traditional constituency. This has also been the lesson of the electoral successes achieved by other European socialist parties in recent years, and of the rise of the 'green' tendencies in West Germany and

⁶ In an article in *New Socialist*, No 3 Jan-Feb, 1982.

elsewhere. The internal structure of the Labour Party is not adapted to this situation, and a greater openness and plurality of representation needs to be created either within, through internal reform, or without, through proportional representation and the wider political competition that might make possible. It is argued here that a more vigorous regional and territorial dimension to socialist politics

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would widen the political reach of the Left, and that the campaign for more regional power would focus these struggles in their necessarily locally-varied forms. It is here, as in the issues of electoral reform, that a possible coincidence of interest with various parties of the centre, both Nationalist and Alliance, might arise, both in debate about regionalism and nationalism and in some regional administrations that might, (as in Italy) eventually arise.

FORMS OF REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

The proposal for elected regional government advanced by the SDP Decentralisation Group, and by Labour advocates such as MacKintosh before them, is for the establishment of nine or eleven regional authorities in England, together with elected national authorities in Scotland and Wales. Various detailed suggestions have been made regarding the size and boundaries of these authorities, and this is not the place to discuss these in detail. The electoral implications of a choice of boundaries for each region are clearly crucial, for example, and would need careful study. MacKintosh's point of departure was the 1964 Labour government's economic planning regions, which were as follows:

| Region (or Nation) | Population (1967) (millions) | Administrative centre |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Scotland | 5.2 | Edinburgh |
| Wales | 2.7 | Cardiff |
| Northern | 3.3 | Newcastle |
| Yorkshire & Humberside | 4.8 | Leeds |
| North West | 6.7 | Manchester |
| West Midlands | 5.0 | Birmingham |
| East Midlands | 3.3 | Nottingham |
| East Anglia | 1.6 | (London in 1965) |
| South West | 3.6 | Bristol |
| South East (incl. London) | 17.1 | London |

The main modification he proposed was the creation of three regions from the last two listed, called South West (based on Plymouth and including Devon, Cornwall, half Somerset and Dorset), South East (still a very large region including London and most of the surrounding Home Counties area), and South Central (including Bristol, Southampton, Portsmouth and Oxford).

The SDP group have proposed two further regions (making eleven English regions), one of these in the South West area of traditional Liberal strength, and one in the Thames area. This is significant given the accompanying SDP proposal for a Second Chamber in which regions would have equal weight. There are also variations in regard to the East and North Midlands, and a convincing alternative proposal for London and the South East which would treat Greater London as a region on its own (with a population of 7



million) and redistribute the surrounding Home Counties to separate regions.

The treatment of London and the South East is obviously a difficulty. To give this region the boundaries suggested by patterns of communication and economic coherence creates a region far more populous than the rest, and thus likely to reproduce the metropolitan dominance which regionalisation is intended to counter. On the other hand, it is difficult to construct coherent regional authorities out of the South Eastern counties exclusive of Greater London. Other problems concern Scotland and Wales which might best, as Crowther Hunt proposed, have some regional division within larger national authorities.

Northern Ireland

One omission from the above list of possible regions is Northern Ireland. The effects of this interminable crisis on British politics, apart from the miseries it imposes on the people of Northern Ireland themselves, are such that socialists *must* address their minds to its solution. While Northern Ireland is manifestly an intractable problem all on its own, consideration would have to be given to it in any discussion of national or regional self-government. It seems to me necessary to find a form of self-government for *both* Protestant and Catholic communities in this province, and a debate about regional government may be an appropriate context in which to explore this. It is clear that the 'consensus' programme of attempting to wear down and outlast the IRA, while achieving agreement between majority and minority populations in Northern Ireland is doomed to failure, and that an interminable and bloody future is all that awaits present policies. It seems, more controversially, also true that the claims of neither 'nationalism' over the opposing community can be met without permanent oppression and bloodshed, whatever might be the historic or majoritarian case for undoing past wrongs.

All that is left open therefore seems to be the principle of establishing self-determining forms of government for both the Catholics and Protestants of Northern Ireland, while preventing either community obtaining unwanted jurisdiction over the other. Other interpretations of the principle of self-determination lead either to the unacceptable (and unworkable) subordination of Catholics to the Protestants of the North, or the equally unviable subordination of the Protestants to the Catholic majority of all Ireland. Separate government could be established by territorial relocation of the Catholic and Protestant populations into geographically separate areas. (Large movements of population have in any case taken place: the 1981 Census disclosed that Belfast's population had declined in ten years by one quarter). While this may seem a drastic proposal, it is less dire than unending urban guerrilla violence. It is probably

strength might be best met by having a cabinet rather than a local government committee system, as MacKintosh proposed. This is more likely to establish a visible leadership than is usually achieved in local government (Ken Livingstone's case being exceptional) and thus enable political support to be mobilised behind their programmes. The experience of the Thatcher government shows this to be quite crucial. It would be similarly imperative for elected councillors or at least executive members to be paid. For socialists, strengthening the capacities and powers of elected politicians in this way should be one benefit from this reform. It might be realistic to recognise that such a change should be accompanied by the adoption both of proportional representation, and by a measure of state subsidy to political parties. It is hard to imagine working class parties being able to operate effectively at this additional level at their present level of resources. Proportional representation needs to be separately discussed, but a new level of government is likely to need the legitimacy it would obtain from being more fairly representative of public opinion.

There are parallels between the present emphasis of the Labour Left on a strategy of democratisation — for example in the demands for the abolition of the House of Lords, for the accountability of the police, for locally-determined public transport policies — and the potential objectives of elected regional government. Appointed executive bodies now control Health, Water, the Universities, Manpower Services and Industrial Training, and the Police. A strategy for bringing all of these under elected regional control seems more likely than separate campaigns to achieve democratic control of these services.

Regionalisation also offers advantages so far as socialist economic strategy is concerned. A renewal of commitment to public ownership was an advance of Labour policy in the 1970s — the democratic control of capital is surely the fundamental principle of socialist policy. But the unpopularity of centralised forms of nationalisation, and the weakness of Labour governments in bargaining with private corporations must be taken into account in any realistic strategy. Giving a stronger statutory basis for regional enterprise boards may be a way towards more popular interventionist programmes, especially as in some regions the priority to be given to creating employment will be locally unanswerable. Socialists in Scotland and Wales have forcefully indicated how they would wish to use such powers; one objective of these reforms is to secure Scotland and Wales the necessary autonomy.

Experience in Italy, in the regions controlled by Communist governments or Communist-led majority coalitions, seems to have been that some cooperation from small private capital can be won by working class-controlled authorities that are committed to regional economic goals, and that are in any case the permanent, efficient and legitimate administrations of their locality. One object of regional government should be to achieve class coalitions in which capital's local interests oblige it to cooperate in socialist economic programmes. In some regions, trade unions and the Labour Party would be in much weaker positions than in others: there would be no uniformity in the bargaining relationships established, just as there has been wide variation in Italy. But in a situation in which national political power for a government of the working class seems currently unattainable, in any real terms, there may nevertheless be opportunity to achieve some stronger regional hegemonies. The working class has often been disunited and disorganised by the emotions of nationalism — the Falklands factor — and even by the posing of the 'integrity of the nation' as an issue in the devolution debate. There should be an opposing strategy, which mobilises provincial interests and the attachments to specific localities as a countervailing pressure to the power of the market.

An opening for the Left

There is some question of whether 'regional identities' any longer exist as significant political potentialities, aside from the nationalisms of Scotland and Wales. Certainly there has been a marked decline of regional inputs into national political life. At different periods these have been from Free Trade Manchester, Social Imperialist Birmingham, Red Clydeside, and the mining communities of South Wales. Consumerism and mass communications have had their effects in dissolving regional particularity and consciousness. This metropolitan domination seems on the whole now to be a conservative force, sucking initiative and ability out of the provinces and absorbing it in the large-scale operations of modern capital, which includes the cultural institutions of broadcasting, the national press, and the subsidised national theatre companies. The opportunity to stimulate local and regional culture, and develop diversity of educational and cultural provision⁷, should be one advantage of regional government, enabling socialists in some places to attempt on a larger scale what has been falteringly attempted through municipal programmes. Socialist historians might be able to make some contribution to such cultural regeneration. It may be more feasible to argue on a regional basis for democratic control and open access to the mass media, than it appears to be on a national basis, where socialists have achieved little against the ideological defences of liberalism and the market. Of course, much 'regionalism' will be parochial and even conservative; this is already the case with parts of the nationalist movements, as socialists who support them make clear. But society is too complex to expect or insist on uniform patterns of culture, and the diversity which increased regional autonomy might make possible should be accepted as beneficial, and as providing a more open environment in which socialists can assert their own positions.

The case for a stronger regional and territorial dimension to the politics of the Left is argued here not merely in terms of desirable policies for the reform of government. What is proposed is essentially a programme of mobilisation, which might enable discontents and political hopes to be expressed in a more meaningful and locally-rooted way. While there have to be tangible objectives for such

What is proposed is essentially a programme of mobilisation

territorially-based campaigns (the transfer of significant powers from irresponsible state agencies and departments, and the acquisition of substantial economic and planning powers over the private sector are critical), the campaigns in different regions must generate their own identity and objectives if they are to have any effect. The Greater London and South Yorkshire councils have demonstrated the potential of what are in effect regionally-based councils to mobilise more interest and support than local government had previously done in Britain for many years, and their public transport policies are examples of distinctive socialist goals for regional government. These examples need to be broadened into a much wider regional strategy. If different parties and elements of the Left were able to cooperate in developing 'alternative regional plans' they might be able to create some more representative and broad-based participation in a campaign for a new politics that could defeat Thatcherism. •

⁷ I have argued a case for the regional control of institutions of post-18 education in a Socialist Society pamphlet, *Comprehensive Education after 18* (1982). A forthcoming article in *New Left Review* on 'A Statutory Right to Work' also suggests that regional economic authorities might have major responsibilities for employment creation.