

RACISM AND THE RISE OF THE RIGHT IN EUROPE, 29.5.17

Brendan McGeever. Anti-racist campaigner

Brendan began by saying what a privilege it is to be asked to speak before a RIC audience, since RIC is far and away one of the most inspiring political movements of his life up to now.

In his opening remarks, Brendan noted that we are at a critical moment: the 30 year neoliberal consensus has been profoundly unsettled by the most sustained economic depression since the 1930s. The most striking feature of this, politically, has been the rise of the right. Across Europe, right-wing populist parties are demanding a return to a mythical golden age of sovereign nation states defined by cultural and racial homogeneity. And they have found traction: some 60 million voters in Europe have opted for parties of policies that are openly xenophobic or authoritarian-leaning.

Brendan further noted that these developments are not confined to Europe, but are global in their reverberations. From the white supremacy of Trump's America, to the proto-fascism of Modi's India, to the authoritarianism of Putin's Russia, the rise of racism and the right is global in its dimensions.

Brendan then went on to offer a discussion of the Brexit vote as an exemplar of this emboldened, racist populism. He noted some anecdotal observations. The air of post-Brexit Britain has become less breathable for many, he suggested. "My black and brown colleagues now tell me that once again, they have found themselves looking over their shoulder, just to see who is behind them". Life might more or less go on as normal for some, but for others, there is a growing feeling that we are in a state of emergency.

The force of racism in Brexit was made clear in the wave of racist hate that followed the result. In the four weeks following the result, 6000 racist attacks were reported to the National Police Chiefs Council. In the 4 days that followed the result, racist attacks rose by 57% on the previous year.

We are confronted with a key question, then: how could it come to pass that the first break from the thirty-year neoliberal consensus in Britain was marbled through with such racism and violence?

Brendan then went on to discuss the role of English nationalism in the Brexit vote. Brexit cannot be understood, he argued, without accounting for the 'invisible driver' of Englishness. The rise of English nationalism, he suggested, is deeply connected to two key developments:

- i) Decline: the decline of the British Empire but also economic decline, and the marginal place that Britain now occupies within the world economy
- ii) Defeat: defeat of the labour and anti-racist movements of the 70s and 80s.

Brendan argued that in recent years, the prospect (and reality) of downward mobility has produced class injuries and collective experiences that have been recast through the politics of resentment. This kind of resentment is no longer defined by imperial prowess or

superiority, but by a deep sense of loss of prestige; a retreat from the damaging impact of a globalised world that is no longer recognisable, no longer 'British'. A new narrative has become prevalent: 'we are under siege, it is time to pull up the drawbridge'. Not coincidentally, this was also one of the defining features of the discourse of the Leave campaign.

Finally, the talk ended with some observations on the Scotland. Brendan argued that if in England, the problem for anti-racists is that almost every social question comes to be defined by and through race, in Scotland, the problem is seemingly the inverse, it is the difficulty of pushing race on to the political agenda.

Brendan argued that amid the flowering of political democracy during indyref, it is sobering to think how rarely the discussion about racism actually featured, including within RIC itself. This is not new. The kind of silence on questions of race has come to be interpreted as an indication of racism's absence by much of the Scottish population, including its political parties. And what this has done is to help consolidate a now powerful myth that there is 'no problem here' or that 'We're a' Jock Tamson's bairns'.

While it is certainly true that the rhetoric from Holyrood has been markedly different to that of Whitehall, anti-racists need to remain alive to the often quite radical disjuncture between elite discourse on, say, migration, and everyday life on the ground. For the fact remains that racism is a deeply structuring force distorting the lives of ethnic minorities in Scotland.

There is also a deep degree of historical amnesia about our racist past. How often have we heard about the disproportionate role played by Scotland in Atlantic slavery and colonial conquest? If we do talk about them, frequently, these histories are projected onto a nasty, reactionary British/English establishment. This suggests not only a degree of intellectual dishonesty but also an unwillingness to confront the legacies of empire and racism in which Scotland is implicated.

Brendan suggested that this is not simply some idle academic exercise in correcting history; rather, if the Scottish population is to challenge contemporary racisms that are structural and deep-rooted, we as anti-racists need to bring into view this troubled past and show how it connects with our present.

We need to remain vigilant, then, for the capacity of Scottish nationalism to become racialized. Particularly when, unlike in 2014, the politics of class and social justice are today in the retreat in Scotland.

For socialists and anti-racists, national questions don't remain static. As the Scottish national question continues to develop and mutate in this post-2014 context, now, more than ever, we need to confront Scotland's racism problem, past and present.

Questions and Answers

Pete agreed that the Unionism shown in the Brexit campaign could be considered a form of English nationalism. He asked how this would impact more generally.

Geraldine asked if anti-Irish racism was likely to reappear in Scotland as part of the drift towards a wider racism?

Allan said there was a widespread but often misleading equation between Unionism and English nationalism. There was indeed an English or Greater English British variant of Unionism. However, there were also Scottish-British, Welsh-British and 'Ulster'-British versions, all united in their support for the most reactionary features of the UK constitution - the Crown Powers, the Union and an established religion. UKIP was the only party in the UK (since the Conservatives broke their formal links with the Ulster Unionists) to organise and have representation in all four component parts of the Union. UKIP had provided the original impetus for the reactionary unionism that now dominates the UK after the Brexit vote. Following in their footsteps, May's current election campaign is designed to give her the full use of the British state's anti-democratic powers and to impose a more reactionary Britishness throughout the UK.

Allan also said that the SNP leadership had not ditched all the reactionary aspects of Britishness, as shown in their support for monarchy, the City of London, Scottish regiments and the British High Command.

Jamie thought that Brendan had been soft on racism in Scotland. Beneath the official veneer of civic nationalism there was still widespread everyday racism in Scotland.

Shaben agreed that there was widespread racism towards black people in Scotland, which remained unacknowledged. She spoke of her experience of being treated by many as if she was not being really British /Scottish because she was not white. She was often asked where she came from, and when she replied Glasgow, was then asked "but where do you really come from"?

Murid said there was an absence of talk about the issue of race in Scotland. It was even thought that raising the issue was in itself 'racist'. People hide behind the myth, propagated especially by the SNP government, that Scotland is a post-racial society. Thus the black experience of racism in Scotland is denied.

Brendan replied by agreeing with the points made by Jamie, Shaben and Murid. What he was trying to emphasise was that the official SNP government discourse in Scotland, which expressed support for immigration, was different from the official discourse in England, which had become toxically anti-migrant. However, beneath the level of official politics he agreed there was still widespread racism in Scotland, and a less active oppositional anti-racist culture. He also gave an example from his youth when he had been active in 'Give Racism the Red Card' campaign and had been invited to speak at North Berwick High School. The head had told him racism was not really a problem in the school because there were no black students!

Brendan agreed with Geraldine that anti-Irish racism could return, especially now that the mainstream unionist parties were making overtures to Loyalists. In reply to Allan he said that there were still progressive versions of Britishness, especially amongst older people who

remembered the legacy of the post-1945 British Welfare State. It could be argued that Jeremy Corbyn represented an attempt to revive this.

Anne said that she often asked people where they were from, not out of any racist feelings, but because she was interested in communicating with others and learning from them. She felt sad that this could be misunderstood. She linked this with her recent trip to Serbia, where she had been often asked the same question. On giving the reply "Scotland", this usually drew a favourable response.

Shaben agreed that not every person asking where you were from was racist. However, the racist assumptions behind the majority who asked such questions had to be taken into consideration.

Richard, from Scotland Against Criminalising Communities, said it was really disturbing how high a percentage of people in Europe when surveyed had declared their support for a total ban on Muslims. Despite this the UK remained 3rd from the bottom in the survey, highlighting how much further downhill things had gone in the rest of Europe. Nevertheless, SACC had been conducting its own disturbing report into Islamophobia in Edinburgh schools. This report would be launched on Friday 2nd June, 18.00-20.30 at the Annandale Mosque.

Richard agreed that although the official Scottish government stance on migration is better than south of the border, Scottish politicians refusal to recognise the existence of everyday racism in Scotland is a real problem.

Brendan argued that the problem in England is that the discussion over racism is dominated by the Right; but the problem in Scotland is that racism is not up for discussion. The death of Sheku Bayoh in police custody in Kirkcaldy was an example of the actions of individual racists, as in earlier cases, but of the Scottish state. The SNP government response has been found wanting. This is worrying.

Nick had said that although it was clear from his accent that he came from England, only once in the 13 years he had lived in Scotland had he experienced personal anti-English racism.

Racism appeared to be stronger in Europe as the large votes for the Right in Austria and France showed. However, so far the Right had been defeated in the elections, most clearly in the Netherlands.

Pete said that we should look at the history of racism in Britain. Labour in the 1960s and 1970s was not some bastion of anti-racism.

We also have a different situation over any IndyRef2 than we had during IndyRef1. We continue to face the growing problem of the impact of neo-liberalism and the everyday experience of a working class living in insecurity and fear. People are encouraged to think as individuals living in competition with each other. This is true of the Curriculum for Excellence in schools and most of the courses run in universities. This all creates the conditions in which racism can flourish.

Luke, who has worked in Alloa for some time, compared this with his experience working in Birmingham. In Alloa there is little understanding of racism and people still talk about

'coloured' people, without necessarily using this in a perjorative sense. In Birmingham you knew that anyone using such a term was a racist. However, such overt racism also led to an oppositional anti-racism, which doesn't exist in Alloa. Anti-racist forces are better organised in England.

Luke was also greatly encouraged by the response of the people in Manchester to the bombing. The unity message had been far better than the response to bombings in Paris, where Islamophobia was more prevalent.

Geraldine agreed that although the official inclusive discourse and practice of Scottish nationalism, highlighted in IndyRef1, was much better than the official exclusive British nationalism of Brexit, highlighted by the restricted franchise for that referendum. However, this was not the same as challenging the everyday racism that still existed in Scotland.

Jamie said that people could not understand Scotland properly unless they were fully aware of Scotland's part in the UK history of imperialism and colonialism. This needs to be highlighted before any IndyRef2.

In conclusion, **Brendan** took up Luke's contribution by saying that, in contrast to England, Scotland's stance on racism had not really been tested. As economic, social and political conditions continued to deteriorate, then Scotland's everyday racism, lying below the official radar, was likely to surface and take on a political form. Would this lead to an effective anti-racism in Scotland?

One example to counter the notion of us living in a post-racist Scotland was his friend with an Asian background working in Glasgow. He had said that if Scotland were to become independent he would move to London, because London at least sustained an anti-racist culture.

In reply to Jamie, Brendan remembered Nicola Sturgeon's response to the SDL. She claimed that Scotland had always been "a welcoming country". This represented a shocking occlusion of Scotland's imperial past. The annual anti-racist St Andrews Day demo in Glasgow is not growing.

Although Brendan agreed with Nick that the recent electoral setbacks for fascists in Europe provided some relief, this did not represent a halting of a wider move to the Right. The mainstream parties had adopted much of their racism and incorporated it into the operation of the state. Furthermore, the fascists had grown in electoral strength and continued to represent a real threat.

Brendan agreed with Pete that that the Left had not really come to terms with the full impact of neo-liberalism. The old class collectivism had been broken up and as yet nothing effective had been put in place.

Brendan emphasised the importance of such dialogue. He had really enjoyed the meeting and had learned a lot.