

Should British workers also be bosses?

By Mervyn Jones

A bitter political struggle is in prospect over the Royal Commission Report on Industrial Democracy which the Labor government must seek to carry into law. It is an open secret that some powerful ministers, including Prime Minister James Callaghan, are reluctant to take action, while others, notably Industry Minister Benn, are determined to see the proposals acted on quickly.

Industrial democracy was a commitment in the 1974 election manifesto, and then Prime Minister Harold Wilson decided to refer it to the Royal Commission for study, which is the normal technique for putting an issue on ice. However, the commission produced a report in one year, record time. The man to thank for this is chairman Lord Bullock, an historian who can by no stretch of the imagination be described as radical, but who is suspicious of the power of private industry and is sympathetic to unions.

► Report favors worker equality.

Commissions normally attempt to reach unanimity, though it is not unusual for a minority report to be issued. This time, the commission was split from the outset with union members working on one report and members representing private industry working on another. All four independent members—Bullock, two other academics, and one lawyer—lined up with the unions to produce what became the majority report.

Three industry members produced the minority report, which advocates supervisory boards on which workers would be represented. Existing management would retain final decision-making powers and responsibilities.

The majority report says that democracy should be introduced into companies employing over 2,000 workers. This would include the giants of British capitalism such as Imperial Chemicals, auto firms, heavy engineering, textiles and banks. The commission's report did not



A Royal Commission Report has recommended that workers and shareholders have equal representation on corporate boards. The report has sparked a bitter political struggle.

"Don't you say Bullock to me!"

cover state-owned industry, but the minister receiving the report said that any legislation would also cover such enterprises, which include coal, electricity, gas and railroads.

The report provides that the first step in any company would be to ask the employees to vote by secret ballot on whether they want the new system, since any democracy without worker demand would prove moribund.

The new boards would possess the full powers of management, and would replace existing boards of directors. There would be parity between members elected by share holders and those representing workers. To avoid a deadlock, the workers and share holders would add several members, presumably accountants or technicians with special expertise, who would be fewer than a third of the total membership.

It was strongly recommended, though not mandatory, that worker representatives be actual employees of the company, who would continue normal jobs and receive no payment beyond normal wages.

► "Bloody chaos" predicted.

The method of electing or selecting the worker-directors was deliberately left flexible and may differ in various companies. But the commission says that the method should be built on the trade union machinery and declares that it is impractical to contemplate any system that does not have the support of the trade union movement.

It is envisaged that the directors would be drawn from shop stewards, who are the trusted spokespersons of workers under existing machinery. Jack Jones, Trans-

port and General Leader and commission member, pointed out in an article last week, "The unions provide the expertise and the independent strength necessary to enable worker-directors to play an effective role on the board."

The opponents of the majority report, including most of the press, fasten on this proposed use of union machinery to discredit the scheme. They claim to favor an elective system in which unions would play no part. The *London Times*, for instance, declared that the plan is not for democracy but for syndio-anarchy. These attacks are in line with the current propaganda charging that unions have excessive power and that the 12 powerful union chiefs are dictating to the government and running the country. They also raise the question of the rights of workers or office staff who do not belong to unions; but all large companies have closed shops or at least 90 percent union membership.

There have been loud cries of protest from the three commission members who drew up the minority report. One says that the majority scheme would produce "bloody chaos," while another predicts "a devastating effect on management."

The Confederation of British Industry has announced root and branch opposition. Tory spokesmen in Parliament have pledged an all-out fight against any bill. The Trade Unions Congress meanwhile demands legislation within one year. Callaghan apparently intends to frame legislation this summer after consultations. In view of the shortage of parliamentary time and the difficulties of the Scotland and Wales problem, it could not go through Parliament in the current session that ends in October.

Certainly his inclination is to go slow and defer the battle. Real action will strengthen Tory determination to oust the Labor government and force an election. They sense a grave threat to capitalism as it has traditionally functioned.

Mervyn Jones has worked as assistant editor of the *London Times* and the *New Statesman*. He has recently published a book on Britain's offshore oil industry.

Sevareid's England sinks into the North Sea

By Joseph Conlin

Cowenry, England. The obvious can be granted. Great Britain has her troubles. But there is a big difference between the way these are perceived in the U.S. and how they stack up over here. It's a difference worth knowing because the American version is a con.

The American version of England's problems is summed up in the topical cracks about her "sinking into the North Sea" and that sort of thing. If you close your eyes and chant your mantra, you can almost hear Eric Sevareid... "There won't always be an England after all, and more's the pity."

Who knows how this translates into images in people's minds? Do they see sturdy young men refusing to work and keeling over in the gutter from hunger? Or surly throngs, sapped of their morals by free medical care, demanding "more! more!?"

► The pubs are still friendly.

In fact, folks over here are bustling about their assorted News, Closes, and High Streets as if there will be a tomorrow after all. Proportionately, more people have jobs than in the States. When you see people in tattered clothes, they are more likely students or other fops than beggars.

The prams are as sleek and as glossy as they looked in old RKO travelogues. On a daily basis, the cops are still incredibly decent and unimposing by American or any other national standard. And the pubs are still "friendly."

A couple of months ago, some fatuous think-tank released the results of a poll to the effect that the English were "the hap-

piest people in the world." If such twaddle is to be taken seriously enough to be mentioned, it ought to be added that you can't disprove it just by looking around.

None of this Merrie England business means that the English are oblivious of their problems. They get plenty of attention. Another rocky day for the Pound

sections of British industry, rather than "the people," "the society," "this scept'd isle, this England."

In the American press, on the other hand, it is verily "this England" that is floundering, from Pennines, moors, Warwick Castle, and Beefeaters to—and this is the crux of it—the welfare state.

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means a quarter-page block of headline type in the newspapers. The Tory leader Mrs. Thatcher sounds like a bilious millenarian on the subject. The Labour Prime Minister Mr. Callaghan sounds like a Tory leader.

In the pubs, if you press the subject, less august statesmen will regale you with their theories of from whence Albion came to this pass, and the truth is, the "typical British workman" knows more about the esoterica of currency than his American counterpart.

► A campaign against the welfare state.

But there is that important difference between the anxieties on this side of the ocean and the solicitous apprehensions of the American press. In England, with the exception of the shrillest right wingers, they worry about problems like sterling, Scottish independence, the Common Market, and the obsolete equipment in many

There is a serious political campaign underway here. It is an aggressive attack on the life of the English welfare state by a Conservative Party that is not, as Americans sometimes like to think, a slightly dotty, well-meaning, and well-mannered collection of harmless old blimps.

On the contrary, the Tories are kissing cousins of American Right-wing Republicans. They are increasingly a party of a narrow Pounds-and-Pence self-interest.

Tory leader Mrs. Thatcher's signal contribution to modern British history was, as Minister of Education in 1971, the elimination of free milk in the tax-supported schools. It is her sole contribution, that is, if her nostalgia for the gallows, whipping post, and whiff of grapeshot are discounted.

In England, as in the U.S., the right phrases its case in homilies about the spirit of the people and the vitality of the nation. They call on Nobel Laureate eco-

nomists and pipe-smoking sociologists to attribute England's deterioration to cradle-to-grave welfare programs.

Gunnar Myrdal lost his temper recently when an American reporter suggested that frustration created by the welfare state was the key to the defeat of the Swedish socialists in last fall's general elections. "This is a fantastic lie," he said. "Why in hell should the protection of your life from economic disasters and from bad health, opening education for young people, pensions for old people, nursing care for children—why should that make you frustrated?"

Liberal American journalists would agree with that, when it is put so bluntly. Surely those of their readers whose politics look toward a more humane American society would lodge no objection. But the journalists have bought precisely the slick line that angered Myrdal—a decrepit right-wing line—and have transmitted it to the United States as "the news."

In any event, there are problems in England all right. Some of them are not even reported in the U.S., like the enduring and quite wretched urban poverty that requires more "social programs," not fewer. But the discomfiture of the speculator who holds two millions sinking Pounds Sterling in his Lloyd's of London account ought not to be confused with the "soul of the English people." Nor the partisan argument of a political right with "the news."

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There seems to be general agreement that the TV showing of *Roots* constitutes a "happening." But there is no agreement on precisely what happened, to whom, and why?

Were blacks and whites moved to the same degree? In the same or opposite directions? Was the TV version a vulgarization of Alex Haley's book, or a supremely successful promotion of it? When 3,000 teenagers line up at a book-store in hopes of getting Haley's autograph, what draws them? the story of his forebears before and after enslavement; or the writer himself, a man totally engaged in the search for a past to remember.

In *These Times* presents a selection of particular views of the "Eight Days That Shook the World," and some suggestions for those who want to continue where *Roots* left off.

1 For the first time, a mass audience has been exposed to part of the Afro-American experience in this country: the reality of slavery and the beginnings in Africa.

Roots has its literary, dramatic and historical weaknesses. But to emphasize them is to ignore the very important cultural significance of both the book and the television drama. For the first time, a mass audience (white as well as black) has learned something of what it meant to be an enslaved African in colonial Virginia. For the first time, the popular media has revealed to ordinary Americans that the Afro-American experience begins in Africa, not in places like Virginia and South Carolina. That strikes at the popular and even academic myth that the Afro-American experience rests on an imitative and "deficit" culture.

One important limitation in the television adaptation—as in the book—is that Alex Haley deals mostly with "privileged" slaves, such as house servants and artisans. The great majority of slaves, of course, were ordinary field hands. That is not an error. Haley, after all, is telling the story of his own forebears. But readers and viewer alike should realize that *Roots* details only a small part of the Afro-American experience. Much remains to be told and retold. *Roots* is just the beginning of that reexamination.

—Herbert G. Gutman

Herbert G. Gutman is the author of *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (See in *These Times*, Feb. 2).

Many viewers of the TV version of *Roots* have complained of what was left out in the adaptation of Haley's book. Obviously, no series of eight programs could cover the entire subject matter that is involved here. Neither can a book about one man's search for his family's roots. For readers who may want to add to the coverage either of the book or the TV program, IN *THESE TIMES* offers a very brief list of suggested reading.

In the cases where a paperback version is available, that fact is noted. In the case of books now out of print (and many of these are), most are available in public libraries.

Primary Sources

The Life of Frederick Douglass, paperback. There are many versions of this classic work which Douglass revised and elaborated throughout his life. The first is the shortest, and in many ways the best to read.

The Underground Railroad, by William Still, reprints by Arno Press and Ebony Classics. This is a collection of the first-hand accounts of slavery and escapes by those blacks who made it safely as far as the doors of the Antislavery Society of Philadelphia, edited by the man in charge of that office. *American Slavery As It Is*, ed. Theodore Weld, reprint by Arno Press. One of the leading Abolitionists collected and edited first-hand accounts of slavery in the 19th century, by blacks and whites who

HOW DEEP DID ROOTS DIG?



had experience of it, and through newspaper stories and advertisements from Southern journals—mostly concerning runaways.

The Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation, by Frances Ann Kemble, reprint by A.A. Knopf. Fanny Kemble was a famous British actress who married an American slaveowner and spent one year (1838-9) on his Sea Island plantations. Hers was the first published description of the "peculiar institution" by an eye-witness who was horrified by it. Its publication in England at the time of the debate in Parliament over the Confederate loan was considered to have aided in defeating that measure.

Denmark Vesey, ed. Robert S. Starobin. An account of one of the important early slave revolts (Charleston, S.C.) from the documents used in trying the "conspirators."

2 Haley writes the balance of recent histories: benevolent slaveholders could be as brutal as Simon Legree if slaves presumed to assert human rights.

In the *New York Times* "op-ed" page of Aug. 30, 1976, David H. Donald, professor of Southern history at Johns Hopkins University, wrote of "The Southernization of America." Referring specifically to the writing of American history, he pointed out that probably the five most important books published on American history during the past three years were all studies of slavery.

But it was not simply the outpouring of major works on slavery that impressed Prof. Donald. It was, he said, "their tone, for they portray slaveholders as basically benevolent and patriarchal, praise the cultural achievements of blacks under adversity, and conclude that the Old South was a region of astonishing efficiency and prosperity. Somewhere the ghost of John C. Calhoun must be grimly smiling at this belated national acceptance of his views of Southern superiority." In short, what we have is a picture of slavery as essentially a benign institution—a variation on the theme of the historical school of apologists for slavery that flourished earlier in this century.

►A different view.

But the largest television audience in the history of the medium—80 million Americans—saw a much different view of slavery in the episodes of *Roots*, the dramatization of a black family's life during the American slavery era. What they saw was much closer to the truth about slavery than the studies hailed by Professor Donald.

The viewers saw for themselves that slavery was an institution in which even the so-called "benevolent and patriarchal" slaveholder could be as brutal as Simon Legree when he felt it necessary to assert his authority over the slaves; that American slavery was an institution under which the slaveowner had absolute, unlimited power to do as he wished with his slaves, and that there was little or nothing a slave could do to protect himself or herself; and that even the "favored" slaves were quickly put on a level with the lowest field hands if they presumed to assert their rights as human beings.

Television viewers also saw and heard whites openly express the view that blacks were hardly human, that the white slaveowners were actually doing them a favor by taking them away from a "savage, barbaric continent"—Africa—and introducing them, through slavery, to civilization. And this was not fiction. In sentencing slaves charged with conspiring to overthrow slavery in the so-called Negro plot of 1741 in New York City, the court declared that "the monstrous ingratitude of this black tribe, is what exceedingly aggravates their guilt."

As late as 1911, a leading scholar declared at a meeting of the Lancaster, Pa., Historical Society: