

Outline wording for a talk by Tommy Sheridan to Yes Dunbar on 17 September 2025 at Dunbar Town House

Please note that although the speaker had prepared this script in advance he departed from it quite extensively on the night. Copyright Tommy Sheridan.

All Hail the Scottish Worker's Republic (drawing on the political writings of John MacLean)

Good evening friends – On the 9th of May 1918 a qualified teacher, a passionate socialist and a radical who believed in and promoted an independent Scottish Republic stood in the dock of Edinburgh's High Court charged with sedition under the controversial war time Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) which was rushed through Westminster after the start of the First World War to clamp down on free speech, strikes and peaceful protest over a war that many seen clearly as the sacrifice of young men from all sides in pursuit of greater economic market shares – a war with no noble objective – only the furtherance of profitability for the nation states involved – the man in the dock was conducting his own defence and he refused to submit a plea as he refused to accept the Judge was anything other than an agent of the authorities who had him arrested on 15th April and refused him bail bringing him to the courtroom from prison in the first place – instead of a plea he delivered a 75 minute speech which began with the following words:

It has been said that they cannot fathom my motive. For the full period of my active life I have been a teacher of economics to the working classes, and my contention has always been that capitalism is rotten to its foundations and must give place to a new society. I had a lecture, the principal heading of which was "Thou shalt not steal; thou shalt not kill", and I pointed out that as a consequence of the robbery that goes on in all civilised countries today, our respective countries have had to keep armies, and that inevitably our armies must clash together. On that and on other grounds, I consider capitalism the most infamous, bloody and evil system that mankind has ever witnessed. My language is regarded as extravagant language, but the events of the past four years have proved my contention.

He (the Lord Advocate) accused me of my motives. My motives are clean. My motives are genuine. If my motives were not clean and genuine, would I have made my statements while these shorthand reporters were present? I am out for the benefit of society, not for any individual human being, but I realise this, that justice and freedom can only be obtained when society is placed on a sound economic basis. That sound economic basis is wanting today, and hence the bloodshed we are having. I have not tried to get young men particularly. The young men have come to my meetings as well as the old men. I know quite well that in the reconstruction of society, the class interests of those who are on top will resist the change, and the only factor in society that can make for a clean sweep in society is the working class. Hence the class war. The whole history of society has proved that society moves forward as a consequence of an under-class overcoming the resistance of a class on top of them. So much for that.

McLean then delivered the lines which still to this day define him as a Scottish socialist legend and man of peace and great intellect:

I wish no harm to any human being, but I, as one man, am going to exercise my freedom of speech. No human being on the face of the earth, no government is going to take from me my right to speak, my right to protest against wrong, my right to do everything that is for the benefit of mankind. *I am not here, then, as the accused; I am here as the accuser of capitalism dripping with blood from head to foot.*

For raging against the First World War, against conscription to that war and calling out the British Government for the carnage and waste of young life their war had caused John Maclean was sentenced to 5 years in the harsh conditions of Peterhead prison – he was released after only 7 months on the back of a worldwide campaign for his freedom such was Maclean's notoriety at the time – within the socialist movements across the world Maclean was revered for his anti-war stance and campaigning – at a time of slow mail, expensive telegram services and the absence of mass media communication Maclean became so known in the heart of the Russian revolution in Petrograd that the Bolshevik leader of that revolution, the first workers revolution that had been conducted around the simple but powerful demands of Land, Bread and Peace, Vladimir Lenin, personally named Maclean alongside Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg as the leaders of the world's socialist movement.

Streets were named after Maclean in Russia. On the centenary of his birth in 1979 a commemorative stamp was produced with the image of John Maclean. He was appointed the first Consul of the new Russian Bolshevik government in 1918 and had an office at 12 South Portman Street in Glasgow although neither the British Govt or the British postal service recognised his position such was their disdain for Maclean and Bolshevism

We gather today in the shadow of many giants within our movement and the rich tapestry of Scottish history - but chief amongst those giants is the shadow of John Maclean, the fearless revolutionary who dared to dream of a Scottish Workers' Republic when such dreams were punishable by five years hard labour in Peterhead prison. We gather in the shadow of those who understood that Scottish independence and socialist transformation are not separate struggles, but one single fight for the liberation of our people.

One hundred years ago, the British state branded John Maclean "the most dangerous man in Britain." Why? Because he spoke truths that terrified the establishment. Because he connected the dots between imperial exploitation abroad and working-class oppression at home. Because he understood that Scotland's freedom and the world's freedom were inseparably linked.

When Maclean stood in that dock in 1918, conducting his own defence against charges of sedition, he delivered what remains one of the greatest speeches in the history of socialist struggle.

He declared that his crime was not sedition against the British state, but loyalty to the Scottish people.

His crime was not treason to the crown, but fidelity to the cause of human liberation.

That speech echoes still.

It echoes in every Scottish community devastated by Westminster's austerity.

It echoes in every worker struggling on poverty wages while their labour creates billions in profit.

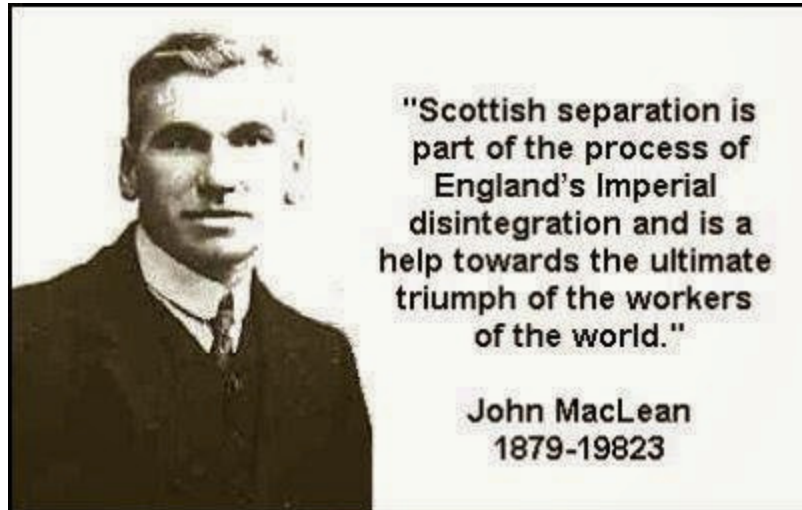
It echoes in every young Scot forced to leave their homeland in search of opportunity that should exist here.

And it echoes in the continued loss of life in illegal wars and immoral conflicts in the likes of Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries we have no right to be militarily involved –

Never forget the British responsibility for the genocide in Palestine given the Balfour Declaration of 1917 promising the creation of a state of Israel within the territory of Palestine paving the way for the brutal murders, land theft and forced expulsions of families which preceded the creation of the Israel state in 1948 on the land of Palestine – that brutal occupation of land and slaughter of civilian Palestinians has continued ever since culminating in the heinous genocide of the last two years – the British Empire and Establishment not only enable the current genocide they are responsible for the

creation of that illegitimate state in the first place – Remember land stolen is never legitimately owned or occupied by the thieves – It remains stolen land

John Maclean saw what we must see today - that the British Empire was not just an external force oppressing distant colonies, but an internal system oppressing the Celtic nations and the working class of these islands. When he called for the break-up of the British Empire as the route to Scotland's emancipation, he was not speaking as a narrow nationalist, but as an internationalist who understood that the liberation of Scotland would strike a blow for liberation everywhere.



John Maclean - "The Most dangerous man in Britain" - Basil Thompson head of British Military Intelligence

Recently released Government Papers show that Basil Thompson head of British Military Intelligence believed MacLean was the most dangerous man in Britain & stated that he would smear both MacLean & the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst by spreading rumours that they were mad.

But Maclean was not just a revolutionary theorist - he was a practical educator who understood that revolution begins in the mind. His Marxist economic classes were legendary precisely because he made complex ideas accessible to ordinary working people. He showed Glasgow's workers how capitalism worked, how it exploited them, and how they could organise to overthrow it.

His commitment to workers' education was matched by his commitment to women's rights - a position that put him ahead of much of the labour movement of his time. He understood that any socialism that did not liberate women was no socialism at all. He understood that the Scottish Workers' Republic must be built by and for all Scottish workers, regardless of gender, regardless of origin.

When tens of thousands gathered to welcome Maclean's early release from Peterhead in December 1918, they were not just celebrating one man's freedom - they were celebrating the power of organised resistance to state oppression. They were proving that when the people unite behind a cause, even the most powerful state must bend.

That same power exists today. That same potential for mass resistance exists in every Scottish community. The question is whether we have the courage to mobilise it, whether we have the vision to direct it toward the goal of a Scottish Workers' Republic.

The Scottish independence movement must in my opinion stand in that tradition.

We must stand for the understanding that Scottish independence without social transformation is meaningless - that political freedom without economic democracy is an empty shell.

We should stand for Maclean's vision of a Scotland where the wealth created by Scottish workers serves Scottish communities, not London financiers.

Look around this country today. Look at the obscene inequality where Highland estates owned by foreign billionaires exist alongside Highland communities with no affordable housing.

Look at the energy poverty in communities surrounded by wind farms and oil rigs.

Look at the brain drain that sends our brightest young people south because London's economy sucks up opportunity like a vacuum.

This is not inevitable. This is not natural. This is the direct result of political choices made in Westminster by people who have never lived the consequences of those choices.

This is the result of a system designed to extract wealth from Scotland and concentrate it in the southeast of England.

The British establishment tells us we're too small, too poor, too stupid to govern ourselves. These are the same lies they told every colony that broke free from their control. They are particularly insulting when directed at a nation that sits on vast energy reserves, that leads the world in renewable technology, that has universities older than most countries.

Scotland has everything needed for independence except the political will to seize it. We have the resources - oil, gas, renewables, fresh water, fertile land, fishing grounds. We have the human talent - engineers, doctors, teachers, artists, innovators. We have the democratic mandate - poll after poll shows majority support for independence.

What we lack is leadership with the courage to act on that mandate. What we lack is a political movement prepared to break with the failed strategy of begging Westminster for permission to be free.

The Alba Party calls on the SNP to return to their roots and recognise once again the power of elections. To recognise the fact that British permission for a referendum was only ever granted because support for the cause at that time was only around 23%. With support now consistently around 50% no further referendum is likely. We must represent the understanding that when a majority of Scots support independence, we don't need to ask permission - we have a duty to act. Every election becomes a de facto referendum. Every mandate becomes a declaration of intent.

But independence alone is not enough - it never was for John Maclean, and it cannot be for us. The Scottish Workers' Republic means democratic control over our economy, our resources, our future. It means that those who create the wealth have a say in how it's distributed.

This is not utopian fantasy - this is practical necessity.

Climate change demands planned economic transformation that only democratic control can deliver.

Inequality demands redistribution that only public ownership can achieve.

The Housing crisis demands building programs that only government investment can fund.

A Scottish Workers' Republic would mean public ownership of energy companies, ensuring that renewable wealth flows to communities rather than shareholders.

It would mean land reform that breaks up the great estates and returns the land to productive use.

It would mean a publicly owned banking system that serves economic development rather than speculation.

It would mean workers' representatives on company boards, community control over local services, democratic planning that puts human need before private profit.

It would mean an end to the grotesque spectacle of homelessness in a country with empty mansions, of energy poverty in a country that exports energy.

To our Irish comrades who have made Scotland home - you understand better than most what John Maclean meant when he spoke of Celtic solidarity. Your struggle for Irish freedom runs parallel to our struggle for Scottish liberation. Together, we can build the Celtic alliance that challenges the imperial system oppressing both our peoples.

To our English friends who support Scottish independence - we follow Maclean's example in distinguishing between the English people and the English establishment. Our enemy is not England but Empire, not the English working class but the British ruling class that exploits workers in Manchester as surely as it exploits workers in Glasgow.

The path ahead will not be easy. The British state will use every weapon at its disposal to prevent Scottish independence - economic pressure, media manipulation, legal challenges, perhaps even the kind of direct repression that John Maclean faced. We must be prepared for that resistance. We must build our movement strong enough to withstand it.

Sadly, John Maclean fell seriously ill from double pneumonia in November 1923 after his body had been left seriously weakened by the forced feeding via a rubber tube forced down his mouth or up his nose twice a day whilst in Peterhead in 1918. John had gone on hunger strike in support of his status as a political prisoner and because he claimed his food was being tampered with and poisoned. The response of the prison authorities was brutal. John's wife Agnes wrote after visiting her husband:

Well John has been on hunger strike since July. He resisted the forcible feeding for a good while but submitted to the inevitable. Now he is being fed by a stomach tube twice daily. He has aged very much and has the look of a man who is going through torture. Seemingly anything is law in regard to John ... It is nothing but slow murder...

John collapsed during an outdoor speech in Glasgow in late November and died in his Pollokshaws home on November 30th with his family by his side. He was aged only 44. A crowd of over 10,000 attended his funeral as he was laid to rest in Eastwood cemetery.

But we have advantages that Maclean's generation could hardly imagine. We have instant communication, global solidarity networks, international law that recognises the right of self-determination. We have the example of successful independence movements across the world, from Ireland to India to South Africa.

Most importantly, we have the growing understanding among Scottish people that the current system has failed them. Austerity has stripped away the last illusions about Westminster's benevolence. Brexit has demonstrated the contempt with which Scottish democracy is treated. The cost-of-living crisis has shown the inability of the British state to protect its own citizens.

The moment for the Scottish Workers' Republic is approaching. The question is whether we will seize it or let it slip away. The choice is between bold action and gradual decline, between revolutionary transformation and managed decay.

John Maclean spent his life preparing for this moment. He endured imprisonment, persecution, and ultimately martyrdom for the cause we now champion. His legacy is not a museum piece but a living challenge - the challenge to match his courage, his vision, his unwavering commitment to human liberation.

When the history of Scottish independence is written, let it record that we proved worthy of that legacy. Let it record that we had the courage to break with a failed system and build something better. Let it record that we chose revolution over resignation, hope over despair, the future over the past.

The Scottish Workers' Republic is not a distant dream but an immediate possibility. The technology exists, the resources exist, the democratic mandate exists. What remains is for us to exist as a movement capable of delivering it.

On the 2nd of December 1973, a large crowd gathered on a cold winter's day to witness the unveiling of a stone cairn erected in the centre of Pollokshaws in Glasgow to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of John MacLean's death. The cairn was paid for by public donations and followed an enthusiastic campaign led by the John MacLean Society. The inscription engraved on the cairn reads:

**In memory of John MacLean
Born in Pollokshaws on 24 August 1879,
And died there on 30 November 1923.
Famous pioneer of working-class education,
He forged the Scottish link in the
Golden Chain of World Socialism**

Today there is a similar grassroots campaign to raise the necessary funds to erect a statue of John Maclean in Glasgow city centre. It is a crowdfunder which has so far raised almost £7,000 of the £32,000 target. I would invite you to donate online if you are able to at #MacleanCampaign

All hail the Scottish Workers' Republic!