

agenda¹⁵

how can we make
change happen?

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Doug Bain

With the untimely death of Doug Bain, the left in Scotland has lost a clever, warm, witty activist who was always open to new ideas and willing to work across boundaries. He was a contributor to SLR and a regular participant at our Board meetings as a representative of Democratic Left. Doug died just at a point when his political activity and creativity was increasing again. He will be missed and remembered. On page 15 we print one of the last things Doug wrote as a tribute.

comment: making change happen

In the last issue of Scottish Left Review we published a programme of action for starting the transformation of Scotland into a more equitable, more sustainable and more rewarding place to live. The proposals were realistic and in many cases new – and yet predictably the mainstream media ignored it and the UK continues to drift further to the hard right. How can the left make change happen?

It's not that those of us who put the Scottish Left Review together are unrealistic people. We set ourselves a significant challenge in trying to produce a set of proposals which could be implemented in Scotland now and which collectively would amount to a real change in direction for politics which, in Scotland as in the rest of the UK and indeed most of the developed world, are failing. But we did not imagine that publishing a set of proposals would in itself be sufficient to change anything. In this issue we're starting to ask the question 'if this is the kind of change Scotland needs, how do we make it happen?'

It may be worth starting with some context. Firstly, Scottish Left Review is not a political party (nor is it affiliated in any way to any political party or movement) and it is not a campaigning organisation. The reason the Scottish Left Review was set up was to provide a space and a focal point for discussion, debate and analysis. Our aim has always been to print interesting and stimulating material relevant to the left in Scotland from as wide a range of sources as possible and we do not take an 'editorial line'. In publishing Agenda 15 we are not trying to change that. We would expect – and encourage – people to

disagree with parts of what it contains or to point out the many important things it doesn't contain. This is not a dogmatic take-it-or-leave-it manifesto. But it is an attempt to stimulate thinking which is badly needed in Scotland just now. So in 'making change happen' the Scottish Left Review continues to see its primary role are encouraging thinking and bringing people together.

Secondly, we are very aware that the left in Scotland spans a wide range of people. We know that they can be found in a number of different political parties and that many are not a member of a party, and we know that there are many strands of emphasis for the left (economic justice, sustainability, gender, race and so on). While this is a great strength is also poses problems. In particular, we are approaching a Scottish Election and campaigning is already well under way. Elections are naturally polarising and this is especially the case in Scotland where the political left is spread among a number of parties. If we are to get change in Scotland it is unlikely to emerge from a very public contest which is played out primarily in the corporate media. One of the most important steps in achieving change

Cover and illustrations: Nadia Lucchesi
nadia_l@hotmail.com
Back Cover Cartoon: Frank Boyle
www.boylecartoon.co.uk

Editorial Committee

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Articles for publication: editorial@scottishleftreview.org
Letters and comments: feedback@scottishleftreview.org
Website: www.scottishleftreview.org Tel/Fax 0141 424 0042
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in Scotland will be to build coalitions across divisions and that is very difficult to do when the focus is naturally on the divisions rather than the [significantly bigger] similarities.

Thirdly, as with any enterprise it is healthy to start by recognising that failure is entirely possible. Scotland is not quite as besieged by corporate lobbying power as are London or Washington, but money does not

successfully accumulate unless it is capable of protecting itself from interventions which would dilute its unrestricted power. By definition, most forms of power (the power to be heard, the power to influence views, the power to influence decisions) are greatly strengthened by the liberal application of money. So the ability to restrain the negative effects of money rests mainly with those who have no interest in restraining the power of money. As Iain McWhirter points out in this issue, the work of 'think tanks' has been heavily distorted (against their will or not) by the interests of corporate donors. And of course most media ownership in the UK has a broadly (or in many cases vehemently) corporate-friendly outlook. If Lord Browne of BP wants to privatise English universities he is apparently able to do it all by himself. It will be a long, long time before there is sufficient reform of society to imagine that such radicalism could be driven from inside government if it wash pushing in the opposite direction.

OK, these are three caveats and it is important that we are aware of them. But they are no reason for inaction or despondency and all can be overcome. Indeed, they help us to sketch out the shape of what needs to be done:

- Scotland needs an active focus for developing and promoting ideas. At the moment the left is very disparate; political parties do not usually generate radical new thinking, academia in Scotland has not been effective at challenging the received wisdoms and campaigning organisations have not (in general) worked together to generate an impact bigger than their individual parts. When some right-wing commentator pronounces on the 'inevitability' of some form of neoliberal dogma, there is no obvious counterweight. This needs to be addressed.
- The left in Scotland needs to rediscover its ability to work across boundaries. The impact of the collectivism that led to the Constitutional Convention has been forgotten and where once Scotland could claim a level of maturity in putting differences aside for the collective good, now it has descended into narrow territorialism. There are two particular manifestations of this which should give us pause. Can there be two political parties in Europe with such a closely aligned political agenda as the SNP and the Labour Party but which are so utterly incapable of working constructively together? And (more typically), how did the emergent left political party in Scotland disintegrate so completely over such petty personal differences? In the development of the Constitutional Convention the STUC played an important role of bringing people together. We need to find a vehicle capable of doing that again.
- The left will simply have to be much sharper and more savvy in overcoming the difficulties it faces from established power structures. There is no real prospect of a change in media ownership or a benign benefactor appearing as if by magic to open the routes of communication to the wider world (the Scottish people and Scotland's decision- and policy-makers). But if the left can be more professional and diligent in how it goes about spreading its message then it may not need a deus ex machina to solve its problems for it.

So, a way to develop strong messages and ideas, a way of bringing people together to support them and a way of getting those messages out to influence views and decisions is all that are needed. These may sound daunting, but in fact they are far from impossible to achieve.

OK, but what does this mean in practice? We can start by



they absorb from the other media and politics). If a journalist wants to know about the impact of public spending cuts he or she will pick up the phone to someone to get a background briefing – key facts and figures, core analysis, a narrative. Again, who do they phone and where do they go? People who do not work closely with the media are often not aware of the genesis of what they read in the newspaper. There may be three people quoted on the record but long before that point there has been an extended conversation with somebody to establish what is the 'story'. This might happen because the journalist uses his or her contact book but it also happens because the journalist gets a phone call and someone 'tells them' what just happened. It does not mean that journalists simply accept what interest groups tell them but effective briefing does have a very significant view on what is written.

examining
how others
do it. If
we look
at the way professional
influencers work in the US or
London we can see a range

of the sorts of things which can be done. For example, if everyone who appears on television news and current affairs programmes are all putting forward the same view point and same sets of prescriptions then it is hardly surprising that these views come to be seen as the 'mainstream'. The neoliberal business lobby makes itself very available – a Newsnight producer or someone putting together a package for the six o'clock news knows that they will never struggle to find a business-friendly commentator because the business lobbies make it easy to be reached. It is not always so easy in the opposite direction. In certain policy areas where there are active NGOs there is no problem in finding a left voice – for example, on homelessness and housing or as we have seen in recent weeks on poverty and welfare. But put yourself in the shoes of a TV journalist – if you wanted to get a counterweight to the CBI in a debate about economic rebuilding who would you phone? You might know an economist or two who might be able to do it, you might find someone from the trade union movement or you just might find someone from a political party – but then again, you might just not bother. If viewpoints are to reach the wider world they must be easily accessible and at the moment there is no 'entry point' for left thinking in Scotland.

The same applies to print journalism. Journalists get their information from the people they speak to (as well as what

Politicians respond to a slightly different set of drivers but they are closely linked. Politicians tend to flock towards what they consider to be 'safety'. That means that they want to be seen to be linked with viewpoints and stories which are the dominant ones. For an awful long time that has meant 'neoliberal economic policy with just enough social justice to get by'. That was the 'safety zone' as defined during the Blair years. It is time that this zone was made less safe. Politicians need to believe that if they do not support the sorts of proposals which have been put forward in Agenda 15 then they may find themselves answering awkward questions. Equally, they need to be persuaded that if they do follow the proposals there is a chance of genuine support, of being able to create their own 'stories' about how action they have taken is making a real difference to real people. There is nothing revolutionary in this – it is the very well understood field of political lobbying. It's just that the left only ever does it in a fragmented, issue-by-issue way. An MSP can vote on one clause about social housing in a piece of legislation filled with neoliberal economic dogma and feel they have 'struck a balance'. There is virtually no lobbying on the 'big picture' issues of economic change. If this isn't done

properly and effectively then it is not reasonable to expect politicians to spontaneously lobby themselves.

So, to put it simply, the left in Scotland has to professionalise a bit if it is to take the sorts of issues raised in Agenda 15 and realise them. It has to find ways to operate with the same sort of effective practices that the business lobby uses on a daily basis.

It is not just the media; the messages and 'narratives' which emerge as the accepted narrative of public events does not come from nowhere. There are three simple questions which inform all human 'stories' – where are we?, how did we get here?, and where do we go now? It is only a slight simplification to say that whoever produces the simplest, more apparently persuasive answers to these questions tends to define what people see as happening. (The use of the word 'apparent' here is important – often people prefer to believe things which reinforce what they already

believe to be true and so the most accurate information is not necessarily the most persuasive information). This is the derivation of the word 'spin'. The original concept was that it takes much more effort to reverse the direction of a spinning

wheel than it does to make it spin in the first place. So clear, simple, explanations with simple, memorable evidence to support it and believable, achievable steps which can be taken next are, when brought together, very effective ways of defining how people see events. Independence from political parties certainly helps. To take a simple recent example, it was clear for a few days after the Westminster Budget that journalists knew it was at least a bit bad for 'the poor' but didn't know just how bad. It was when independent think tank the IFS did an evaluation to show that the poor were losing out disproportionately that this view became the pervasive one. Developing messages and stories is how the public imagination is captured, and it does not just happen by itself.

Next is the need for strength in numbers. If you look at the strategies of corporate lobbyists you become aware of the ways to damage narratives that clash with your own. The leaked strategic advice which Shell Oil received from its public affairs advisers after the execution of Ken Saro Wiwa is a prime example – a crucial part of the strategy was about how to divide and separate the company's critics. NGOs were divided into those that could be 'tamed' and those that couldn't. The strategy was simply to isolate those which could not be tamed and in so doing to neuter them. It is much more difficult to isolate coalitions of diverse organisations with a single 'story' to tell. Finding ways to help organisations come together collectively makes it much more difficult for them to be isolated, dismissed or ignored.

Finally (for now), it is important to be able to respond quickly to events as they unfold and effective, professional approaches to influencing how they are understood make an enormous difference. But it is even more effective if it is possible to create the momentum in the first place. One of the problems is that because the agenda is being driven so ferociously by those with a certain vested interest, responding to what is already running inevitably means that you are travelling along the paths chosen by others. Thus it is that however much overwhelming evidence the left has in opposition to the privatisation of Scottish Water, the question keeps emerging again and again and the discussion is always about the possibility of Scottish

Water being privatised. That is because the story is being set by the 'other side' which has (through the CBI and its friends, a number of business-friendly think tanks and a number of heavily business-influenced government 'reviews') repeatedly done exactly the kind of 'story setting' outlined above – we kept water public as a social statement but now that money is tight we need to be more pragmatic and simply selling it off

will bring in lots of new cash without any downsides to customers. None of it true, but this is what opponents of privatisation are responding to. Instead, the left needs to be setting the stories. Which figures in Scotland brought down the banking system and are they still influencing policy? Should they not be named and shamed and politicians be pressed to explain why they have not been banned from seeking to influence government further? How much public money has been wasted on contract work which granted too much control and reward to private companies at public

expense? Who allowed this to happen and how can it be fixed now? There are hundreds of compelling 'stories' which will not become stories if they are not told. Agendas must be set, not only followed.

So, to put it simply, the left in Scotland has to professionalise a bit if it is to take the sorts of issues raised in Agenda 15 and realise them. It has to find ways to operate with the same sort of effective practices that the business lobby uses on a daily basis. In effect, we need to replicate the sort of left-wing lobby groups that are found in the US or to balance the sorts of right-wing think tanks we already have in Scotland. There is no obvious existing forum for doing this. That is why the Scottish Left Review is seeking to create a left-wing think tank and campaigning body in Scotland. If we want to achieve the outcomes achieved by the professionals, we need to learn some of the lessons of the professionals. We will keep you up to speed with development as we go along but this is our starting-point. We know Agenda 15 will not simply implement itself. We need to have the capacity to push harder. Change can happen, but we need to be realistic about how it happens. It takes work – and we need to create the structure to make sure that work gets done. ■

much to win, much to learn

Iain McWhirter looks at the media and policy response to the economic crisis and argues that while there may be some media bias, this simply means the left must raise its game

Why does it always take mayhem before the media takes notice? The student demonstration on 10/11/10, which was overwhelmingly peaceful and good humoured, marked a significant shift in political attitudes towards the government's deficit reduction programme. Suddenly, there is an opposition again. The 50,000 who turned up in the November sunshine

weren't marching just to protect their future from debt - most of them won't have to pay £9,000 fees anyway because they have already begun their courses. They were challenging the Coalition government's assault on the public sphere. It is a measure of just how far the UK media - with a few notable exceptions like the Sunday Herald- has appeared to close down debate

on alternatives to the dismantling of the welfare state, that it took this show of strength on the streets to get the argument underway. Really, since the collapse of Northern Rock in 2007, there has been very little questioning of fiscal orthodoxy. We have been told that the only legitimate response to the banking crash is the slash social spending, throw hundreds of thousands out of work, and continue to pay banker ludicrous bonuses. But there are alternatives.

Back in the 1970s, during a comparable financial crisis, there was genuine debate about how to make capitalism work for people rather than purely for profit. Ideas like establishing a national investment bank were not dismissed as leftist fantasy. We had - shock! - prices and incomes policies. Nationalisation was still regarded as a legitimate option for maintaining industrial activity. There were commissions established in to pay comparability and of course taxation was seen as a legitimate way of redistribution wealth and ensuring economic fairness. Not any more.

When the Labour government nationalised Royal Bank of Scotland and half the financial sector in 2008 it was seen as simply an unfortunate necessity. It was assumed that normal corporate banking would be resumed as soon as possible. No one even considered using the state-owned banks to achieve social objectives. There is a very strong argument that banks which are too big to fail are too big to remain private. If they depend on public money to survive, they should be seen as part of the state and used to ensure that finance goes to productive activities and not speculation. But this argument barely got off the ground. All we have today are banker's solutions.

A one trillion pound public bail-out of the financial sector which has failed to get the real economy going again and has simply enriched the very people who were responsible for the financial crash in the first place. This is wrong. You don't have to be a card carrying Marxist to see that there is a moral deficiency at the heart of the Coalition government's and Labour's entire approach to the crisis. Moral hazard is too small a phrase. It is simply an outrage that the bankers have had their mouths stuffed with gold while public services are slashed.

This is not entirely down to media bias. It has more to do with the way that public debate has been colonised by special interest groups, lobbyists and think tanks who rarely present alternatives to the received wisdom of the City of London and Whitehall. From the Institute of Directors to allegedly left-leaning bodies like Demos and the Institute for Public Policy Research, there is a presumption that the economic argument is over. That liberal capitalism, financial capitalism, is the only game in town. This ideological narrow-mindedness is partly down to the way that these organisations are funded and operate. Mostly think tanks depend on corporate money to run their activities. Moreover, they solicit for private money by offering access to decision-makers, to politicians and in particular ministers. Ministers are fully aware of this, as the former health secretary, Patricia Hewitt revealed during the Channel 4 'sting' operation before

the last general election. Hewitt told her prospective future private client, that the best way to get up close to ministers is to fund seminars and conferences run by organisations like Demos. This is a two-way street in which politicians converge with private interests to express a received view of how 'real' politics functions.

But it's not just a great right wing conspiracy. The Left has often been its own worst enemy. Its failure to get its message across to the public in a language they can understand has been lamentable, and isn't just down to media bias. A paranoia about, especially, the Murdoch press has led many on the left to have nothing to do with the media at all. Others on the left clearly believe that it is more important to fight each other than to address the common enemy. Nor has the left fully recovered from the intellectual crisis left by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Many on the Marxist left believed that something would be salvageable from the communist experiment. In the event, we discovered that the state bureaucracy was even worse than the Right had said it was. Corruption, inefficiency, authoritarianism, environmental degradation, brutal suppression of dissent - it will be a long time before anyone can seriously propose a communist solution to society's ills.

But just because communism failed doesn't mean that its polar opposite - financial capitalism - has won anything more than a temporary victory. The ruinous financial policies required by the banks, and implemented by the Coalition government, are generating a great deal of unspoken dissent - and not just within the state bureaucracies. Small businesses

have been radicalised in a way I can scarcely remember by their experience of the usurious lending policies of the banks. A million workers in the private sector have had to go part time, and lose a large part of their income, in order to keep their jobs. The pension industry has been exposed to many millions of ordinary families as an iniquitous kleptocracy unfit to look after their financial security. Across society, there is now a very broad coalition forming against banker capitalism.

Little of it is expressed because of the difficulty in getting fair hearing. People have forgotten how to express dissent - the vocabulary isn't there. But the students are showing the way with their witty and intelligent campaign against the privatisation of higher education. They will help find the voice of the many people who have been radicalised by the financial crisis, but don't quite realise it yet. There is a possibility that we may even be seeing a social democratic version of the Tea Party movement in America. That too was also borne out of discontent at the rescue of Wall Street, but has unfortunately been channelled into the Right. Britain is different. We are not so susceptible to religious fundamentalism, quasi racialism and ultra-right wing individualism. It is up to the trades unions and the left now to seek new ways of formulating and infiltrating alternative ideas into public debate. The party starts here. ■

Iain McWhirter is a journalist and writer

agenda 15 - reactions

We wrote to a range of the people who will have the power to implement the proposals put forward in Agenda 15 to ask for their reactions. We wrote to leader of all the centre and left-of-centre political parties in the Scottish Parliament.

We wrote to an current MSP in each of the parties. And we also wrote to a candidate at the coming election in each of the parties but who has not been an MSP. We also got a number of responses from readers. The following is what we have received.

Alex Salmond, First Minister

Devolution as we know it is over, the mission of building a better society has begun. The truth is we need a national purpose, a common goal to make Scotland a remarkable and fulfilling place in which to live. If Labour made the mistake of thinking that devolution alone would fix things, then perhaps I have talked of independence without explaining sufficiently what I mean. In future, I may refer to the referendum I seek as a jobs referendum; when I say I want more powers, I want powers to create and protect jobs. When I speak of financial responsibility, I mean the responsibility to grow the economy and defend the services that we as a society want.

This is the defining issue of the moment – how do we protect our people and jobs? It seems to me the choice is straightforward. Either we have the powers to look after all the people of Scotland, or we continue adrift on the waters of the ConDem cuts storm. Where we can act, we have done so for the benefit of all the people of Scotland. We will not sell Scottish Water, but develop it into a dynamic agency managing a vital asset. We have fostered a boom in renewable energy development, aiming to meet all our energy needs from green sources by 2025. We have set the world's toughest climate change targets. We have done all this to protect the inheritance of our children, to build a green economy for the future and to meet our international obligations.

We have acted to defend the least advantaged in our society. By freezing council tax, lifting bridge tolls, and ending prescription charges we have reduced the burden on households around the country. Protecting the health budget, employing more hospital cleaners and reducing layers of management ensure we can protect the NHS. Putting 1,000 more officers on the beat, while seeking a cut in back office duplication, means communities can stay safe even as Scotland's budget is cut by Westminster. These are good steps, as we move forward to a fair society.

My vision is to build a better Scotland using the economic powers and financial responsibility that come with independence. The age of confusing a national parliament with a national purpose

are over – the one exists to deliver the other, which is why Scotland needs independence. Now is the time to work towards that fair society.

Richard Leonard, Prospective Labour Party candidate, Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley

Let's get some points of significant disagreement out of the way. I am not in that new consensus which believes "the arguments for full independence seem strong to anyone who has been observing closely what being part of the British state really involves". I have been observing, but I reach quite a different conclusion. The political choices we face need to be guided more by principle than geography, more by a redistribution of power from those who happen to own the wealth to those who by their endeavour create it. In my eyes the last few years have shown that the democratic deficit we need to address above all others is in our economic rather than our political system. Similarly I am far from convinced that we are living in a "post-religious...post-industrial...post-imperial society". Admittedly some of their manifestations are in an altered state but take

it from me as a union organiser, corporate imperialism in industrial Scotland is a daily experience for millions of our citizens as producers as well as consumers. But that's also why much of the thinking behind Agenda 15 is right. The voice of big business is heard all too loudly in the corridors of power and needs to be regulated. Those most responsible for the banking crisis are getting away with it whilst those who are in no way responsible for it are being asked to pay the price.

And so we need a radical agenda not despite the scale of the crisis we face but precisely because of it. We have income inequality, but we have power inequality too. Most notably the continued marginalisation of women, socially and economically has got to

be part of Agenda 15. So pursuing a Living Wage, equal pay and wage convergence through public procurement and ending the public sector bonus culture would be a marked change in the right direction. But we need to look at the income of those out of work, not least, the dignity of those in retirement, too. And we need to promote an agenda of wider economic democracy

In future, I may refer to the referendum I seek as a jobs referendum; when I say I want more powers, I want powers to create and protect jobs. When I speak of financial responsibility, I mean the responsibility to grow the economy and defend the services that we as a society want.

which includes though is not limited to the longstanding but too often neglected labour movement goal of industrial democracy.

Agenda 15's challenge to the fake diversity generated by the advertising and marketing machine is right. But this shortage of real choice is much deeper and the concentration of power much greater. Remember the only big Scottish registered companies to emerge over the last thirty years are either privatised utilities like Scottish & Southern Energy and the now overseas owned Scottish Power or corporations which have benefited from privatisation like Stagecoach and the FirstGroup. There is a massive investment gap in the Scottish economy, and much that could be done by directing the multi-billion pound Pension and insurance funds that we own but fail to control, as well as radically reforming and bolstering the Scottish Investment Bank and giving new powers to Co-operative Development Scotland.

Much is made quite correctly of the power and quality of the media in Agenda 15, the failings of the civil service and the monopoly power of big business: in our National Health Service as well as in the wider economy, but what about the power of the land-owning classes? There is much unfinished business on land reform, because ownership means power. It matters, and if we are to see transformational social and economic change our land must be part of it. **Bill Wilson, SNP MSP**

I recall reading that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries many young English women destroyed their health trying to reduce the diameter of their waists to that of the Duchess of Rutland's, said to be equivalent to one and a half oranges. Their strict diets and tight corsets made them prone to fainting and disinclined to go hill-walking. Meanwhile in China, the female victims of a bizarre male concept of feminine beauty tottered about on deformed feet and were not much into walking at all – never mind hill-walking. What we measure, in a large part, determines what we are.

Today growth is god: to a greater or lesser degree, success is measured by growth in GDP. We compare our GDP to that of other nations, and if it is higher we are doing well, if lower then government policy is a failure. Why do we measure GDP? We seek full employment, we want to use the wealth to generate a more just society, we want better paid jobs, we want people to be happy...

The problem is that GDP measures none of these things. As pointed out in Agenda 15, GDP growth may be job-free. One Labour local authority in Scotland – North Ayrshire – used to advertise its region as an area for international investment on the strength of its internationally low wages; good wages and GDP growth are not linked. The trickle-down effect has long been discredited, and GDP growth may increase rather than decrease inequality. As for happiness, well, lots of things make us happy, but I have yet to hear anybody remark that their personal happiness is due to a recent increase in GDP! Worse, GDP does not differentiate between positive, and neutral or harmful increases in economic activity. Spending on the NHS is considered a good thing, but in a more equal society we would

not have to spend so much on health. Is that not a better thing?

There is much unfinished business on land reform, because ownership means power. It matters, and if we are to see transformational social and economic change our land must be part of it.

Thatcher once informed us that "A man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself as a failure". Ownership of a car was a mark of success; a new car shows that you really are succeeding. But how about an alternative view? Buying a new car means your old car has finally packed in – was no longer up to the job. Are you not then a failure; you could not keep your car on the road? Or... buying a new car means that you do not care about the environment, about anybody

but yourself, is that not a social failure on your part? Now I am not suggesting that one should read my last few lines literally, but imagine the kind of society we might live in if the latter view, and not the former, was the more common? If we use an indicator – new car or GDP – as a measure of success then it follows logically, inevitably, that we will seek to maximise our score in that measurement. Nobody (least of all politicians) wants to be seen to fail. If we want less inequality, greater happiness, or whatever, then we had better make sure that that is what we measure, because what you measure is what you get.

Why, given the range of excellent points raised in Agenda 15, have I concentrated on one, GDP, alone? Well, aside from limited space, measurement is central to who we are, how we perceive ourselves, success or failure. GDP turns our world upside down: it seems that people exist to serve our economy. But surely our economy exists to serve our people? That is why in my last few months as an MSP I am carrying out a survey of the views of French and Scottish NGOs on GDP. If you have something to say, I would be delighted to hear it.

Maggie Chapman, number three on the Lothians list for the Scottish Green Party

Agenda 15 is exactly the sort of visionary thinking that devolution should have prompted. It is sad that the quality of debate has never really come to encompass the sort of big thinking that the Scottish Left Review is to be commended for. Reading the set of principles and policies set out in Agenda 15 I was left struggling to disagree. Of course there are areas where Greens would go further – much more on an economic strategy based on the twin aims of creating jobs and tackling climate change, for instance. There are some areas which Agenda 15 glosses over. The most important is radical devolution of powers. It's not enough to just strengthen the powers of the Scottish Parliament. We must strengthen the say communities have over their own lives.

And it's here that I'd like to make my own contribution to this Agenda. The evidence points to disempowerment and alienation being a serious factor in undermining wellbeing. Late capitalism seeks to answer this by giving consumer choice. Greens believe that giving people more power to work together for better communities and a better world is the solution to alienation. Agenda 15 would benefit from some material proposals on how communities could be more empowered, and how that would create social capital and increased well-being. I suggest an

extension of the right to buy legislation to urban areas, allowing communities to take the first option on any asset on the market and a substantial endowment for the voluntary sector and social enterprises of the order of £1bn to be managed by a consortium of voluntary sector organisations.

There is a need to rework the individual's relationship with the state, and while Agenda 15 is strong on this it doesn't mention co-production. This is a way of designing and delivering services that puts the individual and communities at the heart of both defining the service and helping to deliver it. The municipal monopoly on public services cannot be seen as an untrammelled good. Often self help and mutual aid approaches can help deliver better, more effective services that will be treasured by their users. This might include helping older people learn maintenance skills so they're not dependent on their landlord. Or it could mean having communities design and deliver waste reduction plans that create resources such as compost and recyclable metals. Perhaps it is most appropriate in design and delivery of care, where putting the service user at the heart of the service delivers better health and well being. Both the New Economics Foundation and the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts have interesting work on this process.

Agenda 15 gives an effective framework for supporting a progressive Scotland. It is to be commended for that. While there are some areas that I'd develop, it delivers the sort of exciting thinking that is so desperately needed. We must make a better nation, rather than capitulating to a neoliberal cuts agenda.

Joan McAlpine, Scottish National Party candidate for the South of Scotland region

I welcome Scottish Left Review's Agenda 15 as an important contribution to the debate on how Scotland can become a fairer country. I particularly welcome the informative piece you ran on the forces behind the campaign to privatise Scottish Water. I am very proud to be representing a party in 2011 that has spelled out clearly that it will not privatise Scottish Water, and intends to develop this valuable resource for all the people of Scotland and, in future, for global humanitarian purposes. Since the publication of Agenda 15, the SNP government has also set more ambitious climate change targets and promised to introduce free prescriptions. Universal benefits such as free medicine are the easiest way of creating an equitable society in which everybody has a stake.

They are also popular - the NHS is a universal benefit. Such benefits, however, must be balanced and paid for through a progressive taxation system. Under the current devolution settlement, Scotland has no control over the whole taxation system. If we did - either by means of full fiscal power or with independence - we would have access to the income that has seen Scotland, according to official figures, run a surplus even after our share of the banking bail out. Independence would allow Scottish politicians, if they choose, to regulate banks and

place a fairer levy on greed. With access to our oil revenues and other forms of corporate taxation, alcohol and tobacco duty and petrol taxes, we could tailor a system better suited to Scottish conditions. It would allow us to develop renewables using our own wealth - and so create the kind of high skilled manufacturing jobs that will grow Scotland while also reducing our dependence on fossil fuel. Scotland is a rich country. To share that wealth we need to control it.

From some of our readers

We are in the wake of the worst financial crisis for a century, we have witnessed a near meltdown of the financial markets and the ensuing chaos and turmoil, resulting in savage cuts in the public and private sectors. Yet amongst this the very rich are no worse off and the very poor certainly no better. The Hutton Review of Fair Pay in the Public Sector is looking in the wrong place for answers. Excessive salaries in the public sector are a direct result of market influences in the spilling over into the public sector. Despite a 24 per cent fall in shares, the boardroom pay of the top 100 companies in the UK has increased by 23 per cent. Top executive pay of over £1 million is still on the cards at the Royal Bank of Scotland, Lloyds Banking Group and many others.

Wage inequality is destructive and destabilising to our society, allowing the rich to buy privilege, education and health. Wage inequality divides communities and traps those at the bottom on low wages and benefits.

The idea of a National Maximum Wage is not new - but it is an idea whose time has come. The creation of a High Pay Commission to conduct detailed research, hear evidence and look at alternatives such as linking the maximum wage in a company to a multiple of the lowest wage. Or perhaps setting a maximum wage at 10 or 20 times the UK average wage, would be a first step in discussing wage inequality and how to resolve it. We need to develop solutions that structurally tackle the inequality in income. We will be told to "Let the market decide" - but as we have seen - how wrong the markets can be.

Linda Somerville

My response to Agenda 15 is not about commenting on the ideas and proposals as such. I agree with many of them and think that quibbling about this point or that would miss a more fundamental one which is how do we go about operationalising and mobilising for them? The first step must be the wider public articulation of the platform or vision contained therein. The second step is identifying, creating and stimulating the social forces and social/political processes by which people could campaign to achieve the aims and goals. Has the Scottish Parliament got any mileage here, either in terms of its existing powers or the likely composition after 2011? There have been too many examples in the past of great ideas and initiatives that ended up going precisely nowhere. The instigators were convinced that the ideas were great - and sure they have to be - but that is less than half the equation of social change which the agenda discusses. Ironically, is there anything we can learn

- positively and negatively- from the take over of society and the state by neo-liberal forces?'

Gregor Gall

Agenda 15 is like a breath of fresh air, an agenda where ideas have room to breathe. In keeping with some of the more important contributions from the left in recent years, it eschews the language of lofty destinations and instead promotes the first steps of a pathway towards the transformation of Scotland. This is what is genuinely radical about Agenda 15. It starts from where we are and challenges us to address the question: why aren't we doing this now? It acknowledges that the possibilities for the transformation of Scotland would be so much greater with independence while recognising that, in spite of all the constraints of Britishness, we can at least make a start. Many of the ideas here should be promoted to the top of the national agenda - greater convergence of wealth and life chances, social provisioning, the re-design of job strategies, a broader and deeper cooperative movement, more creative and socially useful forms of housing tenure, freedom of knowledge and so on.

Agenda 15 is also a rallying call for the democratisation of Scotland. Informing its thinking is a voice that will become louder and louder as the effects of the damaging policies of the dead hand of Westminster are increasingly felt in Scotland, a voice for economic democracy. Agenda 15 captures the foundational aims of the left - how can we start to create a society that expands the capabilities of all individuals and allows them to live better lives? Everyone, whatever their location on the spectrum of the Scottish left, should not only endorse Agenda 15 but ask themselves the question: what can I do to contribute to the realisation of this agenda? As a first step, we could establish a more formal network of the "incredibles". Where do I sign?

Donald Adamson

Issue 60 of the SLR raises a number of important issues for Scotland's future as well as paying tribute to one of the greatest Scots most of us every had the privilege to meet. I will approach this question of Scotland's future from a Marxist perspective as Jimmy would have done, although Jimmy would have been able to explain his thoughts much more effectively than I can. We need to start from the base, from the economic structure in Scotland to-day for any political or social changes in Scotland tomorrow will need to come from Scotland's economic base tomorrow. The first obvious thing to recognise is that the Scottish Government has very limited power to effect, far less control, the Scottish economy. This leaves us on the left with a very stark and immediate choice. We either have to decide to ignore the Scottish Parliament as irrelevant and concentrate on winning over the "British" public to establish socialism in the UK Parliament; or more realistically we need to fight for real economic power for the Scottish Government and win over the Scottish people to a "left" agenda. It does not take a lot of thought to recognise as Jimmy did, and I do that the latter is the more obtainable objective.

If the strong left base, which still exists within the Labour Party, even although it has had no political voice for two decades, were to be mobilised in real opposition to the ConDem Government cuts, and to take head-on the Labour Party Leadership in Scotland which would attempt to divert this, this would provide either a shift in the Labour Party in Scotland's position, or more likely a division in the Labour Party in Scotland. However even a divided Labour Party in Scotland, would be likely to have a powerful left section which could be organised into a powerful force in the Scottish Parliament after the May election. A force strong enough to do a deal with the SNP for a share in Government.

The immediate duty of such a Government would be to push forward the Salmond concept of Scotland "growing its way" out of recession with a Keynesian economic strategy which would work fine while there is

such unemployed resources available and natural resources to fund it. Of course such a policy would not last for ever, and the left would need to assert more direct socialist policies after we reached a full employment economy, but such problems would be easier to deal with and are some years away. This it seems to me is the obvious way forward for Scots on the left, any approach which repeats the mistakes of the past will divide the left in Scotland and play into the hands of the ConDem Government who will not be concerned about the Scots supporting a right-wing unionist Labour Party which they will easily handle.

Andy Anderson

I spent most of my working life in London and overseas, and in only a few years back in Scotland I am struck by the institutional stasis and graft which remains in this country. Perhaps the most salient point of all in Issue number 60 was "In the upside-down world of government, credibility has come to mean either obedience or convenience". From the reports of chief officers retiring from posts to come back as very high paid consultants, through the inert and sclerotic bureaucracies of the quangos like Transport Scotland who cannot even manage elementary processes such as not releasing tranches of money to contractors (on the Edinburgh trams) before their actual 'milestones' are met, to the political manoeuvrings across the unitary local authorities - just to keep things as they are - there is something very rotten, self-servingly complacent, in Scottish political and public life.

I am heartened by the tone of Agenda 15, and subscribe to the principles you set out. However in relation to the democratic deficit, and to begin to redress some of the power imbalance against ordinary people at the mainly lived level, why is there not a call for empowering parishes and communities again? Local authorities are already talking about further 'economies of scale' to meet, or rather yield to, the new fiscal agenda, when in fact they act remotely from people as it is, and community councils are hopeless tokenism without any actual powers, mere figleaves of consultation to help introduce 'nicer cuts'. Agenda 15 is a start, but more actual power to the people in it would widen it to ordinary folk. ■

Gordon Peters

Agenda 15

The Scottish Left Review has produced Agenda 15, a programme of action designed to aid transition from the current crisis in public policy towards a fairer, more sustainable and more effective Scottish society. It proposes a range of actions which can be taken in the Scottish Parliamentary term between 2011 and 2015. Everything proposed is within the powers of the Scottish Parliament and its agencies and everything is a credible response to the social, economic and environmental problems caused by failed neoliberal policies. The following is a summary. The full Agenda 15 can be read in Issue 60 at:

www.scottishleftreview.org.

Principles

Too much of current political debate is based on rhetoric and sophistry rather than principles and ethics. Principles are important to guide policy and to ensure that we are moving in the right direction.

- **New understanding.** We must be willing to accept that many current dogmas have failed and be open-minded about alternatives.
- **Universalism.** We must support universalism in public services as a fundamental means of protecting citizens, creating social cohesion and preventing social fragmentation.
- **Convergence.** We must narrow the unacceptably large variations in the experience of living in Scotland, including income and health inequality.
- **Freedom of expression, freedom of knowledge.** We must ensure that people have real opportunities to express their views. We must equally ensure that they have easy access to the knowledge they need to inform those decisions properly.
- **Real security.** We must put the aim of ensuring a safe and secure life for all at the heart of policy so no-one lacks access to an acceptable standard of life.
- **Accountable evidence.** We must have access to all the information needed to judge whether progress is being made.
- **'Recentring' and pluralism.** We must remove privileged access to influencing policy from the few and restore it to the many, and allow differing views to be heard.
- **Improvement.** We should only take actions which improve Scotland and not ones which improve only profits.
- **Real diversity.** We should ensure that diversity is supported and means more than a choice between

a small number of commecial options.

- **Aesthetics matter.** We must pay more attention to how public policy impacts on how our senses experience living in Scotland.
- **Universal human rights.** We must defend universal human rights and reject 'selective' interpretations of what this means.
- **Morality.** We should not be afraid to make morality and ethics an important question for public policy.

Money, work, wealth, equality

We need to begin the transition to a different type of economy based on values, the positive experience of work, equitable wealth distribution and sustainable, positive outputs. We must challenge the dominance of profiteering and consider diversification of ownership models.

- The immediate economic priority must be to secure as many jobs as possible, and this means avoiding swingeing cuts in public sector employment – and 'private-led' growth theories must be challenged.
- Economic development strategies must be changed to emphasise quality sustainable job growth and not economic growth in its own right. And this growth should be in the public interest if it is to receive public support. Blanket 'incentivisation' should not be pursued.
- An explicit programme of economic diversification should be developed, putting less emphasis on fast-growth, more emphasis on quality, less reliance on a small number of high-profile sectors, and a wider range of economic ownership models should be encouraged.
- Explore all policy options for the potential to redistribute wealth equitably through practices such as universal provision or the use of public procurement as a policy tool to redistribute.
- Create a national strategy for jobs which will provide a road-map for how to move the experience of work in the right direction over coming years. This strategy must be based on national interest not vested self interest – the public sector should work hard to support any private enterprise which is likely to create positive work and have positive social impact. There should be no commitment to support private enterprise which does not.
- If public agencies are pursuing strategies aimed at different objectives than these, reconstitute them or close them down.
- An immediate policy of 'pay convergence' must

be put in place in the public sector. This should use a curve to move people progressively into a narrower spectrum of pay. In the immediate years ahead this should be used firstly to protect jobs and convergence may mean overall wage bills declining, but weighted so loss of salary is borne by those able to bear it.

- The Scottish Parliament cannot put in place employment policies to promote pay convergence in the private sector, but it can use public expenditure to encourage it. Government contracts should be given only to companies which meet pay policies such as 'living wage' and 'income ratios'.
- A commission should be established to generate debate and identify what Scots themselves want from their work, in terms of pay, hours and engagement/involvement in decision-making. This should provide a landmark piece of work to guide future policy in this area.
- The kinds of investment that have gone into promoting private profit generation should now be put into the development of other economic models such as cooperatives, mutuals, community-owned companies and other shared equity approaches.
- More work should be put into 'low growth' strategies – ways of providing security and wealth that do not require unsustainable growth. This does not mean abandoning all current 'economic development' activity, but rather means balancing it with new types of activity which aim to achieve a different kind of development of the economy.

Real Security

We need to see 'public services' not as a private relationship between an individual and the state but part of the social cohesion of the nation. Only by seeing social provision as a connected programme designed to improve society will we ensure real life security for everyone in Scotland.

- Implement the findings of the Report of the Scottish Prisons Commission 2008 (the McLeish Report) on crime and punishment
- Publish a statement of the minimum acceptable standard of life that a citizen should expect (base security) and assess whether collectively all layers of government are meeting this.
- Do not assume blanket protection of NHS budgets but put in place a programme of 'deprofitising' and 'demonetising' to substantially reduce leakage from the NHS through profiteering by suppliers of goods and services – and pursue salary convergence.
- Make 'health equality' a compulsory cross-cutting policy agenda and embed impact on health assessment in other policy decisions.

- Create a system of sanctions to discourage private interests from influencing and coercing people into negative health choices.
- Protect local authority services and reduce the pressure on the Scottish budget by removing the Council Tax freeze and urgently replacing it with a progressive local income and wealth tax to ensure equity.
- Hold an architecture prize to create designs for future social housing which is cheap to build, efficient in performance and has a positive aesthetic impact.
- Diversify models of home ownership and increase 'shared equity' schemes to bridge the social segregation of 'owners' and 'non-owners' and to reduce the use of housing as 'equity', and to open up alternative models of funding social new-build such as social enterprise models.
- Establish a developers' charter to require a more responsible national approach to the provision of housing.
- Reform planning both to remove corruption, enforce the charter and prioritise social rather than commercial factors.
- Implement a transport infrastructure utilisation strategy to encourage more use of off-peak public transport. Pursue a national pedestrianisation strategy for towns and cities.
- Establish a programme of energy saving action and create the capacity to implement by putting pressure on energy suppliers to fund it.
- Develop a Scottish National Food Security Strategy to create jobs, improve health, help the environment and reduce food poverty.

Freedom of knowledge

We need to recognise that citizens can only act as citizens if they are able not only to hold their own views and opinions but also to have access to the diverse range of information, experience and knowledge which should shape those different views.

- The Curriculum for Excellence should be developed in a way which puts preparing pupils to be active, empowered citizens ahead of the interests of employers, and structures for ensuring the delivery of these aims on the ground should be reformed.
- The attempt to fund universities for short-term return must be abandoned in favour of a commitment to fund them for broader purposes and for longer-term outcomes.
- A proportion of the Scottish Government's advertising and marketing budget should be used to establish a fund to encourage alternative media.

- A feasibility study for the establishment of a Scottish Broadcasting Corporation should be started immediately, with a social and cultural remit, not just a commercial one.
- A Scottish Media Commissioner should be created to monitor the public interest implications of newspaper news reporting, with the ability to apply sanctions where appropriate.
- The Freedom of Information Act should be extended and strengthened. In particular, the commercial confidentiality exemption should be reformed.
- Three codes of practice should be established to govern the interface between policy-makers and those seeking to influence them – one for individual policy-makers (elected or professional), one for governmental entities (including committees and inquiries) and one for lobby groups.

Looking after Scotland

We should think of Scotland both as a place and as an idea. Both are important and if we wish to create and sustain our nation we should pay careful attention to what we leave behind.

- Existing policies on sustainable development and the environment must be properly enacted. To ensure this an independent annual report on progress should be produced and where progress is insufficient the reason for this should be reported.
- A national policy of improving the build environment and landscaping should be put in place and Architecture and Design Scotland should be given the strength and independence to advise on and implement that policy.
- Funding for the arts should be increased, even during the period of budget cuts.
- In producing a feasibility study of a Scottish Broadcasting Corporation, the remit should contain a clear purpose of acting as a 'patron of the arts' in Scotland, channelling funding towards a range of artistic disciplines.
- An 'arts utilisation strategy' should be put in place to maximise the take-up of places at publicly-subsidised arts events. In particular, free access for schools to performances should be implemented and an entitlement of access to cultural activities given to pupils.
- A Scottish version of the British Council (a Scotland International organisation) should be created by redirecting funding from some existing international promotional activity. The organisation should be free to fund or subsidise any initiatives which promote a positive idea of Scotland overseas.
- The Scottish Parliament should be explicit in its role to encourage debate about ethical values in Scotland. It should make the effort to create focal

points for this debate (such as funding public service broadcasting, more emphasis in the school curriculum and events such as international conferences, lectures and debates).

Ways to provide

We must be realistic about the state in which neoliberal policies have left Scotland and its finances, but we do not need to accept another dose of neoliberal prescriptions. Stripping society bare is not the only response and we must look at different ways to get us out of this mess.

- An immediate audit of all government expenditure should take place to identify where public expenditure is 'leaking' into private profit and this expenditure should be reformed urgently.
- A 'pay convergence curve' should be used to manage pay costs in such a manner that reductions should be borne most by those most able to pay. Bonus and other non-salary, non-pension remuneration practices should be ended.
- Funding cuts to public agencies and NDPBs should be targeted first at failing or non-essential activity. Under-performing organisations like Scottish Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland and VisitScotland should be reformed. Less should be spent on a failing prisons policy.
- The freeze on Council Tax should be ended and immediate reforms begun to bring in a local income tax. This tax should be heavily ramped to spread the cost of dealing with budget cuts to those most able to pay.
- The practice of outsourcing local authority services to 'aleos' should be ended.
- Before any action is taken which would lead to large-scale losses of public sector jobs, an analysis should be made of whether job losses or a penny rise in income tax will have the lesser negative social and economic impact.
- There should be a national culture change among senior public sector employees to stamp out costly pseudo-private sector practices with no direct benefit.
- A longer-term approach to public budgets should see more emphasis put on sustained programmes which will reduce cost burdens in the long term – such as tackling health inequality, income inequality, crime, drug abuse and care provision.
- More time should be devoted to developing 'provisioning' strategies designed to help communities deliver more of their own social services themselves on mutual and collective principles, but properly supported through training, education and funding.

the case for privatising schools

If the case for university fees really stands up then the case holds for almost any public service. Isobel Lindsay argues that there is a much more important vision for the future of Scotland's universities.

Why are we continuing with free secondary education? Seven years of primary schooling are surely sufficient to ensure that pupils can read the Sun and the Daily Record, fill in their lottery tickets and do a bit of counting (but not enough to understand how much interest they are paying on their credit cards). Those who want to go on to secondary education are enhancing their career prospects and their future earnings potential. Many of their parents can well-afford to pay fees and, if they can't, we can allow pupils to repay their fees when they are in employment. The logic of what is happening to university fees in England can be applied throughout public services. It is an ideological position that needs to be exposed as such. At its core it seeks to channel all of our thinking into an individualistic, market straight-jacket and to turn the focus away from what society as a whole needs. Don't encourage debate on the importance to all of us of having a well-educated society which has high technical skills, creativity and cultural breadth and depth accessible to the whole public. We all gain from higher education. If it is good, we get better doctors, better teachers, better architects, better musicians, better engineers, better actors, better business managers, better social workers and even better accountants. There is no-one in our society who is not touched by the gains from advanced education even if they are not graduates. But the neo-liberal ideology does not want us to think in these terms; only to think about education as just another commodity to be purchased by the individual as a personal financial investment.

How typical that the last Labour Government appointed Lord Browne to produce proposals for English higher education. Browne was the former chief executive of BP who was widely criticised in the United States for his ruthless cost-cutting approach which many considered had contributed to the disastrous accidents at the Texas City Refinery and Deepwater Horizon. Why choose someone like this unless what you wanted was a ruthless, neo-liberal approach? That is exactly what Browne delivered. It was an ideologically-driven piece of work filled with dogma. It devotes a whole section to attacking a graduate tax which is just a small addition to income-tax and which in its best form would be progressive. But it does not present any advantages and does the reverse with fees. All about advantages and no criticisms. If, for example, it is so hard to track graduates who go abroad to get graduate tax paid, why is it so easy to track them in order to pay fees? Where is the analysis of the size of debt burden being proposed on future housing and job markets? In time England will be the only country in the world where the educated professionals will be worse off than if they hadn't studied or if the market has to correct this, there will have to be higher salaries to offset the debt. Many young adults will be unable both to repay debt and to take on a mortgage. What are the implications of this? Where is the serious international comparative analysis? On the day of publication, why did the briefing about 80 per cent cuts in public funding start? This had not been stated by any

Government source. We must hope that there will be strong resistance in England but unfortunately the precedent for this massive increase in fees was set by the universities when they promoted/accepted the fee route in 2003. Scotland took a different route. We should be proud of that and insist that we continue to reject fees in any form. Most students already graduate with student loan debts which they have had to take on for maintenance.

The Tory-Liberal Government is, in effect, proposing to privatise most of university education and is treating all the humanities and social science subjects as if they are merely a personal hobby, unimportant to society. For any subject that is not science, technology, engineering, maths, medicine, there will be virtually no public contribution to teaching. This is saying that there is no public good in history, literature, languages, economics, sociology, psychology, geography, etc. This is an extraordinary decision with potentially major effects on the structure of disciplines in universities. No major economy has a mainly privately financed university sector. Even in the US, fewer than half a per cent of students are in 'ivy league' universities. Most are in state (i.e. public) universities and seven of the ten top universities by research income are state not private. While there are fees, these are lower than now proposed for England and they get more public money than in England. The UK has been spending below the OECD average on universities and this is before the drastic cuts proposed. A recent report looked at the comparative effects of the recession on university funding. At the top, Germany, France and the US have been increasing their university investment as a response to recession. In the bottom tier was only Latvia; England was in the second-bottom and that was before the current proposals. Nor is the UK as a whole an over-educated society. The EU average for the proportion of the working population with a degree is around 28 per cent; the UK is around 21 per cent. It is exceptional for advanced countries not to recognise that their economic future as well as their quality of life will depend on investing in a highly-educated population. Westminster now appears set to take a very extreme position and many of the universities in England are now having serious doubts about the uncertain outcomes of these radical proposals.

When top-up fees were first introduced in England, Scotland took a different route. The Scottish Parliament rejected fees but did introduce a graduate endowment of £2000 which could only be spent on student support and was to be repaid when in employment. The SNP abolished the endowment in 2007. Many commentators and some university principals predicted doom and gloom for the Scottish sector as it was predicted that English universities would be awash with money. This did not happen. None of the predicted crises happened. Scotland actually did a little better than England. Its income did not decline comparatively. The rate of applications from fee-paying non-EU students rose faster in Scotland. Predictably the

applications from EU students rose much faster because they did not pay fees here but this brings money into Scotland and develops networks in Europe. This was not how the script was supposed to go. Even before the current recession, there was lobbying going on from those in the Blair and Brown camps in Scotland to get the universities to front the campaign for the introduction of fees because since 2003 it was embarrassing to have fees in Scotland but not in England. But it was the banking crisis and recession that revived the view that 'there is no alternative'. There have been an increasing number of voices in Scotland as well as England presenting marketisation as the only pragmatic option. The experience in England, of course, has been as critics predicted that after the initial introduction of fees there would be constant pressure to increase them and to remove the cap. It has given the green light to government to reduce their contribution and universities have not benefited. Those universities that believe they are in a seller's market want to let the market rule but this may have a seriously damaging effect on less prestigious universities (which, after all, is most of them). The decline in social mobility is set to deteriorate further.

The Scottish Parliament does not have the full fiscal powers to enable all funding options to be considered. With power, Scotland could choose a more gradual deficit reduction plus a higher contribution from taxation. This would enable a university budget settlement which while frozen would be sufficient for continuity. While we do not have these fiscal powers, we can still maintain free higher education in Scotland – the cost is not insurmountable. It would be made easier if the Parliament was prepared to use one penny of the income tax varying power. But fear of hysterical media attack and lack of any solidarity at Holyrood has ruled out that prospect prior to the 2011 election. We do not have to go down the English route.

This is not to suggest that Scottish universities can be complacent. There will be serious budget pressures and one

of the issues that regularly rears its head is ending the four-year honours degree. This merits a serious debate but not the one we usually hear. A four-year specialist degree is not long by European standards. This is especially so if we are to give students the opportunity of studying subjects they have not done at advanced level at school or not at all. What the universities do need to do is to rebrand and promote the three-year degree as a different kind of degree not an inferior one. The general Scottish three-year MA was a popular degree in the past not just a less-advanced level of the Honours degree. It required the study of a language, a science, a philosophy, one of the humanities. This would require some adjustment for more contemporary disciplines but it is a concept even more relevant today. On issues such as year of entry flexibility, the universities have been very open to change for years. They have also encouraged engagement with the wider community as well as, predictably, work with business. But there will have to be leaner administration and more inter-disciplinary co-operation in teaching and research.

The student demonstrations against fees in England have been a welcome initiative, especially since there is an altruistic element in the action. It is the students of tomorrow who will be the principal victims although the impact on staffing and academic disciplines will accelerate soon in anticipation of the funding changes. This is a message to the politicians that they cannot assume that there will be a passive public whom they can ignore between elections. Let us hope Holyrood is watching. Fees will be seen as fees irrespective of the language in which they are presented. Leaving our young people with the choice between giving up on higher education or saddling themselves for much of their life with very high debt should not be the future that we offer them. There is an alternative. ■

Isobel Lindsay was a lecturer at Strathclyde University for 30 years

the left is not dead

Doug Bain was an active participant in Scottish Left Review Editorial Board meetings up until his untimely death last month. Here, in one of the last things he wrote, he responds to an attack on the relevance of left-wing politics published in the Scotsman.

I read your article with interest. However I have to say I don't really agree with its main thrust. You detail quite a long list of criticisms of the left – some justified and others not. You end by hailing a new politics which will transcend the old left-right dichotomy. Why then do you devote 99.9 per cent of your article to the left with only a few throw-away lines at the very end about the post-left project? Why is your article not all about the 'new politics'? From the few lines you devote to this, the defining elements would seem to be:

- Embracing shared sovereignty;
- Decentralism;

- Replacing 'great British powerism' with constructing alliances;
- Genuine self-government and self-determination.

I'm not sure what you mean by 'embracing shared sovereignty' but it sounds like we will remain in the Union – presumably in some kind of federal structure. I find it difficult to equate that with genuine self-government and self-determination – but perhaps I've misunderstood you. However, my main reaction to reading these defining features is that there is nothing particularly new here – all of these concepts are a fairly familiar part of a left lexicon. And, even if some have not been explored

sufficiently, there is no ideological or philosophical barrier to them being added to the 'to be done' list. Your recent work on self-determination would be read by most as a contribution to the debate on democratic renewal – but there is nothing in what you are saying which lies out-with the parameters of left politics.

Writing in yesterday's Guardian, Polly Toynbee observes "facing an Osborne spending review more rightwing than Thatcher ever dared, the left-right chasm has rarely been starker. In every corner of the globe the tussle persists between progressive and regressive forces." The fact is that, at the beginning of the 21st century, half the world still makes sense of politics in terms of right and left. Even the SNP and the Green Party, neither of which spring from a left tradition, have very quickly been located on the left/right spectrum as left-of-centre parties. This is not because of some kind of political fixation; the left-right dynamic is a product of, and response to, capitalism and to the myriad ways in which it distorts and corrupts human relationships. In this regard, there is nothing whatsoever that has happened in the past half century which has rendered that mission any less urgent or valid. As long as finance capitalism holds sway we will have a left and right.

Embarking on a project of defining a 'third way' beyond left and right is not for the faint-hearted. Precedent is not encouraging. Mussolini was in fact one of the first to coin the phrase 'neither left nor right'. Anthony Giddens' **Beyond Left and Right** was written 16 years ago and has not, to put it mildly, inspired a new post-left vision. The terrain of third-way politics has remained pretty barren intellectually.

So why go there? Your argument seems to be that the left is bankrupt of new ideas, locked into a black-and-white, modernist, determinist mode of thinking. I just don't recognise that left. The critique of modernism is now close-on 50 years old and the postmodernist thesis has been thoroughly debated and explored over several decades – e.g. Willie Thompson's **Postmodernism and History**. I think there is now a consensus that while postmodernism provides valuable insights in the field of aesthetics, its contribution to social theory is much more limited and, as a philosophy to inform a post left political project,

it is a non-starter. If Jacques Derrida's help was enlisted in campaigning for improved postal services, the opening paragraph of his campaigning leaflet would read: **Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but it belongs to its structure that it is always possible for it not to arrive there....A letter does not always arrive at its destination and since that belongs to its structure, it can be said that it never arrives there truly, that when it arrives the fact that it is capable of not arriving afflicts it with the torment of an internal misdirection** (quote from Willie's book). I think it is becoming clearer now that, politically, postmodernism was a turn to the right and even people like Frederic Jameson are conceding that its days may be numbered and that the challenge is, in fact, to re-define modernism. As someone wrote somewhere, if you live in the slums of Mumbai, modernism probably sounds quite a good idea. Beyond post-modernism, the only other recent post-left articulation I can think of is Etzioni's communitarianism – which Blair and Clinton briefly flirted with but which has run into the sand.

Far from being moribund, the left continues to generate a rich and diverse intellectual output sustaining influential journals such as **Soundings** and **New Left Review** (not to mention **Perspectives** and **Scottish Left Review**). Far from being stuck in the past, the centre of gravity of thinking is very much post-Marxist. The left has a long and rich history of theory and struggle and has continually adapted and changed to accommodate new circumstances. To argue that we should turn our backs on this tradition and attempt to invent a new discourse seems to me to be foolhardy in the extreme. And quite unnecessary.

The Scottish left is not going to dissolve and disappear. It finds expression in the Labour Party, the SNP, the Greens and in the left groupings such as DLS and SLR. It seems to me the prospects for bringing these elements together and beginning to articulate a common vision for the future of Scotland are very good.



Doug Bain (1939 - 2010)

the mask of reputational spin

The impact of 'reputational management' leaves us all in need of protection from neoliberal ideology, argues Chris Holligan

The maintenance of reputation by universities and individual academics through the metrics of league tables and the knowledge objects called 'outputs' has taken a high profile in

recent years. For this reason it is timely to add some critical intellectual commentary as a way of helping us to gain a critical grasp of the nature of this morally and institutionally

destructive paradigm. Aristotle asserted in his book "Politics" that man is a political animal. The mask that is reputational spin reveals just as convincingly that organisations are also political animals. The public sphere of the modern world relies heavily upon cultures of dishonesty, disinformation and duplicity. Maybe it has always been thus...the work of the notorious political theorist Machiavelli in **The Prince** (1532) might imply this culture has been around before. The pejorative term 'Machiavellian' frequent appearance in contemporary contexts seems to endorse the truth of this negative characterisation of the modern world. The public and political spheres engage not with seeking to be truthful (not primarily in any event), but instead with trajectories of management reputation. Within that management of discourse there is a proliferation of proxies doing the 'work' that truth used to undertake. As the classical sociological theorist Ervin Goffman in his 1956 book **The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life** claimed life is best seen in terms of a dramaturgical perspective where masks frame all our social interactions. Like in theatrical performance there is a front region where the 'actors' (individuals) are on stage in front of the audiences. Reputation management is a conceptual frame, a mask, used by organisations to both present and organise perceptions about them in order to enhance their market worth.

All of us are familiar with political spin, but are perhaps less insightful about the role it plays in constructions of truth and the black arts of perception management used by the secret services (Andrews, 2009). The norm nowadays is to focus upon the presentational rather than upon the truth which is an embedded trend with profound consequences for the integrity and happiness of communities and individual personal wellbeing. It is as though truth telling is now so fraught with risk that the dangers and anxieties assumed to be associated with it mean that only the more foolhardy will as a matter of routine aim to orientate their behavior towards telling the truth. Truth provides us with no mask to hide behind. The hegemonic mask used by the elites is instead reputation management. Witness how difficult it is for skilled media interviewers to delve into the genuine reasons for things that take place and are planned to be developed by elites such is the power of that reputational hegemony to stifle authenticity and leave us none the wiser!

It might not matter, those issues just outlined, if they remained with those individuals and organisational entities, although even that is not ideal either, but such a mask causes incalculable damage to all of us, individuals and communities. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1930-2002) concept of the habitus refers to identities and their associated behaviors through which each of us is governed. While the elite in democratic states rarely use physical violence to extend their power and influence they do use, in Bourdieu's terms, symbolic violence. The latter affects our emotional and mental states causing us to adapt in some way or other depending upon the form it takes on any particular occasion. The mask of reputational spin inflicts symbolic violence by degrading the social capital of communities leading to their members no longer having much trust for one another. One result of which is a rise in stress-related mental health problems in society as a consequence of the damage done to trust.

Power (2007) a UK academic sociologist, in his recent book entitled **Organised Uncertainty: Designing a world of Risk Management** might equally have opted for the frame denoted by my new subtitle

"Designing a world of spin". Spin is an activity which is deliberately strategic being at the heart of what Power calls the "Reputation Constellation". Some argue reputation is the new management paradigm and that such a focus links it inextricably associated with questions of morality and therefore integrity. The reputations held organisations and individuals have come to figure more prominently in recent years affecting the rewards and esteem with which they are accorded. There are a plethora of private companies devoted to supplying the resources required for the successful management and presentation of a reputation by business and public sector companies. Such endeavors demonstrate the contingent and socially constructed nature of power. The effectiveness of reputation management is likely to be tantamount to augmenting its capacity to achieve in neoliberal political landscapes which are particularly receptive to the soft power held by certain brands. The problem for the rest of us is that in tandem with these processes whose underlying effect lies in the manufacturing of the truth is that they influence the extent of that valuable commodity trust. Trust, as the Cambridge philosopher Baroness Onora O'Neill argued in her Reith Lectures (2002) "A Question of Trust", is under serious threat and highly vulnerable to becoming a casualty of the capitalist world at whose heart is reputation management.

It took the genius of Karl Marx in his concept of false consciousness to anticipate how we are all the potential victims of vicious elite systems of social and political entrapment. By failing to realise the true nature of the context of exploitation which is intrinsic to the operation of the capitalist system of governance we live our lives in a state of false consciousness, believing that we are free, fully autonomous creatures. Reputation management is a contemporary manifestation of false consciousness in so far as it represents the attempt to hoodwink us into believing that we are observing the true state of the world when in fact it is a fictional variety. False consciousness is the Marxist thesis that the material and institutional processes inherent in capitalist society are misleading most of the people, particularly those he calls the proletariat. Moreover, it is claimed that sectional interests conceal the true relations of social power that pertain between the social classes. Viewed through this Marxist lens it is tempting to argue that reputation management is a mode of governance or ideological control. From which it follows that the oppressed in the socio-political order of neoliberalism might not only fail to observe their own manipulation by those skilled at spin, but in fact come to adopt unwittingly the values of their own oppressors becoming in their train individuals who through practices of consumption and self promotion design a unique reputational mask. To indicate how this process of capture develops the neo-Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990) coined the term interpellation. Interpellation describes the process by which ideology 'captures' the naive individual and constructs his or her identity as a subject. Interpellation refers to the moment and process of recognition of the interaction, which in this essay we are calling the reputational mask. That mask hides from the subject an ideology (social and political values), but the mask itself is made to be appealing in order to 'recruit' from the subject loyalty and attachment to the thing the product brand represents. It envelopes us, brands our soul, before destroying our integrity. As O'Neill (2002) argued deception and misinformation are the real enemies of trust. But O'Neill failed to recognize how this political entrapment draws its capability from our desire to belong, participate and believe. We need laws to protect the human condition from the corrosive forces of neoliberalism. ■

Dr Chris Holligan, Reader in Education, University of the West of Scotland

are we nearly there yet?

For 50 years trade unions have been arguing that proper provision of childcare is central to improving the lives of many workers. As Ann Henderson shows, progress is simply not fast enough.

Good quality, accessible childcare is an essential component of our society today. There is a shortage of places, with demand far outstripping supply, yet it is widely accepted that childcare provision is of benefit to both the child and the parent, and needed by the employer. In September 2010 the Scottish Government published the annual childcare statistics. Showing a reduction in available places in playgroups, crèches, after school clubs and family centres, the Chair of the STUC Women's Committee Elaine Dougall pointed out '...women in particular may not be able to continue in employment – and jobs are being lost in the childcare sector itself.'

This is not a new concern for the trade union movement. In the Co-operative Hall in Dumfries in 1965 the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) brought forward a Motion which was carried "That this Conference of Unions Enrolling Women Workers calls on the Government to introduce measures which would lead to the provision of adequate facilities for the care of the children of working mothers during working hours, namely, by setting up of nurseries where there is a demand for them and by creating a supervisory service during school holidays and during the hours between the end of the school day and the end of the working day. These measures would save children's lives and help to bring the full emancipation of women, with consequent economic benefits to the country." In 1972, the annual Women's Conference in the Co-operative Hall, Dunfermline, heard the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers Engineering Section (AUEW) "That this Women's Conference requests the General Council to demand that Nursery Schools be part of the free State Educational System. Our economy cannot function without women workers: therefore it is a State responsibility to provide nurseries together with after-school and holiday facilities to enable those who desire to go out to work to do so." In Kirkcaldy at the Adam Smith Theatre, November 1984, the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO) responded to the Conservative Government's decision to treat workplace nurseries as a 'perk' through the taxation system, placing childcare in the same category as a company car for tax purposes "(this) fails to recognise the necessity of good quality childcare in ensuring equality of opportunity in employment." And in November 2010, at the recent STUC Women's Conference in Perth the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) highlighted the difficulties faced by shift workers in the transport sector with totally inadequate childcare provision, whilst also pointing out "...Conference is mindful, in these times of draconian cuts and rising unemployment, that issues such as the provision of childcare can be pushed down the agenda and regarded as a luxury that we cannot afford. This cannot be allowed to happen."

It is interesting to note the common themes of the impact of inadequate childcare provision on women's ability to

stay in the labour market. The policies adopted at the STUC Women's Conferences are very clear that the services needed include after school clubs and school holiday cover, and that there should be no charge at the point of access. So what is the reality? Since 2006, there has been a reduction in places, with the number of childcare places in Scotland falling from 10,468 to 10,191. Alongside that reduction in places, costs have risen for families. The Labour Government of 1997 made early years work and childcare a high priority, with a massive expansion of free nursery education provision for all three and four year olds of 12.5 hours a week, along with a complicated Tax Credit system to assist families in meeting the cost of additional hours required. Initially many families benefited from the Tax Credits, with a real increase in the household income. However, there was criticism over the reliance on the private sector to deliver the childcare places needed, albeit often in partnership with voluntary sector

SCOTLAND HAS TAKEN THE LEAD IN TRANSFERRING FREIGHT TO RAIL

ASLEF WILL DEFEND THE INDUSTRY AND ITS JOBS THROUGH THE RECESSION

CLEANER TRANSPORT FOR A

BRIGHTER COUNTRY



Keith Norman
General Secretary

Alan Donnelly
President

Kevin Lindsay
Scottish Officer

ASLEF the train drivers union - www.aslef.org.uk

and local authorities. A massive expansion of state provision, free at the point of delivery, would have been the STUC's preference.

The Daycare Trust is a UK national childcare charity, which has been working since November 1986 to promote high quality affordable childcare for all. The latest annual survey showed that the average parent working part-time (England) could be spending more than half their wages before tax on a nursery place for a child under two. Nursery costs for children over two in the East Midlands had risen by an average 23.5 per cent in the previous year. The findings also reveal a shortage of childcare places across the UK, with 58 per cent of family services reporting parents struggling to find childcare. Local authorities up and down the country also report significant shortages of childcare places for children with disabilities. In a sector characterised by unstable funding streams over the years, this is causing considerable concern for the future.

With more women in the workforce than ever before, this recession is making its impact felt differently. Manufacturing and heavy industry in Scotland was already dealt a heavy blow by Thatcher's government in the 1980s. With cuts in public spending looming, child tax credits removed from many families, and an attack on the principle of universality for child benefit, there can be no confidence that the Coalition Government actually intends to support women in the workforce. In Scotland the SNP administration came to power in 2007 on a promise to increase by 50 per cent the amount of free nursery education available for three and four year olds. This has not been achieved, and the Government, when pressed, passes responsibility to the local authorities. Without clearer direction from central government, irrespective of political persuasion, childcare provision will not expand to meet the need that we know is there. The nursery education offered, for part of each day, requires the provision of 'wrap-round childcare' to support parents in work, and as already mentioned, the statistics show a decline in that.

Childcare is not just a question about supporting women and men in the labour market. The Early Years framework and early years reports demonstrate that good quality childcare can make a significant difference to a child's start in life. In England the 'Sure Start' initiative under the Labour Government has been tremendously successful. In the Scottish Parliament the Finance Committee 'Inquiry into Preventative Spending' has taken evidence from a number of organisations, highlighting the benefits to children of early intervention in their lives, including nursery education and in childcare. Tackling the economic recession through jobs and growth, rather than through cuts and mass unemployment, must see childcare placed at the centre of the strategy. Jobs would be created in the childcare sector, and parents can work without juggling many other arrangements. The absence of childcare services, or excessive cost, has been putting grandparents into the front line for childcare duties to allow daughters and sons to work. But the impending changes in pension entitlement, combined with an ageing population where people will have to work to retain their own financial independence, will make it harder for parents to rely on their grandparents for childcare, often not a decision taken freely.

Another point to consider in the months ahead will be the impact of the changes in the Job Seekers Allowance and benefit system. Since 25 October, single parents must now actively 'seek work'

once their child is seven. As we know that there are not enough out of school places for children already, and that most jobs are not planned around school hours and holidays, this is going to place families under intolerable pressures. Despite promises of personalized support from the JobCentre for lone parents in seeking work, one of the major concerns remains the lack of suitable childcare. Restricting options for work, partly because of the constraints posed by lack of childcare, will see many lone parents continuing to be paid low wages and living in poverty.

When talking about childcare policy, Scandinavian countries are often cited. A brief look at Sweden illustrates well a different direction, and one which could be considered here. Childcare in Sweden is organised in a similar way to that in the UK in terms of types of provision, with pre-schools (day nurseries), family daycare homes (run by municipal childminders), open pre-schools and leisure time centres (equivalent to out-of-school clubs). All pre-school establishments also have to be assessed by the government and meet certain standards. However, the key difference lies with the funding - while most pre-school childcare is provided by the private sector in the UK, Swedish nurseries are financed partly by central government grants, partly by tax revenue and partly by parental fees. There is no need for the complex Tax Credit and reimbursement system, nor is it possible for the percentage of a parent's income that is spent on childcare to go above two or three per cent. Compare that to the Daycare Trust figures quoted earlier, with some workers spending more than 50 per cent of their salary on childcare costs. Interestingly there are also more men employed in childcare in Sweden than in the UK (over five per cent as compared to less than one per cent) which may be indicative of the sector having more status.

Investing in childcare provides employment, and should be at the heart of our jobs and growth strategy. Equality of access to good health, nutrition, and early years education for all children, is in the interests of society as whole. In Scotland choices could be made with public finance allocations. With the exception of some additional funding to support childcare needs of students in higher education, there has been little initiative taken over the last three years by the Scottish Government. Lobbying the UK Government to extend childcare voucher provision is hardly a radical strategy.

Referring to the recent Equality and Human Rights Commission submission to the Parliament's Preventative Spend Inquiry: "Employment, in most cases, will ensure people stay out of poverty, and is a critical route out of poverty. While Westminster controls welfare and policy there are many Scottish-controlled levers that enable people to remain in work. Education and training schemes, childcare, social care and community transport schemes all enable people to participate in employment. ...Allowing people to remain independent is essential to personal well-being, ensures they remain economically active in their community both in terms of tax-paid and income spent, and for most (not all) it will keep them out of poverty." What we've been doing for 50 years hasn't worked - it's time to test out those policies argued for by trade union women in Perth, in Dumfries, in Dunfermline, in Kirkcaldy, in workplaces and communities up and down the country. As the TGWU said in 1965: "These measures would save children's lives and help to bring the full emancipation of women, with consequent economic benefits to the country" ■

Ann Henderson is Assistant Secretary at the STUC

how good men do evil things

The publication of Tony Blair's memoirs has once again sparked off public interest in Blair's legacy. Gary Fraser explores why Blair continues to dominate politics today and ponders the biggest question of all, why did he invade Iraq?

If a poll were cast tomorrow to find out who is Britain's most unpopular person there is every chance the winner would be Tony Blair. Hard to believe there once was a time when he was Britain's most popular politician; 1997 seems so long ago. The publication of his memoirs entitled **A Journey** have thrown Blair and his legacy back into spotlight and the furore caused by the book is a reminder that Tony Blair, whilst unpopular, is still a major figure in British politics, influencing both right and left of the political spectrum. This article looks back on his legacy. I'm interested in three things; Blair's influence on neoliberal politics, why his arguments against the left in the 1990s were successful, and why he went to war in Iraq.

Every era has a politician who stands above the fray who shapes his or her times like no other; Churchill and Thatcher spring to mind. Whether we like it or not our era is the era of Blair. His legacy lives on in the leaders of Britain's New Right, led by David Cameron, Nick Clegg and David Miliband. For them, Blair is a hero. The young leaders of the Con-Dem coalition spent their formative political years on the backbenches in awe of Blair, studying him closely, learning how to imitate him and giving more respect than they ever did their own party leaders who they regarded as ineffective. For Cameron, perhaps the shallowest of Britain's post war Prime Ministers, his re-branding of the Tories was an attempt to make the Tories more like New Labour, and the central ingredient of his marketing strategy was to cast himself as Tony Blair.

Sometimes Blair is accused of lacking substance. This is incorrect. Whilst his political philosophy is something of a muddle he was attempting something significant, namely to reconcile 1960s social and cultural progressivism with 1980s neoliberal economics. In so doing he helped turn neoliberalism into a truly modern political philosophy. He didn't just reform Labour, he also reformed Thatcherism. Blair attempted to provide neoliberalism with a social conscience which for a time appeased his own party. His set of policies, framed around the problematic term social inclusion could work well, in theory at least, provided the economy was strong. The rhetoric of social inclusion demonstrated that Blair unlike Thatcher, believed in society. Cameron's 'Big Society' narrative is a re-branding of the communitarian politics which influenced Blair in the late 1990s. The New Right (Blair, Cameron, Clegg and Miliband) are keen on the concept, whatever they choose to call it, because it is anti-state and emphasises the role of voluntarism and the third sector in the delivery of public services.

In office Blair flirted with a range of political philosophies, from Will Hutton's Stakeholder Capitalism to Anthony Giddens' nebulous Third Way to Amitai Etzioni's Communitarianism. Yet his approach was superficial, and each was discarded by Blair once they fell out of fashion. He often struggled to articulate a coherent set of arguments about what he believed in, and at times seemed genuinely incapable of seeing beyond the surface of things. Whilst he talked about 'community' or 'social inclusion' or 'equality of opportunity' he was often vacuous about what these terms meant when asked to explain in detail. One academic who interviewed Blair for a couple of hours about the Third Way concluded that Blair was 'ludicrously vague, even incoherent'. Melanie Philips, following a lengthy interview with Blair, said it was like talking to a man with no shadow, a man with no form. Having discussed politics with Blair for a couple of hours another academic drew the conclusion that most of what Blair said amounted to waffle and cliché.

What truly drove Blair was power and he believed that the road to power lay in defeating the Labour left. As a young lawyer he advised Kinnock on

the expulsion of the Militant and in his memoirs he even admits to not wanting Labour to win the 1983 General Election. In the 1980s a battle for control of the Labour Party ensued between the right and the left, a battle the left were never likely to win. The arguments made against the left by the Labour 'modernisers', and echoed by Blair in the 1990s, were to a certain extent accurate, a point seldom acknowledged by leftists today. The left had failed to acknowledge and respond to the sociological changes of late modernity or post modernity. The old left did not recognise that the most cherished of all its concepts, the concept of class, was changing; maybe not fundamentally in terms of classical Marxism, but most definitely at a surface level. The working class had become heterogeneous and working class people no longer thought in terms of class but saw themselves as autonomous individuals. The traditional industries were dying and so too was the politics of class solidarity. Meanwhile a new layer of social aspirational citizens were eager to climb the ladder of meritocracy.

The left offered little to this new demographic, and leftist narratives of the period were hostile to the politics of what leftists called 'individualism'. The left had failed to recognise that it was possible and indeed necessary, to reconcile egalitarian politics with people's self interest. The left no longer spoke to people as individuals who had needs and desires and aspirations; instead the 1980s left conceptualised people only

as abstract categories, e.g. 'class' or 'gender'. The failure of the left to take seriously the changing sociology of Britain resulted in the right winning the battle of the ideas in society at large, but also inside the Labour movement. At a time when the left needed its own moderniser, dare I say its own Tony Blair, it got Michael Foot. At a time when the left needed a grouping that could rearticulate egalitarian politics for a new age, it got the Militant Tendency. The left, in refusing to change or identify a strategy on how to win power essentially left the ground open to what became New Labour.

By the 1990s the social base of the left was no longer enough to win British elections. Blair's strategic brilliance was in recognising the need to build an electoral coalition which could unite three cross sections of society; the poor, the traditional working classes, and the socially aspirational middle classes. The hard left, stuck in the iconography of a previous age, the age of industrialism, could never have built the coalition necessary to win power. Blair did and he won by a landslide. Hard to believe now, but in 1997 Tony Blair had an approval rating of 90 per cent, and at that moment in time was the most popular Prime Minister in British history. Yet once in power all of the contradictions inherent in Blair began to emerge. Blair never understood why he won power; he didn't win in 1997 because he had defeated the left. He won because the electorate perceived that New Labour had reconciled the self-interest of the individual with the traditional politics of egalitarianism. But Blair never got this. By denying the politics of egalitarianism and the best traditions of social democracy, it was inevitable that his electoral coalition would fall apart at some point.

He stuck to Tory spending plans for his first two years in office, which even the Tories said was unnecessary. He was hostile to any changes that he perceived would threaten his grip on power, and his contempt for the best traditions of social democracy were increasingly irrational, evident in the way he bent over backwards to stop Ken Livingstone becoming the Mayor of London in 2000. Had Blair lost office in 2001 he would have been remembered as an ineffective Prime Minister. The public image of him at the time was of a man who lacked purpose, who was shallow and obsessed by news management and 'spin'. Linda Smith, a former NEC member, summed it up well when she said "I had no expectations of Blair and even I'm disappointed by him". He was increasingly seen as a ditherer, someone who couldn't make his mind up about anything without consulting focus groups. Under his leadership it seemed that Britain was being run by a well oiled PR company called New Labour. Then came Kosovo. Kosovo was the turning point in Blair's political life. It was the moment when his religious beliefs, always there in private, started to influence policy.

The great influences on Tony Blair were Gordon Brown, his intellectual soul-mate; Peter Mandelson, who instructed Blair in the politics of public relations and marketing; Roy Jenkins, whose social liberalism Blair genuinely admired; Bill Clinton, the man he imitated more than any other figure; and Margaret Thatcher, whom he admired tremendously. But the biggest influence on Blair was God, and his belief in the Almighty was to lead to his nemesis. Blair's religious awakening happened when he was a student at Oxford, and was the defining moment

of his life. He explains that "religious beliefs are not something that you shut away from the world, but something that meant you had to go out and act". In Kosovo he acted. He fought and won what he believed was a just war. Clare Short believes that Blair's taste for war began with Kosovo. Following Kosovo, his world outlook, partly shaped by his faith, became simplistic, sometimes to the point of being naïve. The politics of any fundamentalist, whether of the left or the right, begins with naïve and simplistic dichotomies. Blair's tendency for crude politics was exacerbated by the events of 9/11 whose consequences he blew out of all proportions. Blair, the fantasist, prone to messianic beliefs in good versus evil, misinterpreted the whole event insisting that the attacks were a threat to Western civilisation.

What truly drove Blair was power and he believed that the road to power lay in defeating the Labour left

It was this line of thinking that led Blair to war in Iraq. Of course he was not alone in his thinking; the current narrative, that the war was exclusively Blair's fault conveniently ignores the fact that most of the Parliamentary Labour Party supported the war, including David Miliband; so too did the Tory party and

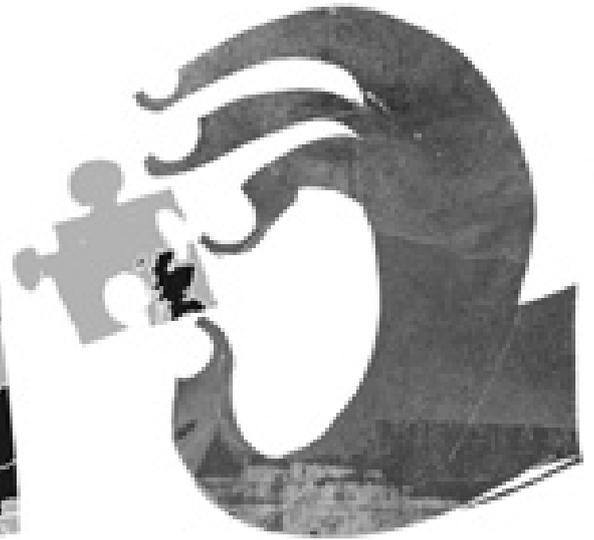
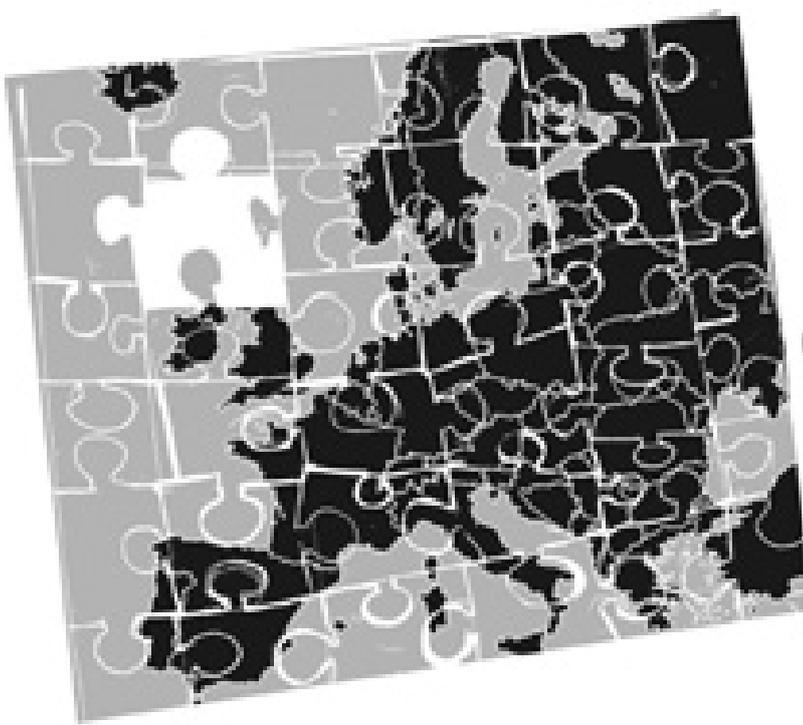
the flag waving sections of the British media. Yet despite this, Iraq was very much Blair's war. In 2003 Blair was the most articulate representative of a neoliberal class which was at its most confident. The neoliberals were self proclaimed revolutionaries who wanted to impose their political philosophy on the entire world, and like all true revolutionaries they were ready to use violence in the pursuit of political goals. Blair was a true believer. He was no poodle to the crazed Bush as is often portrayed. Bush offered Blair the opportunity not to commit troops in 2003 but Blair said no. Blair wanted the Iraq war and was prepared to lie to get it.

Some people might read his memoirs to try and understand why he went to war. They offer no satisfying explanation because Blair is a master of self delusion. But it is a question he will be asked for years to come. Nothing else will matter. His fall from grace is the most spectacular of any post-war politician. His every move is interpreted by the public with cynicism such as his recent decision to donate the profits from his book to the British Legion. Maybe Blair was trying to buy forgiveness. The great Bob Dylan once sang in Masters of War:

Let me ask you one question
Is your money that good
Could it buy you forgiveness
Do you think that it could

The answer of course is no. Blair has to pay a great price for the Iraq war. In all likelihood it cost him his premiership. Had he acted like the leaders of our European neighbours France and Germany, he might well have been Prime Minister today. Deep down he knows this to be the case and is angry. But Blair was driven by a messianic zeal that made him different from most leaders and it was this zeal that led to his downfall. There is an old saying that it takes religion to make a good man do evil things. This best explains Tony Blair. Well it's the best I can come up with. ■

Gary Fraser is on the Editorial group of the online magazine Democratic Green Socialist



terrorism of information

Continuing our series on the post-crash political situation in other countries, Giannis Banias explains how the focus on the violent street protests in Greece have been used to disguise the real political terrorism of the IMF

There is more than one side to the crisis today's world is facing, financial, social, cultural and political, a deep turmoil of values and morals. Most of all, it is capitalism that suffers, leading humanity to a modern barbaric state, great social and ecological deadlocks. A novel, radically different social and political map of Europe is currently under formation, originating from the EU countries but affecting the entire world. Its shape alters according to problem solving policies and their consequences as well as social resistance coming from the working class. The international crisis in question results from capitalism, in its most extreme, aggressive and neoliberal version: unconditional and non-stop competitiveness, market speculation, consumerism, banks and the entire financial system mercilessly profiteering, their motto being "money over people". The aim has been maximizing profit while minimizing labor cost in order for speculators to dominate.

The Greek financial crisis, extremely intense as a result of the administration of the two political parties that have monopolized power in Greece since 1974, is connected to the international one, but is also unique in its characteristics: an unorthodox form of development lacking a solid productive base, debt escalating due to deficit and a combination of constant loans without productive investments, consumerism, political parties and their clientele ruling the state, an oversized public sector, profiteering, corruption, selling off and embezzlement of national resources, high-level government officials involved in various scandals. Consequently, Greece was neither ready to handle this crisis nor strong enough to resist capitalistic greed.

The strategy chosen to fight the crisis actually uses the same logic and tools that triggered it in the first place, only now neoliberal tactics, against the working class, against the masses are much more intense. Public funds are used once more to support private banks, without any guarantee whatsoever that

development will also be supported. In fact, the people have to pay for a crisis they have not caused in any way. Measures that the Greek government has chosen to take, the infamous Memorandum as well as the EU, the European Central Bank and the National Monetary Fund have turned the country into a pioneering guinea pig, testing the limits of the lower class, the size and strength of their will to resist. Other European countries have of course also been targeted, but the European South remains a priority.

Taking the measures in question and allowing the EU, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund to sponsor the country has been the choice of a government, fully aware of its actions, in total compliance with the internationally dominant financial forces. George Papandreou, the Greek Prime Minister, absolutely refuses to renegotiate the country's debt, arguing that paying off the loans challenges the country's credibility while proclaiming that the measures his government took are the only solution. Here is the characteristic of the measures mentioned above and the Memorandum in general: the total destruction of social services. The working class, farmers, average size businesses and the majority of social groups will be charged for the crisis. Minimizing labor cost, reducing salaries and pensions, unemployment on the rise, already affecting young people, is the cornerstone of the new philosophy. Also, alternative forms of labor, freedom to dismiss as many workers as desired, no more collective agreements, no more social security, not to mention the increase of VAT causing prices to rise. Consequently, while the working class bleeds the capital secures its profit and the banking system reigns secure. Meanwhile, with loan rates on the rise, wealth is accumulated at the expense of workers and so is income in general. To make matters worse, the Government is finalizing a series of privatizations regarding national resources, public utility corporations and the wider public sector.

All of the above mentioned rescue measures and the Memorandum in general will only cause the country to plunge into recession, which is already in progress, while a new pack of even more hideous measures is to be expected together with greater sacrifices. The IMF is showing the way with the full co-operation of the Greek government. Another interesting aspect is the question of whether the measures are in accordance with the country's constitution – some of them have already been declared unconstitutional – as well as whether the government has violated basic democratic principles, since they had been presented with the country's and the economy's actual problems before national election day – nevertheless, they systematically lied to the Greek people, handing out untrue promises and declarations. The application of the above mentioned measures also causes outbursts of absolutism as well as terrorism of information and ideas, mostly orchestrated by electronic media. What about national and popular dominance for countries sponsored by the IMF? Is there a new model under construction for the EU countries?

The system is on a desperate quest for government solutions to absorb social and political tremors against this multiform crisis with the least possible cost for the wealthy and their political representatives, the two largest Greek political parties, PASOK (The Panhellenic Socialistic Movement, now governing) and Nea Dimokratia or ND for short (New Democracy, the right wing opposition). The two most popular scenarios include governments of a wider political scale, since political party division is already in the air as well as governments including technocrats from the area of business, the media and higher education. A combination of the two is also under consideration.

Union leaders and the left parties have not been able to come up with a satisfactory answer to the current situation. The leading party also controls the working class unions, making sure that any reaction does not get out of hand. Meanwhile, the left parties are faced with the burden of their own choices, different strategies, a serious lack of coordination and ultimately each other, failing to actually rise up to the occasion. That poses a grave problem for the next phase of social resistance. During this fall, we could be witnessing an even greater social turmoil, with the wider participation of young people that could escalate even further. Government propaganda for the Memorandum is also escalating with the support of the opposition together with the media, attempting to undermine any counteraction. There is also an outburst of blind force aiming to smear any backlash; for example the murder of three Marfin Bank employees during a massive anti-government demonstration in the center of Athens on May 5, 2010.

According to the Greek Media and the George Papandreou government this is the only approach to the crisis. This conscious lie only applies to their followers, who also support capitalism and the general system. What's even worse, these recent changes are here to stay as part of a wider financial and social model of absolutism, promoted by those who control capitalism and attempt to fight the masses, the working class and their right to say no.

On the other hand, what the left parties have to offer, especially SYRIZA (Greek Coalition of the Radical Left), in order to permanently come out of the crisis, is a radically different approach as part of an alternative financial and social model, characterized by entirely different values, structures and human relations, an entirely different equation between man, nature

and the environment. Greece has already paid off more than twice the amount of money it owes. So, what we can do now is deal with a number of specific problems by putting forward some alternative suggestions, which could also, under certain circumstances, take form within the present system, such as:

- a renegotiation of the country's debt
- a refusal to pay part of the debt owed to speculation
- different loan rates and other European countries offering their solidarity, engaging in negotiations on a wider level
- high taxes for the wealthy, the church, banking revenues and off-shore corporations
- a cut back on military expenses of at least 50 per cent
- a state-controlled financial system and no more public utility corporations going private
- a different development policy, based on production and making use of the country's advantages
- wages, salaries and pensions increased, no more unemployment
- prioritize public health, education and the environment.

Unfortunately, the majority of those changes are hindered by the existing social and political forces. Only when left-wing parties and the working movement both in Greece and Europe come together, determined to work hard and promote the necessary ruptures, will actual change take place. A useful tool to promote unity around the movement's goals could be a referendum to officially reject measures that support the Memorandum and International Treaties such as those of Maastricht and Lisbon. A major goal should be the formation of a strong social and political front, aiming to cause the fall of the George Papandreou government, put an end to the reign of the two largest political parties and strengthen the left ideology.

Striving to promote common action and substantial unity for all Left Ideology representatives in Greece and Europe, SYRIZA is neither a single political party nor an alliance, but an original political configuration, characterized by its radical, social role. Standing out within the Greek society, it was founded six and a half years ago, comprising eleven minor political parties, representing the Left or Radical Ecology, as well as independent members of a similar ideology. It holds nine MPs and one MEP. Its primary goal is to organize and fortify social and political resistance against government measures and the Memorandum as well as the unity of the Left and Radical Ecology representatives. Its vision, socialism and democracy, freedom, people above all else and a totally new balance between man, nature and the environment.

SYRIZA achieved a major social impact, which is why it has been targeted by the media and the system. As a result, its social and political stigma has ultimately weakened, having also to deal with internal problems that arose on the way. Recently, its largest component, a political party by the name of SYNASPISMOS, withdrew, together with four SYRIZA members, elected MPs after the 2009 national elections. They all formed a new political party, of center-left ideology, an ally to the two largest already existing ones. In order to face this new reality, SYRIZA is regrouping, reinforcing and getting ready for those initiatives that will have a more decisive impact on the country's imminent social and political agenda. ■

Giannis Banias is a member of the SYRIZA Secretariat

reviews

The New Old World by Perry Anderson, Verso, £24.99

The world has never seen anything quite like the European Union before. More than an international organisation or an alliance of states, yet less than an outright federation (let alone a classical nation state); repository of the most enthusiastic hopes of salvation and passionate fears of tyranny; simultaneously operating in broad daylight and the shadows of the European imagination: the EU, both in terms of what it is and where it is going, has confused the politicians who shape it and the observers and academics who interpret it. Huge volumes have been written on whether the EU is merely 'the continuation of (national) politics by other means', a new forum for national self interests to clash and cooperate; or whether the process of integration has taken on a Frankenstein life of its own, representing an internal logic of advance deadly to traditional ideals of national sovereignty, and producing a 'supranational element', such as the infamous Commission, with an independent interest of its own for national governments to deal with. In the political world, different elements of the left have seen Europe either as the gravediggers of social democracy (represented by the No2EU Yes to Democracy tendency) or as the potential arena for the creation of a modern welfare state (in more establishment circles).

Books on the EU tend to fall into two categories: the academic tome written for other academics, or the anti-European screed (see David Craig's "The Great European Rip Off" etc.) Perry Anderson's collection of essays, mainly taken from the **London Review of Books**, undoubtedly falls into the former category, although it is largely (though not completely) free of the worst jargon of the discipline. There are several perceptive "state of the nation" pieces on the major countries of the Union, including the 'Eastern Question', such as a diagnosis of the malaise of France, or an analysis of the conflict in Cyprus, but the core of the work is undoubtedly Anderson's attempt to pin down the nature of the Union. In this he is not entirely successful: we get rather more of his thoughts on the work of colleagues than his own. Furthermore, in his valiant attempts to unveil the inner mechanics and dynamics of the EU, an opportunity to lay out in full an alternative practical and moral vision is not really taken: he describes what is possible for the EU but not what is desirable.

However, this is hardly a fault for which Anderson alone is culpable. Indeed, he superbly analyses the general drift, confusion, and lack of clarity surrounding the European institutions at present, which is at root due to the clash between national and supranational imperatives, conflict between competing visions of a 'liberal Europe' (free market)

and a 'social Europe' (welfare protection on a continental scale), and the underlying lack of popular legitimacy of the whole enterprise. On the latter Anderson is masterful. This goes beyond mere instances of certain countries being 'encouraged' to vote again on European treaties when the result goes 'the wrong way', or the miserably poor turnouts in European elections and referenda. It goes right to the heart of the European style of governance. As Anderson shows, for large sectors of legislation, "What the core structures of the EU effectively do is to convert the open agenda of parliaments into the closed world of chancelleries", through impenetrable negotiations behind closed doors. In addition, the European method effectively substitutes compromise and deal-brokering for politics and ideological debate: "In the disinfected universe of the EU, this all but disappears, as unanimity becomes virtually de rigueur on all significant occasions – any public disagreement, let alone refusal to accept a prefabricated consensus, increasingly being treated as if it were an unthinkable breach of etiquette. "For many of Anderson's fellow academics, this does not present a problem: it is only natural that important areas of policy should be insulated from popular pressures and placed in the hands of experts. So-called 'collusive democracy', "in which elites make sure electorates cannot divide over questions to which they have no access. "However, the financial crisis suggests that rule by experts does not always lead to expert results.

All this is not to say that the super-state is upon us. Anderson relates the absurd weakness of the Commission in relation to national governments, with a budget of only one per cent of EU GDP, no tax raising powers, and a bureaucracy smaller than most city councils. The development of the EU has produced some curious results (in terms of their logical order) that are only explicable in terms of the EU as another level of national government negotiating: the Common Agricultural Policy

(before there was even an internal customs Union) due to French demands, the Structural Funds as a sop to the poorer Member States. If we are building up the EU as a global superpower this is due to the desires of our democratically elected governments. Nevertheless, the democratic deficit, which has occurred more due to neglect than to actual design, is something which should be of concern to all citizens. And the internal logic of integration has a dynamic of its own, as shown by the creation of a bailout fund for Greece, against the specific desire of previous treaties, and after much agonised procrastination by Germany until they realised there was no other option. A single market and single

currency may well eventually require common taxation and common social policies to balance, whether certain Member States like it or not. If we are to have a 'supersized' EU, these

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issues of democratic accountability must be urgently addressed. One possible avenue lies in the European Parliament, which Anderson, like other European scholars, casually dismisses as an irrelevance. (A declaration of interest: the author works in the Parliament). This view is too depressive: the Parliament, unlike other European institutions, at least debates issues in public and with principled disagreements: precisely the faults Anderson identifies with the EU. Furthermore, the idea that the Parliament is powerless legislatively is untrue: witness the financial regulation package in which the 'European elements' were significantly strengthened due to Parliament intervention.

Europe is a subject, shrouded in mist, on which clear thinking is needed desperately. In Anderson's essays one can see the link between drift and confusion on Europe and the internal difficulties of the key Member States. Having expunged the ideological conflicts of the old world we are left befuddled on how to interpret the new. Laissez faire economics has produced a laissez faire politics. Europe has always been an elite project: we cannot afford this anymore. Anderson expresses the desire for a "republic of letters" to develop in Europe. This is important, but no substitute for a genuine popular debate on the future of The Project. Anderson asks the right questions: our political leaders have shamefully failed to provide the answers.

Daniel Wylie

Keir Hardie by Bob Holman, Lion Hudson 2010, £10.99

A few nights ago I was watching Newsnight Scotland when who should appear but Bob Holman. It was at the time that Ian Duncan-Smith's announcements were due surrounding his 'biggest shakeup of the welfare system since the Beverage reforms'. Bob was somehow persuaded to do some work for Ian Duncan Smith's Centre for Social Justice. Now there's an Orwellian title for a Tory think tank. I think I would be close to the mark if I interpreted his response as horrified at the thought of his participation in any way being accepted as any sort of support for that old Tory slander that the victims of unemployment should be punished for their condition.

Bob has recently published a very readable biography of Keir Hardie – "Labour's Greatest Hero?". Hardy was indeed well aware of the capacity of the capitalist political system to incorporate leading working class spokespersons to add credibility and breadth to their appeal to the electorate. In fact in his book, Bob Holman provides an acute analysis of two aspects of Hardie's intellectual makeup which were affected by this dichotomy. These were his Christian beliefs and his socialist commitments. Sadly it is a truism that many churchgoers profess Christian beliefs but do not behave as Christians and many members of the Labour Party proclaim their support for socialism but don't ask them to support it in office.

Hardie's pursuit of both sources of hypocrisy was never diverted by naivety; when it came to firing arrows of derision at the pious factory owner he rarely missed his target. He also was a marksman of pinpoint accuracy when it came to those who took the Lib-Lab shilling which strangely made them lose their tongues when it came to condemning mine owners who placed profits before miners' safety. Bob Holman provides much well-researched material from newspaper articles some

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which of course appeared in Hardie's own "Labour Leader". Hardie never got round to producing an autobiography although there have been several biographies. Bob's is different in many ways in that he explores the difficulties and deprivations confronting Keir Hardie and his long suffering wife Lillie as he pursued his peaceful social revolution without regular resources to do so. He also provides an antidote to the lies of the Tory and Liberal press barons of Hardie's supposed wealth and his dourness. Unsurprisingly he did enjoy a good ceilidh but in the company of his ain folk. Hardie left his home in Cumnock to his family and the £96 still due from his parliamentary salary. Doesn't this put the recent corruption of parliament robbing the public through their expenses claims all in some perspective? What would Hardie have

said today? He probably wouldn't have been allowed into the party and, even if he was, the careerists would not have allowed him anywhere near the leadership.

In 1898 at the ILP conference Keir Hardie expounded the party's attitude to armed conflict; "war in the past was inevitable when the sword constituted the only court of appeal. But the old reasons for war have passed away, and, the reasons gone, war should go also. Today they fight to extend markets, and no empire can stand based solely on the sordid considerations of trade and commerce. This is running the empire on the lines of an huckster's shop, and making our statesmen glorified bagmen." What would Hardy say of Blair's visit to India to sell arms on behalf of BAE or four coalition ministers visiting China on a sales mission to the country that already has everything including our debt?

Hardie had a great interest in international affairs and, for a man of his class, was well travelled having attended the great socialist international conferences and made acquaintance with the great socialist leaders of his time. I have a picture in my mind of the delegates at the Second International in Paris in 1889 turning in their seats to see who it was that had just introduce himself as the delegate on behalf of the Ayrshire Miners. It is sad that we now have Labour MEPs fully funded and who, unlike Hardie, can be in Brussels in an hour compared to the deprivations suffered by Hardie. Yet will they have, in a century's time, a Bob Holman reaching for the pen and finding the rich and inspiring story like that of the illegitimate Scottish miner who founded a political movement against all the odds? What indeed would Hardie say? ■

Henry McCubbin

web review

Henry McCubbin

Is there anyone else out there who finds it difficult to swallow the cover story for preferring to go ahead with the new UK aircraft carriers? Namely that it would cost more to cancel the contract than to fulfill it. On environmental costs alone it must make sense to break the contracts and pay everyone involved (including ex-ministers on the payroll of defence contractors) a pension. The decision to have only one new aircraft carrier will cut the number of Joint Strike Fighters to be flown by RAF squadrons from 138 to about 50. At current prices, the aircraft will cost close to £90m each, but it has been stated that this could rise to more than £100m. Cost of 50 JSF - £5 billion cost of 138 JSFs - £13.8 billion. £8.8 Billion saved at one strike of the pen:

www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article6888962.ece.

www.isequal.com/cost_of_running_an_aircraft_carrier_for_1_year/cost_of_running_an_aircraft_carrier_for_1_year_f-22.shtml

europeangostrategy.ideasoneurope.eu/2010/07/25/scrap-the-behemoths/

Next there is the "we can afford it" attitude of the military. They say that "the cost of the two carriers, including their air squadrons, is around £15 billion (€17.8 billion), and they are projected to last for thirty or more years. Likewise, the nuclear deterrent is planned to cost approximately £20 billion (€23.8 billion) and will last for a similar period of time. Is £1.2 billion (€1.4 billion) per year so expensive for a country with an annual national income of £1.7 trillion (€2 trillion)? That is less than 0.05 per cent per year of Britain's gross domestic product! This

debate therefore has little to do with cost, and everything to do with political priorities." Precisely! Why therefore are essential public services being cut and what are our armed forces there to defend if not our civilised way of life?

www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11570276

When they first got the green light in Labour's 1998 defence review, the plan was that the Navy would also consist of 32 destroyers and frigates. That number has already fallen to the low-20s. In the House of the Commons, Prime Minister David Cameron confirmed the number would fall again to 19. Latest estimates since the defence review indicate that costs have already escalated another £500 million for the carriers

Not to be outdone by the running aground of HMS (not so) Astute the French Aircraft Carrier Charles de Gaulle whose crew, according to David Cameron, our jolly tars are to be doing the hornpipe with requires an eight-figure sum for repairs and will be out of service for at least two months having just returned from a three year refit. It is estimated that a mid term refit for the British carriers is likely to cost in excess of £2 billion:

www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/8098896/French-aircraft-carrier-set-to-defend-Britain-breaks-down.html

It has also been announce that our new entente with the French will last for 50 years. I thought that Thomas Paine had won the argument over generations presuming that they could rule beyond the grave. It obviously hasn't penetrated to Britain's nouveau elite. ■



Stop the Scottish government using YOUR money to undermine rail safety

The recent Loch Awe derailment underlined once more the essential role of safety-trained guards. But First Scotrail wants to do away with guards on the Airdrie-Bathgate line, and has plans to impose even more driver-only operation. The Scottish government has colluded with the company, and is even considering using public money to bankroll the company's attempt to break RMT's strike action

No public money for First Scotrail's strike-breaking army

Ask YOUR MSP to sign motion S3M-06444

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RMT

www.rmt.org.uk

Kick Up The Tabloids

LITTER SHORTAGE PANIC - NOTHING FOR POOR TO PICK UP

I'm not a betting man but I now wish that back in May I had put a five-pound treble on Anne Widdecombe becoming a reality TV star, Boris Johnston being leader of the opposition and the Lib Dems performing a U-turn on tuition fees before the year was out. I would have been in the money well before Christmas. Amazingly, Ms Widdecombe has captured the hearts of the nation and the front pages of the tabloids with her appearances on *Strictly Come Dancing*. After last year's stellar rise of Susan Boyle, this only goes to confirm that there is nothing the British TV-viewing public likes more than a spectacularly ugly virgin showing off on the small screen. And, believe me, that screen really does look look small when Anne is dancing across it.

It wasn't only Anne dancing of course. We had Harriet Harman trying her hand at stand-up comedy, with an excruciating badly-written and amateurishly-delivered gag describing Danny Alexander as a "ginger rodent", which if nothing else was highly offensive to red squirrels. Boris Johnston is obviously not the leader of the opposition, but has been leading the protests against David Cameron's proposals to cut housing benefit. Incidentally, talking of the Leader of the Opposition, it shows how bizarre is our democratic system when we see Ed Miliband going head-to-head with Cameron at PMQs, a man most Labour MPs did not vote for as their leader taking on a man who virtually no-one in the entire country voted for as Prime Minister.

That Boris is opposed to the changes in Housing Benefit just shows up the brutality of this new Government. Thousands of poor people will be forced to move out of central London, which may actually prove to be unpopular even with Tory voters. After all, if people on housing benefit have to leave the centre of the City, where are the bankers going to find anyone to clean their houses? Furthermore, those on Job Seeker's Allowance for more than a year will have their Housing Benefit cut, making them more vulnerable to becoming homeless. That must rate as one of the more novel ways of tackling unemployment, by making the unemployed homeless, hence unemployable.

On top of this, the Coalition then announces plans to force the unemployed to do community work such as picking-up litter. What I don't get is how the Tories think that this plan fits with their vision of "Big Society". Surely making unemployed people pick up litter will merely encourage people who have got jobs to drop litter, knowing that some unemployed person will come along to pick it up. This was something that even Margaret Thatcher at the height of her zaniness never suggested. Admittedly, at the peak of Thatcher's reign, unemployment was so high that there wouldn't have been enough litter on the streets for all of the

unemployed to pick up. In fact, the same is likely to happen now under Cameron once the cuts kick in. Presumably, some people on Job Seeker's Allowance will have to go around leaving litter in parks so that a whole load of other people on Job Seeker's Allowance can come and pick it up.

Meanwhile, the Government has announced that it does have a plan of sorts to tackle unemployment by bringing in laws which will make it easier to sack people. This is the sort of nonsense that would even have appeared batty and right-wing in the 1980s. It reminds me of some of the cuckoo ideas that rose like steam out of the head of Sir Keith Joseph, Margaret Thatcher's guru and Education Minister, who would think up the all kinds of wacky reactionary policies such as sterilising the homeless and making them pay for the operation. A man who was so far right that he appeared to be mentally-deranged, yet who seems the epitome of moderation compared to Iain Duncan-Smith. Nonetheless, despite all evidence to the contrary, David Cameron assured the nation, at the Tory Conference, that "Your Country Needs You". Somewhat dangerous and doom-laden rhetoric, given that the last time that phrase was uttered it ushered in four years of the most appalling carnage in the history of humankind. I guess we've all been warned then.

And finally to the Lib Dems. Six short months after appearing on election platforms under a banner which proclaimed "We Pledge To Scrap Fees", Clegg, Cable et al have now decided to double or treble them. Doubtless, as always, to be justified by the excuse of "not realising how big the mess was". Vince Cable increasingly resembles one of those dodgy mechanics who will give you an estimate and then treble it once they've looked under your bonnet. "Well, we didn't realise it was going to be that bad. This is going to cost you, squire."

It may be, however that the Lib Dems were misunderstood in the first place and that the original campaign of "We pledge to scrap tuition fees" had been abbreviated so that it would fit on placards and that the statement in full was "We pledge to scrap tuition fees at their current rate and replace them with fees that are three times as much as they are now". Doesn't look quite as snappy on a poster, after all.

Anyway, what the public fail to understand is that this is all part of the Coalition's idea of Big Society. If your son or daughter is going to a university that has decided to triple its fees, all you need to do is get together with a group of like-minded people and set up your own university. I can't see there being a lot of takers for that idea. But then, I'm not a betting man. ■



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