

HEROES AND VILLAINS



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Comment

Scottish politics can be remarkable - and not in a good way. The Megrahi affair has not cast Scottish politics in a good light, but not for the usually trumpeted reason. Rather, it just shows that sometimes we just can't see past ourselves to anything bigger.

Let's start with the obvious point - it is perfectly reasonable to have different views on the release or non-release of the man convicted of the Lockerbie bombing. It is possible to believe that he was in jail rightfully and it is possible to believe that he was the subject of a miscarriage of justice. It is possible to believe in the former case that even though he is in jail on sound grounds, he should be shown compassion - or that he shouldn't. In turn, there are different ways in which compassion could be shown. For those who believe that this is a miscarriage of justice it is still possible to believe that a compassionate response is still pragmatic given the timescale the man faced. But it is also possible to believe that to show 'compassion' to someone who has not been treated justly is to rub salt in the wound and that a pardon or similar would be more appropriate. It is even possible to believe that this matter is bigger than criminal justice and that a geo-political position should be taken (prisoner transfer or whatever). All of these are positions that one might take with varying degrees of justification.

That is most certainly not what happened. Instead there was only one position taken after the decision has been made and that was to try to squeeze as much political capital as possible from the affair. The Scottish Left Review does not take a party-political stance, and yet on this occasion it is hard not to at least credit the Scottish Government party as the only one to emerge with a shred of credibility. This is not because it has behaved impeccably - it whipped its MSPs into a centrally-decided party position too and left no room for a vote of conscience. But at least it made a decision (and one which was not exactly designed to curry favour with the popular media), it had a real and defensible reason for its decision and it stuck by it. There - barring an honourable mention for Malcolm Chisholm - ends any honour in the whole affair.

The most pathetic of positions was that taken by Iain Gray and the Scottish Labour Party. As an entity the Labour Party now

seems to be unable to see the world in any terms other than point-scoring. It would be an interesting academic exercise to write down every position taken by Iain Gray since assuming 'leadership' of the party and map it against the positions taken by the Daily Record. It is not immediately obvious that there has been any difference. Mapping it in the other direction is equally telling - it is not just that the Labour Party is in opposition, it's that it is developing a new sort of Total Opposition. No matter what happens, Scottish Labour finds reason for outrage at the SNP. A cross-party group tries to produce a rescue plan for the Kilmarnock Johnnie Walker plant which is then embarrassingly rejected by Diageo? That'll be Alex Salmond's fault for, well, speaking in public ('megaphone diplomacy' apparently). You can be sure that had he not spoken in public that would be the reason given for outrage.

It is the new law - nothing must be allowed to happen in Scottish politics without Iain Gray being outraged (simple disagreement is never enough) with what the SNP has done. He has already written twice in little more than a year asking the Presiding Officer to find the SNP leadership guilty of being less than completely open and honest in Parliament. Do they not understand that evasion is a tactic perfected by their erstwhile national leader and used often by their erstwhile Scottish leader? It is probably fair to say that we're all sick of the obfuscation of politicians, but writing to the headie to complain? The Scottish Labour Party could virtually dissolve itself to no effect since everyone in the country knows what it is going to say before it says it. There is an art to opposition and it is an art lost on Labour.

But in some ways there is one politician who has managed to emerge with even less credit. Is it not about time that someone prosecuted Tavish Scott under the Trade Description Act? In what sense is this supremely populist politician 'liberal'? If the Liberal Democrats are incapable of being thoughtful on complex moral issues such as this one, why have them? That Tavish Scott tries to guess what will be popular and gets in there first with a pantomime pose we are growing used to, but that not a single Liberal Democrat MSP voted against the censure motion in this affair reflects badly on them. Compassion on criminal justice matters and a high-minded approach used to be at the

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heart of liberal politics. That no longer seems to be the case in Scotland.

For much of the last two years Annabelle Goldie has deserved credit for having achieved a much more thoughtful form of opposition than that taken by the other party leaders. Here we can at least say that not much would be expected from her - and that she more-or-less delivered. The Tories don't pretend to be compassionate on matters of criminal justice so the 'find him somewhere to die that isn't to pleasant' line at least fits there. But again, could some free will not have been allowed? (Further credit here to Ted Brocklebank who at least spoke out and refuse to support the censure motion - Scotland, a country in which the Conservatives are more liberal than the Liberals...)

So, let's try to get back to the issue. There were basically five options. Megrahi could have been left to die in a Scottish jail. He could have been released from jail on compassionate grounds but refused permission to leave Scotland. He could have been sent home to die with his family on compassionate grounds. He could have been sent home under a political prisoner exchange deal of some form. Or just possibly there could have been some form of release on the basis of the unreliability of the conviction paired with the impossibility of him seeing justice through appeal. The last of these was not really possible. So to release or not release? Keeping him in prison served only the Daily Mail and those in the US of a 'retributionist' bent. Releasing him into domestic custody seems almost the worst option - we'll show you compassion but not you're family? And prisoner exchange in return for oil deals seems pretty vile to everyone concerned (apart from oil companies). On balance, the Scottish Government decision seems right, just and setting a high standard for Scotland as a country.

Instead, opposition politicians turned it into an affair almost unworthy of a hustings debate for a local council election. There was one overwhelming sensation which many will have felt

during the debate - thanks be that this decision wasn't left to the opposition. Mr Gray would simply not have made a decision and the idea that his justice spokesperson Richard Baker would have been trusted with the decision would be petrifying if it was believable. All that would have happened is that the Scottish Government would have phoned London for instruction (and who knows what that instruction would have been).

This writer is personally very proud of what was done and has seldom been more proud of Scotland - to show compassion in the face of US fury is the definition of bravery in 21st century global politics. But this writer on this occasion is capable of significant empathy for those who took a differing view. It's that kind of issue. However, the overwhelming impression which has been left has got nothing to do with compassion, justice, terrorism or global politics. The impression which remains is that Scottish politics and parts of the Scottish media are simply not mature enough or responsible enough to be taken as serious players. Bizarrely, this has been a better

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anti-independence position than any previously taken by the opposition - even hardened nationalists must worry if politicians of the moral and professional calibre the opposition parties have demonstrated on this issue were ever to be allowed to take any important or serious decisions. (On the other hand, a quick look at the utter mess London made of the affair reminds us perhaps not to set the bar too high when it comes to the competence of sovereign states.) And lest we are accused of being closet Nationalists, the SLR has not been slow to criticise the SNP when it was deserved, so may we be spared the suggestion that these thoughts are part of a covert exercise.

Many people have emphasised that the Labour Party has to rediscover its purpose in Scotland if it is to move back into power. Looking at it today, it has a lot of growing up to do first.



whores and virgins

Robin McAlpine looks at the political purpose of the redemption of bankers and demonisation of the public sector

There is perhaps no means of social control more important, more powerful and in many ways more dangerous than the creation of heroes and villains. They define how we see the world, what we aspire to, what we will accept and what we will condemn. In creating these poles we draw circles around behaviours and ways of existing which include and exclude, almost as directly as if we were corralling cattle or penning sheep. But there are many ways we can do this. What makes heroes and villains so powerful is that we do not realise we are being corralled and penned; in fact, we think that it is us who are drawing the circles. With notable exceptions, it is not. We rarely even notice it is being done.

Let us begin a long way back with an archetypal example. From what little historical material is available the best guess we can make is that Mary Magdalene was probably the lover and more likely the wife of Jesus Christ. Certainly, even by the uncontested contents of the Bible she was the first apostle - when Christ arose from the dead it was to Mary that he chose to reveal himself. If theologians are to be consistent then we must assume that this is not a coincidence or an accident (we're talking about the embodiment of omniscience returned from beyond human experience here). Christ chose Mary to bear witness to the single greatest event of human existence (again, if you are to take the theology at face value). We have here a hero, a strong, intelligent, independent woman to whom the Lord has chosen to reveal the wonders of the universe. The other Mary was simply a human vessel used for the production of the human version of God and as such should have no real theological significance. To her was given a non-negotiable task, to Magdalene a window into eternity. But the following two hundred years (running up until the Council of Mycenae at which they patched together the Bible from a plethora of scraps of writing by many different authors) were not exactly a period of feminist revolution.

By Mycenae - where a group of rich and powerful men (and only men) locked themselves away with the explicit intent of controlling the nature of the burgeoning Christian religion - there had been a full reversal of fortune for the two Marys. One, the really important one who is key to the whole Christian faith, is transformed from her genuine role as hero into that archetypal female villain, the prostitute. The other, a theologically insignificant woman with absolutely nothing whatsoever to say for herself, is created instead as a heroic virgin. And there we have the genesis of Catholicism's attitude to women as we understand it.

This is no coincidence or chance. This all took place in a highly patriarchal time and the messages are so clear as to be almost funny - to be a virgin, passive and to hold no opinion is the characteristic of the Mother of God. To be a political activist and female, challenging the state and the existing church along with a young preacher, is to be hidden under the charge of whore. Be like the good Mary and conform. The Church created the hero and the villain it wished to make of women and in terms of

penetrating deep into the culture of Christian countries, there is no doubt it worked.

But the hero and the villain is all-pervasive if we look for them. For example, the primary function of criminal justice is not really to protect the public from dangerous people nor to punish the bad but mainly to make clear the boundaries between good and bad (or more specifically good and evil). A trial is as much about describing the reasons that someone is defined as a transgressor as it is about discovering guilt. In this sense, all trials are show trials, telling us what is acceptable and what not. We explain in detail why someone is condemned and we ensure the detail of their transgression is understood. This is really the only way we can understand the history of criminal justice - the hanging of pickpockets is neither an appropriate punishment nor an effective protection of the masses but can only be understood as an 18th century way of explaining what will be tolerated.

This runs through until today - after all, the most vilified crimes in the country just now include ones in which no-one is really being protected and the punishment is for doing something we deem to be unacceptable rather than because anyone is harmed. One is the 'promotion of terrorism', a crime which involves thinking or reading things we don't want you to think or read. The other is downloading child porn. This is not a victimless crime by any means, but the perpetrator is more often than not nothing more than an observer of a horrible act. Really, in both cases we are much less interested in what someone did (looked at something horrible, read something objectionable) and much more interested in what they represent.

Then we have the 'role models'. In the last ten years we have had shoved in our faces a whole new breed of person - the entrepreneur. We are left to gasp in awe at people who are heroes because they make money. In fact, often they are heroes despite not really making any money (there is no space here to elaborate on how underwhelming the achievements of many of our high-profile business leaders are but when you are feted simply because you can get column inches by running photo-shoots of women in underwear or because you bought up successful public monopolies at knock-down prices then something is odd). The message though is clear enough - we celebrate grasping, no-holds-barred personal enrichment and we are supposed to want to be like them.

So throughout human history we have always been told indirectly but unmistakably how to think and how to behave through the examples set by figures defined as heroes or villains - and largely we fall for it every time. Why bother ourselves with it just now? Well, because something blatant is happening before our eyes - we are in the middle of a 'correction' in which the established order is seeking to reverse the unfortunate occurrence of the wrong people having been vilified. Is it even worth reminding you why bankers are the great villains of our age? It's not just the crash and the bailout; these people were destroying the very

fabric of our society long before their biblical fall. The effects of speculative financial capitalism on the globe have been near catastrophic. In fact, when we remind ourselves that these bankers were twisting international policy to remove access to free clean water from millions of Africans to create water utility investment opportunities which would offer fast rewards (they won't all die - someone will have to pay something so how can you lose?) we get a sense of who these people were/are. We think it was all abstract gambling - and some of it was. But an awful lot of it was not the slightest abstract - from young American couples tricked into buying houses they couldn't afford simply to con more money from them to slave labour used to increase the viability of the stock market position of high street retailers, bankers were as immoral as it gets (and much more directly responsible for human suffering than any pathetic soul looking for images of child abuse). So we had every politician in the country writing fawning letters to Big Bankers in part to toady up to them but also to create the myth of their real worth - to us all. Then they suffer a fall as great as anything Milton could invent (oh how those politicians suddenly wish they hadn't dropped Fred Goodwin that obsequious note...) and the whole ideology of neoliberal capitalism rocks. And make no mistake, it did. Almost every single word of the litany of the ideologies of the last 20 years looks not only suspect but blatantly wrong - only a market untouched by regulation can ensure stability and human happiness indeed.

Now, this is simply too dangerous to be allowed to take root. What happens if people start believing something counter to this? We could end up in a situation where the elite are no longer allowed to bend any rule or take any risk with no real risk whatsoever in the sole pursuit of their own vast enrichment. They might no longer be able to justify Babylonian wealth on the basis of 'creating' a few low-pay service-sector jobs. They might have to pay their taxes and behave with some humanity. If any of those ideas seeded themselves, we could be staring at the end of global neoliberal capitalism as we know it. But what to do? It is really indecently early to try to rehabilitate the bankers into heroes in one go. So what do we need? A new villain.

And so it is that out of the blue a massive debt carried by you and me as a result of a system which will not allow anyone with great wealth or power to lose it is placed squarely at the feet of - well, nurses as it turns out. Or the BBC. Briefly MPs. Social workers for sure, and certainly pensioners. In fact, absolutely anyone who is free of blame is in the frame so long as they are in receipt of public money of any sort. We are being fooled into thinking that the bankers did not create this disaster but that it was really Jonathan Ross and the guy who empties your bin. The bankers who whored themselves most are being repainted as virgins and the virginal public sector is being cast onto the street like a cheap call-girl. A straight line from Mycenae to Mandelston.

We could end up in a situation where the elite are no longer allowed to bend any rule in the sole pursuit of their own vast enrichment - if this idea took seed we could be staring at the end of global neoliberal capitalism as we know it. We need a new villain.

There is another part of the neoliberal enterprise at risk. We all know that resources - water, fuel and food - are scarce and growing scarcer. We kind of know that the resource wars have already started (at least we know Iraq was about oil). But they too are at risk. Iraq is now an official disaster and no-one thinks otherwise. The perpetrators were already writing that war off as a bad job and trying to get us all hooked on the 'just war' going on in Afghanistan. What is unfortunate therefore is that you would be hard pressed to find a punter able to explain what was just about it (at least in any country other than the US). But they can't write that one off too or there is a risk that public opinion wouldn't stand for another one. So we need to make us all

willing to cheer on our next collective act of violence via other means; and therefore welcome Armed Forces Day. It is a good job Gordon Brown is really bad at this stuff or it might work (honestly, does he think that choosing a day and asking us to wave flags and cheer soldiers is going to be enough to hold the empire together? Yet another pale impersonation of the United States imported by a politician who gets that country in theory but simply can't grasp how it actually works). We should be asking hard question about the military - there are many well-meaning soldiers but we should be more honest about the disturbing proportion of violent psychopaths and damaged young men close to falling apart - but the tabloids tell us to cheer, the body bags keep coming and only then do the oil contracts arrive.

There is so little space and so much to cover. The 'Tax Payer's Alliance' sees the misbehaviour of the super-rich as another chance to attack services for the poor with the usual demonisation of the weak. The Royal Family is half-tool, half-protagonist as it cynically exploits William and Harry as poster-boys for the Windsors and the warmongers. Rupert Murdoch's offspring spit poison at the BBC like deformed snakes on a Medusa head. And we are all told that somewhere deep down we know this 'whole thing' started when 'asylum seekers' started 'flooding' our country. Thank our lucky stars for such pretty, compliant, unchallenging 'national treasures' like Cheryl Cole from the X Factor. If only more of those uppity public sector workers were like her.

This nonsense won't last - the real villains slipped their fake white capes with Enron and World Com and by RBS and Lehman Brothers they were standing naked down to their jet-black underwear. The old order might try to drape a white veil over them for now while throwing black ink at innocent bystanders. But it won't work. A baddy is a baddy. Their time will come. ■

Robin McAlpine is the Editor of the Scottish Left Review and author of No Idea - Control, Liberation and the Social Imagination

it's the rich who caused the pain

Joe Cox analyses the role that the super-rich have played in the economic crisis and argues for a High Pay Commission

We have lost sight of what the bankers did and we will all pay the price. There are certain times throughout history when real press freedom emerges and the fundamental questions about our social and economic system are asked. These opportunities are gone in an instant, closing as quickly as they are opened up. A golden moment of press freedom emerged in late 2008 and early 2009. The reason? The global economy coming to the brink of meltdown and the most severe economic downturn since 1929. \$2 trillion were written off of bank's balance sheets, it required \$12 trillion of global bailouts (£1.2 trillion in the UK with state owned banks continuing to make losses) to stabilise the system. The world economy lost 2 per cent of GDP and the UK economy contracted by over four per cent alone.

For a brief moment questions were asked about our economic and political system; New Labour was pronounced dead, neoliberalism was pronounced dead. The article that will always stick in my mind was in The Guardian in April 2009, Eric Hobsbawm asked "Socialism has failed. Now capitalism is bankrupt. So what comes next?" These dangerously important questions can never remain in the public domain for too long. They didn't, and on the 8 May the **Daily Telegraph** began publishing details of MPs expenses, these revelations took the pressure off the bankers and the left became demoralised; duck ponds replaced derivatives as the story of choice.

So what did actually happen back in 2008? Are bankers the real villains? The link between excessive pay and the economic crisis is now widely acknowledged. According to the Treasury Select Committee - Ninth Report: **Banking Crisis: reforming corporate governance and pay in the City**: "the 'bonus culture' in the City of London, particularly amongst those involved in trading activities in investment banks, contributed to excessive risk-taking and short-termism and thereby played a contributory role in the banking crisis."

The massive short term pay incentives encouraged more money into more risky

and secretive practices. On the eve of disaster, huge bonuses were still being handed out, they had no idea that they were single handedly about to bring down the entire system. The state bailout will probably lead to a generation of fiscal pain. The greed of the rich will directly hurt the poor through cut backs in public services and soaring unemployment. They are undoubtedly villains.

Major individuals who oversaw the meltdown have got away with it; Fred Goodwin, former Chief Executive of RBS who oversaw the collapse of the Royal Bank of Scotland walked away with a pension of over £300,000 per year. Andy Hornby formerly of failed bank HBOS is now CEO of Alliance Boots. Richard Burrows, governor of the Bank of Ireland has now taken up the chairman's seat at British American Tobacco. American economist Paul Krugman summed it up perfectly, it's a case of "heads they win, tails other people lose".

So why have they got away with it? The first reason is the state; the system has been underwritten by £1.2 Trillion of state guarantees. Leaving aside whether the bailout was necessary (I think it was) we now have a very dangerous situation of moral hazard. If financial institutions are too big to fail then there is no need to act responsibly because they know they will have to be bailed out. Now the bonuses have returned the government can only grumble from the sidelines, Rescuing the financial system without real reform has not protected us from future crises.

The government has also reinforced the old ways of doing business. Stephen Hester, Chief Executive of the publicly owned Royal Bank of Scotland has a total salary package of up to £9.6 million, not only is the government not curtailing excessive pay, they are encouraging it. Just as importantly perhaps, Stephen Hester's pay is linked to share price; his mission is to boost the share price of RBS, then sell it back the private market, but isn't this the sort of short-termism the government should be discouraging? The depressingly predictable first reflex is always for privatisation, what about mutualisation, what about a UK



state investment bank? This government has repeated the dogma that banks are better run in private hands and that huge salary packages are necessary to attract 'talent'. Even a modest exploration of these practices or fresh thinking has been dismissed by the chancellor.

Secondly, the instability of the economic system caused by bankers is part of a wider unstable economic system; neoliberalism. If the state props up a pro-privatisation, deregulated, non-interventionist model of the economy it cannot tackle the banker's excess. Ironically, the bankers heading up the casino capitalist model which has wrought so much destruction are saved because they are part of the fabric of that very model which this New Labour government has bought into.

The economic model is hugely prone to instability and crisis for several reasons. Since the 1980s the fruits of higher productivity have been increasingly siphoned off by the super rich. The share of GDP going to profits has continued to rise while at the same time there has been a decline in the share allocated to wages. The reduction of the relative share of labour in national income has led to a reduction in aggregate demand. Profits and output were rising faster than wages so who was going to buy the output? Demand was kept up in the short term by increasing the supply of credit and keeping interest rates low, but this is not a sustainable economic model and is in no small part responsible for the economic crash.

The super rich, far from being the wealth creators in our economy, have had a hugely destabilising effect. In a document written by the Joseph Stiglitz entitled "The ways out of the crisis and the building of a more cohesive world", he states unequivocally that "the crisis has structural roots. The aggregate demand deficiency preceded the financial crisis and was due to structural changes in income distribution. Since 1980, in most advanced countries the median wage has stagnated and inequalities have surged in favour of high incomes." The alternative to a low wage, high debt economy is a more sustainable model of greater equality and higher median wages for all. For that to be achieved the trade unions must be allowed to grow stronger, the welfare state must be more generous, and the model of taxation must become more progressive. In short, the bankers have been allowed to get away with it because exploring the deeper causes of the economic crisis will open up a can of worms which many in government and in New Labour do not want to open.

Thirdly, there has been a lack of political action from the public at large. Post-crash the broad 'Put People First' coalition march for 'Jobs Justice and Climate' only mustered 35,000 people - compare that to the over one million who marched against the Iraq War. Outside activist circles and into the Party political processes the response has been muted. The Labour left has been drowned out by the right wing New Labour orthodoxy. The Green Party, Plaid Cymru and other left of centre fringe Parties have had more to say but their influence on the mainstream of politics is minimal. At the same time the public outrage around banking greed and excessive remuneration is palpable so why did this not translate?

One obvious observation is the lack of political activity from the grass roots. If one does not have experience of political activity, of organising, of protesting, of campaigning then however angry people may become they have no positive outlet for that anger. This suits the conservative elements in our society and 30 years

of the market trampling over society has made ordinary people feel powerless.

Fourthly, we cannot ignore the role a non-proportional electoral system plays in Westminster politics. At Compass we galvanised support from politicians from the Lib Dems, Greens, Labour academics, writers, journalists, economists, bloggers, campaigners and trade unionists in our campaign for a 'High Pay Commission', it was a microcosm of the 'progressive majority' in Britain. Yet this progressive majority has no channel for its voice. This rotten electoral system maintains the centrist political orthodoxy because the major political parties have to focus their message on swing voters in marginal seats. The voice of the majority is constantly ignored - why are there still five million people in need of social housing after 12 years of a Labour government? The answer is that they are living in safe Labour constituencies.

It would be dishonest of me to pretend Compass has the perfect formula to curbing the banker's excesses, we don't. Our campaign is to establish a High Pay Commission to be the main body of research into the broader impact of high pay on the economy and society. We believe it should focus on three main things; how high pay and remuneration have affected economic stability, to explore the link between high pay and long term performance within companies and financial institutions and lastly, to explore the effects of high pay on society.

We realise this short term measure is no panacea, but transparency would be a welcome first step. To achieve the 'good society' nothing short of a wholesale replacement of the neoliberal economic model for a radical social democratic one is necessary. Yet what we are doing through our campaign for a High Pay Commission as set out in our 'No Turning Back' essay for the **New Statesman** does reveal many of the steps we believe we need to take to change society. If what we want is a more equal, sustainable, democratic and liberal Britain we can no longer go on trying to cope with the symptoms of market fundamentalism. It is time to address their causes. Yet the causes are entrenched through class and privilege and we have to work together to succeed. Isolated measures on the environment or inequality are not enough; single issues have to be joined up and given ideological direction. The progressive majority has not united in to take on the bankers and this is another reason we have failed.

What this means is the creation of a politics that transcends tribal party lines. The postwar settlement that delivered jobs, free health care, social insurance and decent education for all was built on the ideas of J M Keynes and William Beveridge (both Liberals) and Rab Butler (a Tory). Meaningful and lasting change happens only when people join in the widest possible movements. At every level we should strive to bring people into the political movements and to dare more democracy; in our public services, in our workplaces, in our communities, and most importantly of all, in electing our representatives.

We should never forget what the bankers did but reining in the masters of the universe means cutting off what allows them to thrive - a lack of democracy and an economic system that puts people before profit. Short term campaigns must be linked with longer term ideological guidance otherwise in ten years time we will be fighting different villains, and losing. ■

Joe Cox is Campaigns Organiser for the centre-left pressure group Compass

answering the queen

Mike Danson argues that we need to remember who failed to warn us of approaching financial meltdown and challenge the assumptions of conventional economics

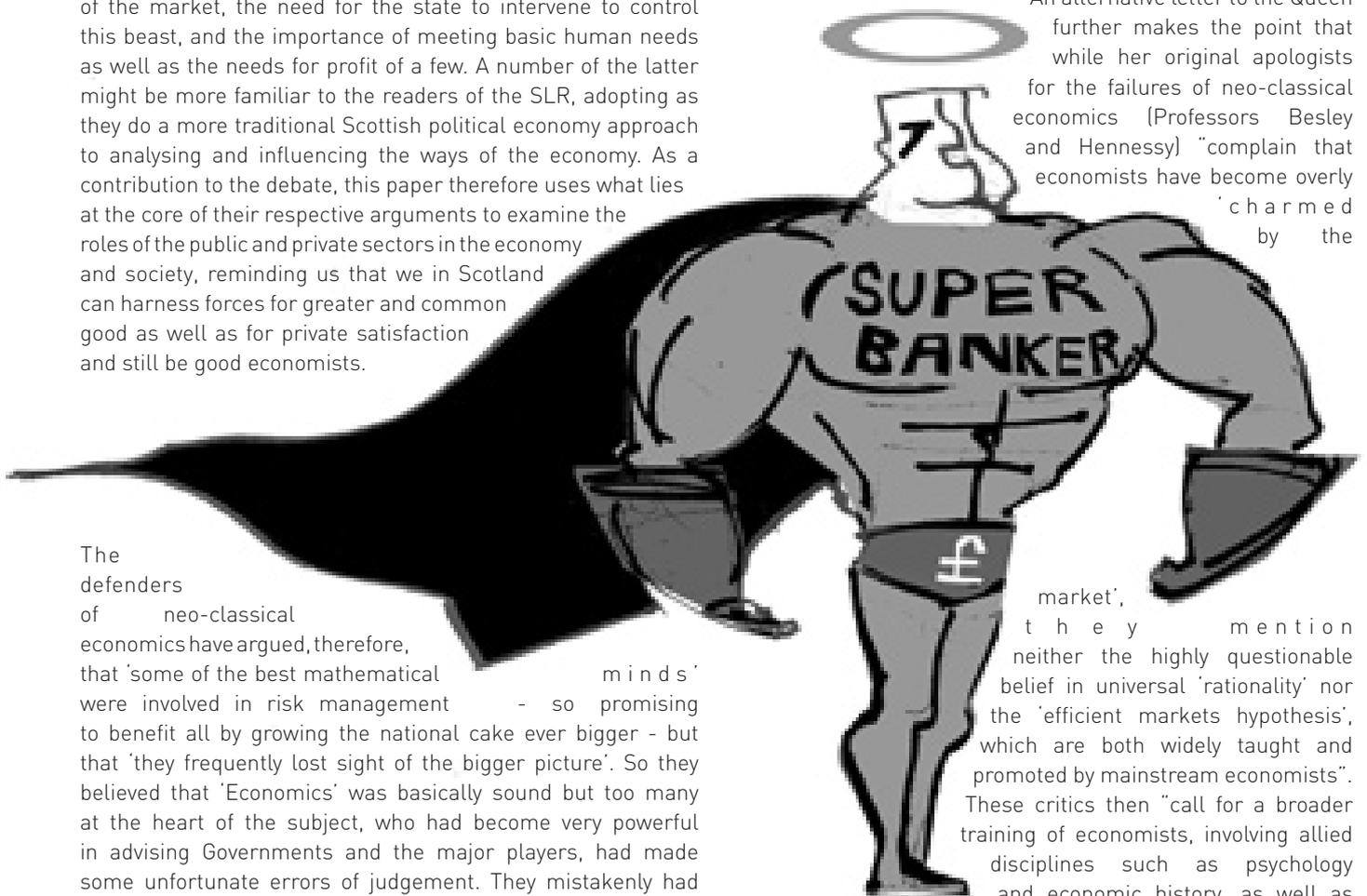
Not normally quoted on these pages but last November the Queen asked why so few economists had foreseen the credit crunch, the apparent cause or superficial symptom of the present recession and economic crisis. This has led to muted responses from the profession, either trying to explain away the failing of the 'science' to see this coming or to identify or apologise for why they had been so wrong. As well as many not showing any contrition, most have not suggested that a more fundamental problem exists at the heart of how economists have understood the world. This neo-classical approach believes that the natural order is that we are all out for own desires and ends; maximising our own profits or bonuses regardless of the impacts on the rest of society. According to their faith, this is good for all apart from the feckless or undeserving. To prove this belief, they represent how the world operates as a mathematical model and all the restrictive and unjustified assumptions which underpin the very essentials of this approach are forgotten when advice is given to governments, corporations and peoples.

Counter to this, some of the critics from within the economics discipline who have entered the debate have offered an alternative view which puts more emphasis on the limitations of the market, the need for the state to intervene to control this beast, and the importance of meeting basic human needs as well as the needs for profit of a few. A number of the latter might be more familiar to the readers of the SLR, adopting as they do a more traditional Scottish political economy approach to analysing and influencing the ways of the economy. As a contribution to the debate, this paper therefore uses what lies at the core of their respective arguments to examine the roles of the public and private sectors in the economy and society, reminding us that we in Scotland can harness forces for greater and common good as well as for private satisfaction and still be good economists.

removed' through an array of novel financial instruments while politicians of all types were charmed by the market. The 'failure of the collective imagination of many bright people, both in this country and internationally, to understand the risks to the system as a whole' was the excuse for the current crisis.

They are not suggesting that the problem was so fundamental as to undermine the whole charade. So all that follows from the neo-classical approach, they argue, can be left untouched; and indeed now more than ever we should be bolstering the market and the freedoms it both generates and protects. But, from across the economics spectrum others have rattled these walls of complacency and abstraction to complain 'that economists have become largely transformed into a branch of applied mathematics, with little contact with the real world'. We do not need to delve more deeply into the world of economists here but this apparently narrow criticism over how the 'preference for mathematical technique over real-world substance [has] diverted many economists from looking at the whole picture' reveals some important differences on public goods and private wealth.

An alternative letter to the Queen further makes the point that while her original apologists for the failures of neo-classical economics (Professors Besley and Hennessy) "complain that economists have become overly charmed by the



The defenders of neo-classical economics have argued, therefore, that 'some of the best mathematical minds' were involved in risk management - so promising to benefit all by growing the national cake ever bigger - but that 'they frequently lost sight of the bigger picture'. So they believed that 'Economics' was basically sound but too many at the heart of the subject, who had become very powerful in advising Governments and the major players, had made some unfortunate errors of judgement. They mistakenly had concluded that risks had been safely dispersed and 'virtually

market', they mention neither the highly questionable belief in universal 'rationality' nor the 'efficient markets hypothesis', which are both widely taught and promoted by mainstream economists". These critics then "call for a broader training of economists, involving allied disciplines such as psychology and economic history, as well as mathematics".

A generation ago many of us relied on the state for housing, health, education, security at all stages of our lives, stability in families and communities. As well as not being perfect, but then none of us ever claimed it was a completed project, this reliance we were told from 1977 onwards was generating a dependency culture where our enterprise and entrepreneurship were being stifled so that the national cake was not growing quickly enough; and so hundreds of thousands of jobs had to disappear across Scotland, homes were sold off to sitting tenants and housing associations, our companies and mutuals were privatised, essential services were deregulated, our investment in our futures was organised through PFI/PPP schemes and a new country was to be born. But alongside all the papers and arguments made in Scottish Left Review against each and all of these, we know that the state had to remain or re-enter many areas of life as the market failed again and again to provide even the basics for many in society. Here we have been generally more circumspect about the benefits of many of these changes but in England New Labour's extension of the Conservative neo-classical model has pushed ever deeper into the public sector, burdening the population with the demands of private markets, motives and returns in health, education and other areas of the welfare state. Looking to the wealth of the promised land of the US, we have been led down a privatised future while ignoring the incredible depths of poverty that necessarily exist amid that plenty. The poor are not only always with us in that system but must be in order to keep the minimum wage low, deskill the workforce and so create the opportunities for profit.

From our northern European neighbours we can see an alternative vision of greater equity and efficiency, backed by the confirmed highest average living standards in the world founded on state intervention and high taxes. The role of the public sector in the Nordic countries has been fundamental to their individual and collective prosperity, contrasting with the US and UK model of believing that the crumbs of a bigger cake will naturally fall to the poor - and we know that trickle down strategies simply do not work.

Our own earlier research on the proposed transfer of municipal housing stock in Glasgow and other places in Scotland, identified many of the issues that have come so strongly home in the current crisis, as has the work on Schools PFI proposals. To make these fantasies appear to make sense, incredible leaps of faith had to be made with inconceivable rates of improvements to homes, schools, hospitals, army training, etc. embedded in the statistical detail. When we and others managed to gain access to such 'economic analyses', the damning truth was all too apparent. The very companies and organisations which created these stories and statistics were, of course, involved in the feeding trough frenzy of bonuses and fees. And so with such assumptions as every pound spent on a privatised Glasgow council house raising its value by £1.25, that every pound spent on a pupil in a Renfrewshire school being an investment under private control but a cost under the traditional council management, they were generating the pre-conditions for the crises of today and tomorrow. The evidence has been there for all readers of this and other critical journals to see and this was presented at a time when the business cycle was supposed to be confined to the wheelie bin of history.

Not only did we tell you so, but the very bases of the wider current recession were to be found in that approach to economics. The fundamental presumptions that the private sector could deliver

these huge productivity gains - with no attempt to understand how this would be achieved (it had to be through vilification of the workforce, wage cuts, anti-union practices, in-work poverty, deskilling, and under-utilisation of highly qualified migrant workers), and that public risk would be reduced through capital market machinations (proved all too ridiculous over the last eighteen months) were not questioned by the orthodoxy.

The immediate impacts of these crucial assumptions were also rarely challenged in the mainstream. Reducing costs by driving down the terms and conditions of the lowest paid and transferring these savings to offshore accounts, bonuses and pensions for the super rich would inevitably shrink the UK and Scottish economies: taking money out of the corner shop and the neighbourhood with their high multiplier factors in favour of luxury yachts, Formula 1 cars and other inflated imports did not make us a richer society, however measured. As always, bread and circuses and divisive policies are relied upon to obscure that the emperor's new clothes are still not there.

Then when the economic and financial system entered its inevitable recession, we fully expected that, after the initial anger had been managed, the poor would suffer the most, the regressive tax system would be reinforced, strategies for social inclusion would be downgraded, bankers and the City would be protected, and regulation would be as relaxed as it had been during the formation and realisation of the crisis. As we all know, the private sector came cap in hand scrounging to the public authorities for billions and billions of pounds of our money to bail them out. Where is the wealth creation there, who created it and who benefits?

So if we pick up the left journals of the 80s or return to the writings of Galbraith, Keynes, Marx or Smith - all political economists and none of whom would have been welcomed by the mathematical modellers who control the discipline today - an overwhelming sense of déjà vu and despair may descend.

But we live in Scotland and with a rich history of political debate and a devolved Parliament, we can dare to argue for alternatives. We can start to learn from our Nordic neighbours on what would be required to follow their route to a better future, with some honesty necessary from across the political spectrum on the tax and spend implications (see for some speculations on this¹). Closer to home, I would argue that the example of community based initiatives in everything from housing, regeneration, social and cultural activities, have been transformed by land buy-outs under the Land Reform legislation, demonstrating that mathematical economic models cannot pre-determine the impact of changes in ownership. Increasing population, sustainable and sustained economic development, improved housing, renewable energy generation, reforestation, are all evidence of the failure of simplistic economics to understand the importance of social ownership and control.

With clear links across the health, education, housing, social welfare, enterprise and employment agenda, these initiatives confirm that the public sector - essentially in cooperation with the agencies of communities, volunteers and workers - offers a better, sustainable and more secure future than what is offered by the sterile, short term, free market philosophy beloved by the establishment. ■

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inconvenient truths for the neoliberals

Despite the rhetoric about the private sector being the only 'wealth creators' there is no evidential base for 'crowding out' argues Andy Cumbers

It really does feel like back to the future. Tories talking about shrinking the state, revelling in model local authorities contracting out services and attacking jobs in the public sector. But of course, the economic context of 2009 is markedly different from the late 1980s and early 1990s when the Conservative Party was last in power. At the height of the financial crisis in 2008, there were grounds for hope that the political tide had turned against neoliberalism and its emphasis upon competition, individualism and market deregulation. Hitherto zealots of the free market, such as the British Conservative party and even the Republican Administration of George W. Bush were forced to speak the language of state regulation and intervention.

As the banking crisis began to ripple through to the rest of the economy, with a collapse in the housing market, the freezing up of credit to business and a general downturn in consumer demand, it appeared that the political classes might be rediscovering the benefits of a more sophisticated economics. Hayek and Friedman might be giving ground to Keynes, Polanyi and even Marx.

However, as the initial shock to the financial system wore off and state intervention appeared to have at least temporarily stabilized the banking system - at massive cost to the taxpayer - it became clear that the grip of free market philosophy on the political mainstream remained as strong as ever. Recent months have seen a dramatic shift in media and policy discourse. Away from a concern with irresponsible bankers and the need for greater financial regulation, to dire warnings about government deficit and the growth of the public sector relative to the rest of the economy.

In the UK, a weakened Brown Government, with its economic identity crisis amidst the collapse of its own variant of deregulated neoliberalism, and shorn of any progressive economic philosophy to fall back on, has allowed the Conservatives and their business friends to seize the initiative and resurrect cherished Thatcherite nostrums. It is in this context, that the political debate has moved with frightening haste to a discussion of the size of public sector cuts needed, rather than any sense of a deeper analysis of the workings of the economy. A Guardian ICM poll taken in July captured this shift in mood with over 64 per cent of voters thinking that government should be reducing

public spending.

This is a bizarre turn of events. Just at the time when neoliberalism is failing and neoclassical economics has been exposed as a vacuous and erroneous intellectual project, financial and business elites have succeeded in deflecting attention on to the public sector. Worse still, flawed arguments about the public sector 'crowding out' private investment in market economies are being resurrected by the Conservatives and meeting little opposition in public debate. On the Left, to borrow a phrase, we need to highlight a number of inconvenient truths that dismantle such arguments.

Inconvenient Truth Number One: there is no evidence that increased government spending will crowd out private sector investment and frustrate economic recovery

The general definition of crowding-out is when government spending pushes out private investment by producing disincentive effects, such as rising interest rates induced by government borrowing requirements, and consuming goods and services produced by the private sector, meaning that the private sector has to procure goods and services from an external source (i.e. import). The problem with this thesis, as I wrote in an earlier article in Scottish Left Review and at greater length with Kean Birch in the journal Scottish Affairs in 2007, is that there is simply no empirical evidence, contemporary or historical, either from the UK or at an international level to support this.

If we look at the UK, Treasury figures for 2005, they show that public sector investment has declined significantly since the late 1960s, from 7.1 per cent of GDP (1967-8) to less than one per cent by the mid 1990s, before rising under the current Labour Government to 1.6 per cent in 2004-5. In contrast, public expenditure has fluctuated considerably over the past three decades. Rising public expenditures in the 1970s reflected the particular circumstances of the time: rising oil prices, inflation, wage pressures, balance of payments problems and growing unemployment. Government expenditure may have contributed to rising inflation and interest rates but was unlikely to be the key factor.

Subsequent increases in expenditure during the 1980s and 1990s, up until 1997, were largely due to the effects of the economic cycle. In particular, the recessions of the late 1970s / early 1980s and early 1990s and rising unemployment were the main reasons for the rise in the state sector under the Thatcher and Major administrations.

Until the recent expenditure and borrowing explosion, the long term trend in both investment and expenditure had therefore

... a weakened Brown Government... has allowed the Conservatives and their business friends to seize the initiative and resurrect cherished Thatcherite nostrums.

been one of decline. Despite this, there has not been a corresponding increase in private sector investment, which, as a recent paper by the Institute of Fiscal Studies noted, continues to lag behind countries such as Germany, France, the United States and Japan

Internationally, there is no evidence to support the view that countries with high levels of government expenditure fare any worse in terms of economic growth or productivity than those with low government spend. Research undertaken on growth rates across OECD countries since the mid 1990s reveals no correlation at all between economic growth and the size of the state. There was however a positive relationship between increased government spending in the later 1990s/early 2000s and economic growth.

Inconvenient Truth Number Two: government spending produces important 'crowding-in' effects

Public expenditure in areas like education, the health service and public transport provides important markets and stimulates the private sector in other ways, most evidently through research and development spending. Recent work on the knowledge economy emphasises the important role played by the state and public sector institutions in anchoring and incubating new growth clusters such as biotechnology and the life sciences.

Researchers stress the importance of the qualitative nature of the relationships between state and business, between public sector actors and the private sector in fostering economic growth and more importantly adapting successfully to a dramatically changing global economy. Competitive success depends more and more upon the harnessing of key knowledge and skills, requiring long term commitments in a country's human and technology resources, which firms with short term profit horizons are increasingly unwilling to undertake.

In some of the most successful economies, governments take a more active part in systems of national and regional innovation which involve intervention in education, training, R&D, labour market regulation and in the provision of finance and support for entrepreneurialism and innovation. In Finland, for example, government investment has been critical to the country's successful entry into IT and communications sectors and to the emergence of Nokia as the world's leading mobile phone producer. Crucially, the Finnish government expanded R&D expenditure from one to three per cent of GNP between 1980 and the early 2000s. Contrast UK government expenditure on science and technology, which remained static at 0.2 per cent of GDP, between 1987 and 2004.

Here in Scotland, the life sciences cluster - one of the few recent economic success stories which now employs around 33,000 people in 600 public and private organisations - would not have emerged without the institutional bases of the country's elite universities, the research and development opportunities

afforded by the National Health Service and the support of Scottish Enterprise. The public sector can play an important role in connecting science and technology in public organisations like universities with private sector commercialisation. A critical factor is the overall investment in Scottish higher education (and schooling), which is now 40 per cent more per capita than the rest of the UK.

Inconvenient Truth Number Three: those economies faring best in the current downturn are those with 'big government'

Finally, the most recent evidence available suggests that those countries weathering the economic downturn best are those with sizeable welfare states and levels of government spending. OECD figures for unemployment show that the steepest rises in the year to May 2009 were in the deregulated economies of the US and UK (recording rises of 3.6 per cent and two per cent respectively) compared to the supposedly 'crowded out' economy of Germany (0.2 per cent). The hitherto celebrated

free market tiger of Ireland, like many economies that have been opened up to broader global economic forces such as the Baltic states, has seen one of the most marked deteriorations in economic performance. Unemployment there has risen dramatically from 4.6 per cent in 2006 to 11.7 per cent in May 2009.

Overall, even in economies with a smaller government share of GDP, the effects of government intervention have been critical in staving off a greater downturn. As Paul Krugman and many other respected economists have pointed

out, it is 'big government', and more specifically, the fiscal stimulus packages pursued by governments of all political stripes on both sides of the Atlantic has undoubtedly prevented a much greater economic meltdown.

Moreover, the sheer size of government in the modern economy and as a result its stabilizing effect, has almost certainly prevented a 1930s style economic depression. As Krugman has put it: alleviated the worst of the economic downturn, in contrast to the situation in the 1930s. Contrary to the reheated neoclassical arguments about crowding-out being espoused by the Conservatives, Keynesian style government stimulus programmes are crowding-in by maintain effective aggregate demand as private expenditure and investment have deteriorated. ■

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us swallowing their medicine

Why must the public sector pick up the private sector's mess asks Dave Watson?

With free market madness having brought the world economy to its knees you would have thought the advocates of neo-liberal economics, in particular the privatisation of public services, would be keeping a low profile. Not a bit of it! A steady stream of so called 'think tanks' and business leaders in Scotland are calling for more of the same to get us out of recession and repair the damage to public finances. They remind me of the gambling addict who believes that just one more throw of the dice will recover the losses - but never do.

Most recently we had the Chief Executive of the Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce again peddling the myth that the public sector is crowding out the private sector. If only his members could run public services he cried. Fortunately the people of Scotland have consistently said in opinion polls - no thanks! The other line of attack is that public money is wasted. This is pretty rich from the private sector bonus junkies whose greed got us into this mess.

Of course in any organisation there are examples of waste, like PFI or management consultants, but most of the taxpayers' money goes to help people in need or improve everyone's quality of life. Public service productivity has been improving consistently since 2003 - for every pound put in, we get more and better services in return. Investing in public services also helps local jobs and businesses - for every pound spent, 64 pence is recycled into the local economy. In fact we get a pretty good deal for our taxes. The average UK household relies on benefits and public services worth more than £10,000 every year - more

than they contribute in direct or indirect tax. Those in greater need, such as the elderly, people with disabilities or children in poverty, rely on public spending even more - and would be hardest hit by cuts. As Polly Toynbee put it so succinctly in the Guardian; "In every downturn, politicians and press turn on the public sector - feather-bedded, gold-plated, protected... Picking on choice examples of public excess, the right aims to persuade voters to cut services in ways that will cause immense public harm."

So was this crisis caused by too much public spending as the free marketers claim? The answer is 'no'. The UK still spends less (21 per cent of GDP) on public services and social security than France (29 per cent), Germany (27 per cent), Italy (25 per cent), or Sweden (29 per cent). Before this crisis, total UK public debt was less than 40 per cent of GDP - lower than other comparable economies and lower than it was in 1997. It was irresponsible borrowing and lending in the private sector that caused this crisis. In 2008 household debt was 109 per cent of GDP, and corporate debt almost 300 per cent. Public deficits are now rising fast because the government has had to take on the private sector's bad debts and counteract the damage to the economy.

The April Budget statement revealed the full extent of the damage done to the public finances by the credit crunch and resulting recession:

- sharply falling tax revenues mean that the UK government



is borrowing £350bn over 2009-11 to maintain spending plans, meet increased benefit needs, and inject £20bn stimulus

- in addition the UK government's interventions to secure the banking sector are now estimated to entail a permanent cost to the public purse of £20bn (HMT) to £130bn (IMF)
- as a result, total public debt is expected to double to 80 per cent of GDP by 2014, or more if Treasury forecasts prove over-optimistic. It is worth noting that other countries have faced similar issues, so UK public debt will still compare well to other G7 countries.

According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, the government's figures suggest that it needs to close a £90bn annual fiscal gap in order to stabilise its financial position and prevent further growth of total public debt. The figures in the budget indicate an aim of closing this £90bn gap by 2018. The Tories have indicated that they would seek to close this gap more quickly if elected in 2010.

Roughly £10bn of this fiscal gap will be filled by new taxes such as the new top rate of 50 per cent on incomes over £150k, and increases in fuel duties and National Insurance. However, a greater amount will however be recovered through cuts to planned spending. Total spending is now planned to fall by 0.1 per cent a year from 2010-11 to 2013-14. When increased debt interest and social security payments are taken into account, this could amount to a cut of 2.3 per cent in departmental spending every year.

- roughly £15bn will be cut from planned capital investment - building and maintenance of schools, hospitals, and other facilities - which will be halved over the years 2011-14.
- roughly £20bn will be cut from planned current spending - including around £15bn a year in new efficiency savings (see below)

Beyond these measures announced in the budget, according to the IFS around £45bn remains to be made up. The Budget postponed this squeeze to 2014-18, and did not specify whether these would be achieved through spending cuts or tax increases.

Whilst this is the UK position there are direct consequences for Scotland. These are analysed in the CPPR study of the Scottish Government Budget 'Growth Prospects and Budget Options' (August 2009). They estimate an 8.5 per cent (£2.5bn) real terms cut in the Scottish Budget between 2009-10 and 2013-14. This could be less if the UK government protects their health and education budgets because the Barnett consequentials would be more favourable. However, to do that the UK government would have to make even deeper cuts into reserved budgets like defence. The same problems face the Scottish Government if it seeks to protect health and education.

Most commentators expect this issue to dominate the politics of the next decade. Already the government is coming under pressure from the Bank of England, IMF and international credit ratings agencies to commit to sharper public spending cuts. According to Martin Wolf of the Financial Times, the next government 'will have to be tougher than Margaret Thatcher ... It is clear what this must mean: a sustained freeze on the pay bill; decentralised pay bargaining; employee contributions

to public pensions; and a pruning of benefits. It is obvious, too, that this will mean massive and painful conflict between governments and public workers'. Scotland's own neo-liberal commentators, including the authors of the CPPR report, argue that Scotland should follow the English approach of competition and water privatisation.

On the other hand, some encouragement may be taken from a MORI opinion poll conducted in April found that "on balance, more people think that a future Government should raise taxes (53 per cent) rather than reduce spending on public services (35 per cent) if it has to reduce its debts". There is also positive support for public services. A recent poll for the BBC showed 65 per cent of the GB sample, 72 per cent in Scotland, would oppose cuts in public spending. There are, broadly, three ways in which the UK government could seek to avoid making these cuts:

- **more public borrowing** - should not be discounted but there would be real doubts as to the sustainability or credibility of additional borrowing to finance current spending given the levels of public debt already reached and risk of global financial markets losing confidence in sterling or UK government bonds. There would be a stronger case for additional borrowing - or, even, direct monetary expansion - to finance capital spending. The pace of repayment could also be reviewed.
- **cuts to other spending programmes** - abandoning Trident, Eurofighter, and ID cards and could deliver savings of around £5-10bn a year. Taking PFI and other outsourced services in-house could also deliver some savings on current spending (likely to be in the low billions).
- **increased taxation** - estimates suggest an additional £10bn a year could be raised from the top 1 per cent of incomes (above £100k), a further £10bn from the rest of the top 10 per cent (between £100k and £40k), and perhaps another £10bn through a crackdown on corporate tax avoidance. More than that would probably require increases in the basic rate, NICs or consumption taxes paid by those on or above 'average' incomes (around £25k). A 'payback tax' could be proposed to claw back costs of the financial sector interventions once the banks are stabilised and moving back into profit. Even the former CBI Director, Adair Turner, now sees the merit in a Tobin Tax on bank profits.

The options for the Scottish Government are more limited because they don't have the powers to take these actions. Of course they wouldn't need to if the UK Government took the necessary steps.

Mrs Thatcher's rallying cry 'there is no alternative' is clearly back in vogue with a new generation of free market advocates. Apparently unchastened by the mess they have created and the huge bill we are all being asked to pay for their greed and economic incompetence. In their Alice in Wonderland scenario the public sector that sustained us through the crisis is the disposable villain and the bankers and their bonuses, essential to the economy. There is no doubt that the challenges facing the public finances are massive. But there are alternatives. Not palatable ones to the free market gamblers - but they now look a lot more sensible to the rest of us. ■

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for sale?

Henry McCubbin looks back at the expenses scandal and at the more important issue of Ministers for sale

There is little doubt that the anger among the electorate at the blatant profligacy of MPs with regards to their misuse of public funds for their private comforts was justified. They saw the fearsome sight of their hard earned savings crumbling under the collapse of a banking system that was supposed to be monitored, legislated and regulated by these same elected representatives. The whole episode was beyond satire. Duck houses, flat screen TVs, champagne flutes and a list of consumer wishes even beyond a John Lewis catalogue. From the manner in which it has all died down in the media, one could be lead to believe that the Augean stables had now been cleansed. But was the fiddling of expenses the worst of the wheeling and dealing going on in the Palace of Westminster.

Hardly a week passes by but I hear that our erstwhile business secretary has had a holiday encounter with some business magnate as a matter of pure coincidence. Take Mr Oleg Deripaska for instance, multi billionaire oligarch who first cropped up when Mandelson was an EU commissioner in charge of trade. Next Mandelson is onboard the wealthy Russian's yacht moored off the Rothschild family's property on Corfu. He has cropped up again on the fringes of the General Motors negotiations. In fact so prone is Mandelson to bump into the rich and powerful that it would be in the interests of the health and safety of Brown's government to fit him with a black box.

Politicians' behaviour has not always been like this. Two small examples from history illustrate this. When Keir Hardie was the member for West Ham, the Liberal section of his backers started to rebel at his insistence in fighting on behalf of the unemployed. His response was that the ILP "starts from the assumption that the worker should be as free industrially and economically as he is supposed to be politically". But, he went on, "The men who are to achieve these reforms i.e. "socialist politicians", must be under no obligation whatever to either the landlord or the capitalist, or to any party or organisation representing these interests."

It can be no accident that the next time such problems surfaced was within the Board of Trade, a forerunner department to Mandelson's business department. This case concerned the behaviour of John William Belcher MP. In 1946, he was appointed to a junior ministerial post in the government of Clement Attlee as Parliamentary Secretary to the Board of Trade. Belcher was keen to win support for the government in the business community and networked widely, coming into contact with fraudster, illegal immigrant and undischarged bankrupt, Sidney Stanley. Stanley held himself out to the business community as a "fixer" who could obtain governmental favours for a fee. He arranged gifts for Belcher including a suit, a cigarette case and holiday in Margate, alongside entertainment at various sporting events.

The enquiry concluded that Belcher had been influenced in his public conduct and the police were of the view that he could be charged though Shawcross, on behalf of Attlee, argued that prosecution would not be in the public interest so long

as he resigned. Belcher resigned. The civil service, Dalton, Key, Liversidge and others were exonerated. The tribunal led to the establishment of a Committee on Intermediaries to examine "how far persons are making a business of acting as ... intermediaries between Government Departments and the public and to report whether the activities of such persons are liable to give rise to abuses..." The first time that the nascent lobbying industry was put under parliamentary examination. Who would have believed then, that for a salary now, although more than Belcher's book of clothes coupons to get his suit, you could hire an MP like a taxi from a rank? Let us not forget that it was Brown who complained about the Tories having a revolving door between the Cabinet Room in No 10 and the board rooms of the city.

Perhaps the most blatant example of peddling influence is that of Brown's predecessor Tony Blair. In a report for Middle East online, Christopher King writes "On his resignation as premier, Anthony Blair, who marketed the war for George Bush, was immediately rewarded by the Americans with a job at the investment bank JP Morgan at a salary of GBP 2.5 million per year. This is reported to be the first of a series of posts that could gain him GBP 40 million. JP Morgan is now involved in Iraqi oil and stands to make huge profits by mortgaging future Iraqi oil production. One must ask, "Would Mr Blair have gained these rewards if he had refused to place the UK armed forces at America's disposal and market the Iraq war to the rest of the world?" All the evidence is that the objective of the war was the seizure of Iraq's oil resources and Anthony Blair's objective was money." Not only has Blair trousered this amount, the costs are still being borne by the people of Iraq and the British taxpayer as Christopher King lists,

- Over one million Iraqis killed, many more wounded
- Four to five million Iraqis made refugees, most still displaced
- Destruction of much of the country's infrastructure, still unrepaired
- Widespread destruction of housing and buildings
- 179 British soldiers killed, probably about 1500 wounded, 222 seriously
- Waste of approximately GBP 9 billion in direct costs
- Reprisal attacks and deaths in London and elsewhere, decreased UK security together with huge costs and inconvenience of security precautions
- Destruction of the United Nation's authority, loss of UK credibility, a precedent for aggressive warfare, breach of international law, thus decreased world security.

The above makes a duck house good value for money. But what about others still in receipt of public expenses and salary who have sold the privileged position gifted to them by the ordinary voters and taxpayers in the UK. When an MP like Adam Ingram or a Peer like Lord Moonie accept payment for services rendered to companies which profit from public contracts does it never

enter their heads that their remuneration from these companies comes from them charging their wages against the contract price. Where else does it come from or perhaps New Labour looks on capitalists as being latter day alchemists or charitable institutions who create and give money away like the magic tooth fairy. Certainly, according to the Scotsman this analysis applies to Jimmy Hood. They report "It is perhaps the clearest example of money for nothing. Jim Hood, the Scots Labour MP, has admitted pocketing £625 a month - in addition to his MP's salary of £64,766 - as a consultant for Scottish Coal. This adds up to a £7,500 a year boost to the income of the veteran politician, an MP since 1987 and leader of the Nottinghamshire miners during the strikes of the 1980s. But when he was asked, under new Commons rules on disclosure, how many hours he spent on the consultancy in return for the latest monthly payment, Mr Hood replied: "Nil." Can I assume he only accepts it because all of the Nottinghamshire miners are in receipt of this payment with its accompanying onerous responsibilities? I think not.

But Jimmy Hood's example is small beer compared to Ex-Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram who has faced criticism in Mail Online for cashing in with £170,000 in consultancies, including a £55,000 p.a. job from IT firm EDS, which was awarded a four billion MoD contract when Ingram was still working in the department. The MP was blasted for topping up his £63,000 salary with five posts, giving him the highest outside earnings of any Scots politician. In addition to the EDS contract each year he can rake in:

- £50,000 as non-executive chairman of communications firm SignPoint Secure Ltd
- £25,000 as director of Argus Scotland Ltd, a design and construction services company.
- £25,000 as a consultant to Argus Libya UK LLP (gins all round for Megrahi's release!), which is part of the same group, and
- £15,000 from the International School for Security and Explosives Education
- MoD contract
- Gifts, benefits and hospitality (UK) 28 June 2009, visit to Biggin Hill Air Show as guest of BSKyB. Overnight stay, dinner and entry to the show for my wife and I.
- Overseas visits 23-26 February 2009, to Bahrain, to participate in Bahrain Security Forum as speaker. Return flight, business class, and three nights accommodation in Bahrain funded by RUSI and the Kingdom of Bahrain. (Registered 3 March 2009).

And poor old Belcher got the sack for a holiday to Margate? But we cannot leave it at that for not only do ex- ministers have their snouts in the trough so too do our unelected members of the House of Lords, some of whom have recently been found out abusing the letter of the law never mind the spirit of ascetic honesty which prevailed during Attlee's leadership now with two members of the House of Lords with Labour connections being ejected for offering their services to amend legislation. I refer to Lord Truscott and Lord Taylor of Blackburn who were found guilty of offering to try to change the law in return for money.

The privileges committee decided they had broken rules which state that Lords must "always act on their personal honour", and recommended suspension until the end of the parliamentary session - around six months. Two other Labour

peers implicated in the affair, Lord Moonie and Lord Snape, were cleared of any wrongdoing but ordered to apologise to the Lords for "inappropriate" conduct. Lewis Moonie glided smoothly on well oiled rails from Parliamentary under-secretary at the Ministry of Defence, first to the House of Lords under the patronage of Gordon Brown who needed Moonie's seat due to boundary changes, then he acquired some external interests as Consultant, Sovereign Strategy; and director, Mining Technology; director, AEA Technology. According to the Lords records he became a non-parliamentary consultant acting as a Member, Advisory Board, Northrop Grumman I.T.

- Member, Advisory Council, Perseus Global
- Senior Advisor, Pharmathene Ltd
- Americium Developments, Edinburgh (£35,000-£40,000 pa)
- Non-executive Director, Partygaming Plc
- Trustee, Skillforce (October 2005)

The most recent report on the costs of running the House of Lords was £305 million in 2007-08 (the Commons was £364 million). That is about half a million pounds per member. And remember folks, since a dog is not just for Christmas a Lord is also for life even if it shits on the red benches. The sooner this scandalous waste of public money is ended the better. Membership of a second chamber must not be for life. But should the provision of expenses and accommodation to existing peers be allowed to continue?

According to the Mail online before becoming Chancellor in 2007, "Mr. Darling lodged with Lord Moonie - one of the Labour peers in the 'cash for amendments' affair - in a flat in South London. He lived there from around 2003 until January 2005, listing it as his 'main' home. This enabled him to claim a total of £45,954 on his 'second home' - the family house he bought with his wife Maggie for £570,000 in 1998. The imposing building stands in the heart of Edinburgh's most desirable area. Before 2004, all ministers had to declare London their 'main residence'. But even after this rule changed, Mr. Darling continued to list the flat share as his 'main home'. In 2004/05, he drew another £15,341 for his Scottish home."

Yet today, 28 August 2009 it has just been revealed that the Labour government has plans that would reduce housing benefit for some claimants by up to £15 a week. About 300,000 people gained from the measure introduced last year. The government says most claimants do not benefit and scrapping it would save £150m but stress it is only a proposal. Since 2008 new housing benefit claimants have been entitled to get up to £15 a week back - £780 a year - if they find accommodation at a lower rent than the level of housing allowance set by their local authority. Shouldn't we apply these rules to our MPs?

Parsimony for the poor; billions for the bankers. The poor and public sector workers are to pay for the profligacy of the occupants of the Palace of Westminster and the City of London. Yet, as of this year, most of our banks are also in the public sector. What would Keir Hardie or Clement Attlee make of all this now. Hardie certainly had Blair and Mandelson's measure when at an ILP conference in 1898 in Birmingham he said "Today they fight to extend markets. This is running the Empire on the lines of a huckster's shop, and making of our statesmen only glorified bagmen." ■

Henry McCubbin was formerly a Labour MEP

occupation or strike?

Gregor Gall examines the effectiveness of different tactics used by workers to resist redundancy

Occupation - alternatively known as a sit-in or a sit-down strike - is historically a well-known, if rather infrequently used, response of organised workers to militant employers. The Flint car workers' sit-down strike of 1936-1937 in the US is one of the best known examples of this while the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in of 1971-1972 in Scotland is another. In times of recession and restructuring, the occupation tactic is potentially a powerful tool to resist redundancy through workplace closure for reasons of providing leverage against employers than strikes cannot. Yet, the global recession of late 2007 onwards has witnessed very few examples of workers deploying this tactic - certainly far fewer than might have been expected given the depth and extent of this recession and when compared with other recent global recessions.

This article seeks to understand the paucity of frequency of this form of worker resistance in the current period by examining the conditions and characteristics of those occupations that have taken place in order to understand their social and political dynamics. Drawing on an array of media reporting, occupations were examined in Britain, Eire, France and the US. From this, a series of grounded factors is developed which can help account for action rather than inaction. The choice of countries allows both comparisons and contrasts to be made for there is a similarity in labour market regulation and union traditions in all the countries other than for France which experiences more regulation and direct action traditions of workers.

The argument is that a micro-level approach is more productive than a macro-level one which would emphasise general factors such as decline in worker consciousness, union presence and union combativity in an ungrounded and abstract way. However, because the research for this article is not based on primary research - that is direct interviews with the participants of occupations at the time of these occupations - there is a limit to how far the article can explore what is regarded as an important variable in accounting for action or inaction. This is the social psychology of the workers, by which is meant the cognitive processes by which individuals deploy ideas and interact with each other in discussion and possible pursuit of ideas. Nonetheless, the article can provide a valuable role in flagging up this aspect.

In responding to redundancies involving workplace closure - whether through divestment (like offshoring and outsourcing) or outright closure - being in control of the plant and machinery is a strong card to play. Thus, the tactic of occupation is superior to that of the strike because the strike is predicated on the resumption of work taking place after the strike. Moreover, striking has traditionally been defined as not just a withdrawal of labour at the points of production, distribution or exchange but also walking off the job - which in turn means leaving the workplace. In a situation of closure, striking puts workers on the outside of the workplace and this means putting themselves in a weaker position. Thus, striking means standing outside

the premises, and trying to stop goods, machinery, plant and so on leaving the premises. Restricted by what is lawful for picketing, and the practical difficulty of sustaining mass pickets to physically bar entrances, the employer is likely to be able to vacate the premises with their property without too much trouble. So striking allows the initiative to stay with the employer. Indeed, striking often plays straight into the employers' hands because striking is a civil breach of the employment contract. This means employers can effectively let workers sack themselves and do so without receiving any pay off.

Alternatively, the workplace occupation offers the possibility of maintaining control of the employers' assets from the inside. The leverage created revolves around seizing the assets which may include i) stocks of goods or raw materials, ii) plant and machinery, and iii) land and buildings. Again, and compared to striking and picketing, physically it is easier to prevent asset removal because the workplace can be barricaded in from the inside. Occupation allows the initiative to stay with the workers, requiring the employer to break into his or her own workplace.

So occupation can allow effective action against employers - which is preferable to ineffective action like striking as well as to accommodation and passivity. However, it should not be assumed that occupations are a silver bullet for they can raise the costs of closure and doing businesses elsewhere but not necessarily prevent this. For the latter to occur would require either state intervention or effective solidarity action from the employer's other workers elsewhere. Moreover, an additional aspect that concerns occupations is that there are a much more demanding activity than striking for they are '24/7', they involve challenges to the property rights of employers and require much more planning and organisation (cooking of food, washing facilities, entertainment and so on).

Since late 2007, the numerical roll call of occupations has been thus: Britain (7), Eire (7), France (28) and the US (1). While these are absolute numbers, it is worth bearing in mind the relative context of the size of the labour forces of each of these countries in order to give a more balanced perspective on the frequency of the occupations. Respectively, these are 31m, 2m, 28m, and 153m. An overwhelming percentage has concerned factories rather than office workplaces in public or private services. This is indicative of the greater availability of resources like machinery and stock which has a more valuable and manifestly physical nature and lends itself more to capture than information and data which is not necessarily physically embedded in a single workplace.

We can presuppose that the foundations for occupation are aspects of consciousness, primarily, anger and organisation. Anger at being at the end of the line with nowhere to go and wanting to do something about this: social organisation allowing something collectively to be done about this. This contrasts with other facets of worker consciousness such as a fatalism and resignation that nothing can be done, and that the workers themselves have no power of remedy (even with social

organisation). But this is insufficient to explain action compared to inaction. To flesh out the issues, the main characteristics of the stimulus to the occupations to date are recounted. These are i) total redundancy of all workers and closure rather than downsizing of part of workforce; ii) timing of closure announcement: immediate notice of immediate redundancy and closure; iii) no severance pay and loss of pension rights as a result of bankruptcy (genuine or otherwise); iv) unionised workforces; and v) previous high profile examples of occupation in recent times

Taking these in turn, the fully collectivised nature of the redundancy helps create a critical mass while the immediacy of redundancy provides for no period of consultation or dialogue with the employer and, thus, a greater shock to the system. This grave sense of procedural injustice is heightened by the substantial justice of no compensation and loss of deferred wages.

But even this first attempt to grapple with providing an explanation for action provides only limited illumination. First, not all the occupations had all these features. The only common one to all was the first. Indeed, in a number of cases workers became unionised in the process of an occupation so that social organisation preceded unionisation. And, second, there were many cases where all the features were present but no occupation was engaged in. This suggests that other factors, and assessments thereof, were at play. But before proceeding to this, it is worth noting that where occupation in both absolute and relative has been sparser - the US - the absence of any preceding occupations may help account for this. By contrast, in the other countries the precedent of occupation in the last five or so years has existed.

In this regard, key material factors for workers are, thus, the labour market situation and terms of redundancy. Some workers will believe that they have better or worse chances of finding other, alternative employment (at whatever level of pay) depending on the state of the local labour market and the technical and social skills they possess. However, it is not as simple as saying that workers with no sense of alternative employment are more likely to think of occupation than those that do for other factors have a bearing. Nonetheless, it can be ventured that this sense of no alternative employment is a necessary - without being sufficient - factor. That said, the terms of redundancy have an important bearing on this calculation for payoffs of certain sizes can blunt or delay the impact of redundancy. Some workers will calculate they have enough to ride out the hard times. But again, there are still cases where reasonable redundancy terms have not provided a bulwark against occupation.

In terms of explaining the predominance of France in the country rank ordering, the direct action traditions of unions and workers of here must be accorded a high significance. And this is despite a very low level of unionisation which is on a par (9 per cent in 2008) with that in the US (of 12.3 per cent in 2008). But one factor which can be dismissed relatively easily in the case of the US is the demonstration effect of other occupations. This is not so in the case of France, where the high media profile given to occupations in France, particularly where 'bossnapping' has

been involved, is likely to have led to the tactic becoming part of workers' lexicon there (especially as victories have been gained). Neither can the demonstration effect be easily dismissed in Britain and Eire, for in a couple of cases in each, occupation by workers in one workplace led to occupations by fellow workers at another site of the same company.

When it comes to the outcomes of occupations, very few have won outright victories in as much as neither all workers' jobs were saved nor were substantial numbers of their jobs saved (or redeployment offered). Nonetheless, the leverage that has been created - along with the ensuing sensitivity to reputation - has facilitated redundancy payments or enhancements of these, lawful periods of notice of redundancy, extension of period leading to shutdown and the guarantee of pension entitlements. This has not varied a great in relation to the proportion of the workforce involved in the occupations, their duration or the extent of solidarity support raised for the occupiers. However, this does appear to have been more productive than the use of striking in comparable situations.

... the workplace occupation offers the possibility of maintaining control of the employers' assets from the inside.

The article has sought to provide a grounded explanation of workplace occupation when faced with redundancy and closure. In doing so, it has gone beyond the ultra-left tendency of exhorting 'Such and such workers have occupied their workplace - you should do it too, you can do it too'. This approach is mistaken because it fails to appreciate the complexity of social processes involving worker agency as well as the material foundations of concrete circumstances. This complexity relates to workers' assessments of their situation and their expectations about whether occupation will bring useful leverage in terms of a cost/benefit calculation.

However, this article has not been able to delve into the important area of the way in which workers' consciousness works. For example, in the case of the Visteon occupations in Britain in early 2009, it was not just the six minutes notice of immediate redundancy with loss of pension entitlements and no redundancy pay while the employer's other businesses remained in profitable operation that led to the occupation. This is apparent because the Belfast Visteon workers responded by immediate occupation whereas the Enfield and Basildon Visteon workers left their workplaces and adjourned to the pub to discuss their fate. Clearly what is then needed is research through interviewing the respective groups of workers in order to investigate why three groups of the same workforce reacted in quite different ways. Lines of investigation would concentrate on the role of the shop stewards/union representatives and the nature of the workplace unionism within the setting of the three local areas. This is the kind of work that politically engaged sociologists need to conduct to be of good service to the labour movement. Without this level of detailed understanding, it will remain the case that the tactic of occupation will not become sufficiently widespread and powerful as to be able to force employers to recalculate the costs and benefits facing them down. ■

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back to the '80s?

The Scots need to take a critical look at the high cost of staying in the Union argues Donald Adamson

Shortly before his death in 2003 the English political journalist, Hugo Young, wrote an article in his Guardian column about the relationship between Scotland and England. From his vantage point as gentle critic of the high politics of the British state, Young informed his readers that, "Scotland is too important to leave to the Scots". For nationalists in Scotland, Young's argument is, of course, anathema. But one of the questions to which Young's reasoning demands an answer is: are there any other countries in the world which are too important to be left to their own people? Writing from a very different tradition to the parochial British perspective of Young, Rosa Luxemburg provided a partial and orthodox Marxist answer to this question. Justifying her belief that, historically, smaller nations would inevitably be integrated into larger ones, in her 1908 article 'The nationality question and autonomy' she wrote: "Can one speak seriously of 'self-determination' for the Montenegrins, Bulgars, Romanians, Serbs and Greeks, or even to any real extent of the Swiss?"

Actual history will always trump theoretical history. Moreover, to borrow Young's terminology, if Serbia is not to be left to the Serbs, Greece to the Greeks, Switzerland to the Swiss, or Scotland to the Scots, then to whom should they be left? Marxists have never quite satisfactorily resolved their problems with nationalism, less so with nationalISM - opposition to this latter is, rightly, a badge of honour. In their attempts to explain or, more often than not, elide Marx and Lenin's own belief that the workers of each nation must take care of their own capitalists first, 'internationalism' has proved a useful default position. The distinctly non-Marxist mainstream Labourist left in Scotland has found it expedient to draw on this internationalist rhetoric in its opposition to Scottish independence. One of the many ironies of this in recent decades is that, while adopting this internationalist rhetoric it has, at the same time, argued for Scotland's continued membership of a British state which, for over 20 years now, has made it illegal for workers in one sector in Glasgow to express meaningful solidarity with workers in another sector in Dundee!

Here we are then, thirty years after Mrs. Thatcher first came to power, anticipating yet another lost decade (or more) of Conservative government in Scotland. There are, of course, important differences between the present and the period since 1979. In previous decades the Labourist left in Scotland could maintain the charade that, if only Scots could exercise enough patience, sooner or later a Labour government would be returned at Westminster to shift the balance of power back towards workers. Today, no one in Scotland can seriously believe that. In England, Old Labour is dead and so, too, is New Labour. What remains is zombie Labour, seemingly destined to stalk England's political landscape hunting for its lost constituency. But unlike New Labour after 1994, zombie Labour is not going to be rescued by disaffected Tory voters in middle England. As Heraclitus famously said, you can't step in the same river twice. And if the Scots should make the mistake of remaining in the union after 2010 then the question has to be asked - at least of

non-Tory voters in Scotland - what exactly will they be waiting for this time?

It is encouraging to have a Scottish government that is, among other things, opposed to Trident, intent on distancing Scotland from British military adventurism and its nefarious foreign policy, opposed to PFI and council house sales. But these and the SNPs other policies, whilst not exactly background noise, hardly constitute the basis of transformative social democracy. Devolution, though, has locked in the dysfunctional governance of Scotland. Like the Calman Commission's grudging concessions to limited fiscal powers, devolution itself is based on the time-honoured constitutional traditions of English Burkean conservatism (change in order to conserve). But what both Calman and devolution also demonstrate is that the purpose of Britishness in Scotland today has been hollowed out into the solitary objective - to keep the show on the road.

If the winter of discontent was a gift from the political gods to Mrs. Thatcher in 1979, so the present financial crisis is a gift from the equally beneficent gods to David Cameron's Tories today. The crisis means that the sterile, and for Scotland largely irrelevant, British political debate continues unabated, the incompetent Tory pot can call the mismanaging Labour kettle black. The crisis also means that the Tories have mercifully been spared the difficult task of justifying the policies that they would have pursued anyway had the crisis not occurred. The assault on 'big' government and huge reductions in public spending were only a matter of time. Unless, that is, you are the kind of person who buys into the platitudes of Cameron's "compassionate Conservatism". Not quite as euphonic as St Francis of Assisi it's true but, for Scotland, the net effect will be similar. But Scotland may be about to return to the 1980s in other ways. For example, an under-reported fact about the 1983 and 1987 British general elections, is that even if every eligible voter in Scotland (with a 100% turnout) had voted Labour, it would have made no difference, the Scots would still have been governed by the Conservatives from 1983-92. A Tory landslide in England in 2010 is, at least, a realistic possibility.

If disenfranchisement, dysfunctional governance and the prospect of another lost decade were Scotland's only concerns after 2010, the need to avert all of these would, by themselves, justify Scottish independence. But there is something more serious, more deeply embedded than any of these to make the case for independence compelling - Scotland's chronic economic underperformance in the union. There is nothing new in this of course. It was Adam Smith who, in Book One of the Wealth of Nations, stated that: "The wages of labour...are lower in Scotland than in England. The country too is not only much poorer, but the steps by which it advances to a better condition... seem to be much slower and more tardy". It says much about 300 years of union that Smith's words should be so wearily familiar to Scots in the twenty-first century.

Throughout the post-war period, Old Labour, New Labour as well as the 'official' Conservative British governments have

mismanaged Scotland's economy. Many on the left are turning to Keynes - curious how, for so many on the left, Keynes's contemporary, Michal Kalecki, never merits even a passing reference. It was Keynes's biographer, Robert Skidelsky, writing of the malfunctioning post-war British economy, who made the astute observation that, "fiscal fine-tuning and the stop-go cycle were England's unique contribution to Keynesianism". Plus ça change! England has never quite got the hang of coordinating fiscal and monetary policy, although sterling's (flattering) role as Bretton Woods's second reserve currency up to 1972 did exonerate some of the mismanagement that occurred up to this period. In reality (that is, from the perspective of the US Treasury), in Bretton Woods, sterling was the dollar's first line of defence. But Skidelsky's point is right up there with the prescient observation of General de Gaulle in 1963 that "England is America's Trojan horse in Europe". De Gaulle was referring to defence and foreign policy, but today we can add to these the toxic effect in Europe of the diffusion of Anglo-American neo-liberalism since the 1980s - the unfortunate offspring of what Joan Robinson called the "bastard Keynesians" - underlining further the perverse temerity of England's 'Euroscepticism'.

With a Tory prime minister at Westminster and a Tory mayor in London, the Conservatives' priority will be to restore the fortunes of the City of London, the engine of growth of England's economy. In truth, in the highly unlikely event of a Labour victory in 2010 this would be its priority too - early on in his tenure as chancellor, Gordon Brown understood that he needed the City more than the City needed him. And should Scotland remain in the union after 2010, the roller coaster ride that the pernicious Treasury-City-Bank of England nexus has taken Scotland's helpless economy in the last thirty years will continue. If after 2010 the Scots want a return to business as usual the union will deliver.

One of the assumptions that inform projections about Scotland's economy after independence is that they are based on static comparative advantage. They assume that Scotland's economy after independence would be subject to the same constraints that limit Scotland in the union. If, more plausibly, projections were based on dynamic comparative advantage, there is a great deal to be optimistic about. An independent Scotland would not need to embark on a dash for growth, though it would need to improve on its dismal economic performance in the union. Independence is a necessary but not sufficient condition for this. If we take nothing else from Keynes it should be his insistence on the critical importance of investment, to this we can add research and development. Indeed, should the electorate of Scotland have a Damascene conversion to an environmentally sustainable independent Scottish workers' republic, investment, research and development would still be the key to Scotland's future. Short of that, an independent Scotland will need to stimulate (and attract) investment, research and development funds. Realistically, that means that Scotland will need to re-connect with Europe. It is remarkable that, after 35 years EU membership, Scotland is less well connected to Europe than countries which have only joined the EU in the last four years. As for England, Europe has long taken the Lyndon Johnson

approach - better to have England inside the EU tent pissing out than outside the EU tent pissing in. But England will never commit itself to Europe, the psychology of red-lineism is in its cultural genes.

With independence, a Scottish National Investment Bank could be established to coordinate investment, research and development across the Scottish regions with the capacity to raise funds in open markets. Equally important, independence would shift the debate on twenty-first century governance in Scotland away from the tired British debate on devolution for Scotland to a more dynamic debate on devolution within Scotland, with the objective of enabling the different regions

of Scotland to develop and flourish. If transformative social democracy is to mean anything it must mean that an independent Scotland makes the twenty-first century the century of equality. Thatcher's anti-trade union legislation should have no place in an independent Scotland. Similarly, collective bargaining could beneficially be re-constituted, collective bargaining tends to function more effectively in smaller countries but its most significant advantage is that it reduces wage dispersion. The rotting edifice of New Labour's tax credit system should also be abandoned after

independence and replaced with a basic income scheme, guaranteeing all Scottish citizens a minimum income and dignity whether in or out of employment.

Since the 1970s the Scots have allowed the benefits of North Sea oil to be squandered. It would be unforgivable if the present generation of Scots allowed the same thing to happen to energy renewables which could, realistically, be the engine of growth in an independent Scotland. If combined with other enlightened policies, for example, nationalisation of the railways, a liveable minimum wage, a radical recalibration of the rewards for 'success', investment in affordable housing and the reversal of the distortionary impact of house price inflation with a package of property and inheritance taxes, Scotland could not only anticipate a sustainable future but trigger the momentum for an enduring and transformative social democracy. Alternatively, in 2010 Scots can jump back on the British roller coaster, part of a British state about to lurch even further to the right where the ugly face of British nationalism will never be far from the surface.

A sea-change has occurred in Scotland since the 1970s. For over three decades, unionist parties have successfully nurtured fear in Scotland about the consequences of independence. What is clear today is that, all along, what the Scots should have been most fearful of were the consequences of remaining in the union. If we have learned nothing else in the last 40 years we have surely learned that. ■

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Halls. Organisations had been asked to submit resolutions under the following headings:- Health and Community Care : Pensioners Incomes : Housing : Transport: Participation in Decision Making. The sponsors composited all resolutions under the above headings. Many delegates expressed anger at what was regarded as betrayal by the Conservatives over the preceding 12 years. Pensions generated the most vehement discussion. Housing and Transport saw motions passed calling for appropriate housing and privatisation of transport was deplored. Delegates were united in the goal of a more active part in the decision making process, in particular those decisions directly affecting their welfare and well-being. Typical of the sentiments expressed was that we were treated as second class citizens. The Scottish TUC delegates were vehement in their complaint that for the past seventeen years we have been punched and kicked all over the place and so we must get a Scottish Parliament with representation within that Parliament to ensure that our needs are heard and met. The final resolution on decision making was carried unanimously without discussion - "That this Scottish Pensioners Congress calls on the Congress sponsors to convene a seminar to establish the way in which we seek to participate in decision making". Unfortunately such a seminar was never convened.

Perhaps too many thought that a New Labour Government would treat us in a proper manner, especially when in 1997 a pamphlet was published under the names of Tony Blair, John Prescott, Harriet Harman and Gordon Brown entitled "The Tories have betrayed pensioners". This document stated that too many of today's older people do not enjoy security in their retirement. It made the following claims and commitments. The combination of low incomes and the extra Tory costs they face for essentials leaves many struggling. Having paid tax all of their working lives, a whole generation finds that it cannot be sure of the National Health Service. Millions of people face poverty in retirement, pensioners have lost £20 per week due to the breaking of the earnings link. It claimed that Labour had always done its duty by pensioners and that the next Labour Government would do the same. We will act to tackle the lottery of community care, they said. Labour will put pensioners voices at the heart of government and will encourage the development of pensioners' councils and forums so that pensioners' voices can be at the heart of decision making in local authorities as well as central government. We will include pensioners' organisations in this process, in particular the National Pensioners Convention, the largest co-coordinating body for representative pensioners organisations. Needless to say the reality was different and New Labour has followed slavishly in the Tories' footsteps.

Consultation amounted to the setting up of an organisation with the grandiose title of Better Government for Older People. Pilot projects were set up in three Scottish council areas and similar pilots were set up in the rest of the UK. Discussions were held throughout Great Britain where many recommendations were made including one specifically referring to Scotland stating "That there be established bodies of older people to deal directly with the Scottish Executive and Parliament - that the programme of modernising and improving government for older people becomes as essential to the political life of the country as the provision of education and the health service "

The whole business concluded with the group making recommendations to the government as follows: "The development of a recognised, funded , permanent structure for the participation and representation of older people in policy making at UK, National, Regional and Local levels and

the continuation and expansion of the network. In addition members called upon the Government to address the following matters which are inextricably linked to the aims of the BGOP programme. 1) Pensions should be related to earnings to enable a decent standard of living. 2) The recommendations of the Royal Commission on long term care should be implemented. 3) Transport should be available which is affordable accessible, reliable and safe.4) Age discrimination legislation should be passed in line with human rights and advice and advocacy services should be readily available to older people. Needless to say, the whole sorry business was allowed to wither away, its only legacy is a collection of officials with the title of Older People Advisory Group. The real solution in Scotland has to be similar to that of our more civilised Irish and Scandinavian neighbours."

When the Scottish Parliament was first set up, a representative group of pensioners asked to meet with the First Minister, Donald Dewar, but we were fobbed off with feeble excuses. When Henry McLeish became First Minister, he met with a group of pensioners' representatives from throughout Scotland and discussed with us how the Parliament could engage with older people. Consequently he implemented the findings of the Royal Commission on the Care of the Elderly. He was promptly politically assassinated by Tony Blair. Scottish pensioners were reliably informed that Mr.Blair had "pigeon-holed the report". Prior to being unfairly dismissed, Henry McLeish had requested pensioners to submit proposals for a Consultative Body. Shortly thereafter the Scottish Executive established an Older People's Unit comprising three or four Civil Servants and this group still exists. At the same time a small group was set up comprising officials from various organisations plus a few invited pensioners with the title of Older People's Consultation Group. Its main function appears to be listening to official proposals. I was an initial member of this body and I proposed that we should set up a Pensioners Parliament similar to that in the Irish Republic. The then Minister appeared to be enthusiastic but he was promptly replaced by another individual who informed us that our purpose was merely to comment on Executive proposals.

On the pensions front, pensioners throughout Great Britain are fortunate to have the support of the National Pensioners Convention who annually present the case for proper pensions for all to the British Government, backing the case up with thoroughly researched facts. This has no effect on the present Government who are only concerned with their own pensions. There is a Scottish section of N.P.C. Unfortunately the pseudo Labour administration in Scotland ignored N.P.C. and were supported by the Scottish T.U.C. who accused those of us who support N.P.C. of bringing in the English. We hope to see the setting up of a Scottish Pensioners Convention later this year. The Blairites prefer to listen to the C.B.I. on the matter of pensions.

Fortunately the present Scottish Government has met with a group of pensioners from the Scottish Seniors Alliance to discuss the possibility of setting up a Scottish Pensioners' Parliament. This has produced a reaction from a body set up by New Labour under the direction of a former Blair advisor. The intention is that this body, to be known as AGE, will have the sole right to consult with government at national and local level. Many pensioners see this in keeping with the New Labour policy of controlling what we do and what we say. The present schemozzle being conducted at Westminster should be a warning to us all of the dangers of totalitarianism. ■

Lou Howson is 85 and has been a pensioner activist since 1992. He was a Labour Party activist between 1939 and 1999

religion is hell

Stephen Bowman criticises the continuing divisive role of religion in Scotland

There's nothing more human than religion: nothing more symptomatic of this creative, inquisitive little species. It encapsulates humanity's capacity to learn, ask questions and to improve itself. I can't think of anything else that better wraps into one its insecurities, its ability to love and its desire for peace. Nor can I think of anything that's more accomplished at motivating hatred, starting wars and generally breeding intolerance. All very human indeed, and like much of what we've created (the Conservative Party and hedge fund managers being but two examples) religion talks a load of guff and has done a good job of screwing up the world. Love thy neighbour and all that. So long as thy neighbour attends the right school, is of the right denomination and has sex with the right people. If they don't, they can all burn in hell! And that's just the Christians.

It would seem, then, that the fiery depths will be particularly busy. Heathens are a diverse demographic and although, despite what one of our councillors said on radio recently, I'm quite sure it isn't SNP policy to resign them to eternal damnation, there are perhaps a little too many people who would. To oversimplify things, maybe, we still live in a world of religious crusade and martyrdom. Global conflict and terrorism hide under a thin veneer of politics and culture but, as a friend of mine said, it's just oil and religion. Nevertheless, as the fundamentalists rightly worry, more and more people are growing slightly sceptical about the existence of omnipotent, all knowing ghosts and we are witnessing the creeping secularisation of society. People like the purposefully controversial Richard Dawkins have given atheism a profile and I do feel that to not believe has become less unacceptable than it could be.

A good time then, perhaps, to question what place religion has in society and how it can and should fit into a peaceful future. To do this, it may be best to focus our attention on the ever complicated situation in Scotland. Certainly there is enough religious conflict and mutual dislike on our own doorstep to keep us amused and it is this that I'd like to focus on. When I get otherwise reasonable and intelligent people telling me they would never marry a non-Catholic because they 'just couldn't' or that 'Catholics are as bad as atheists', I do worry. And I really get the heebie-jeebies whenever someone talks about Catholic and Protestant schools. I'm not a Catholic so I must be a Protestant. Is that how it works? But what branch of Protestantism do I follow? It must be the atheist one. We do live in a Christian country after all.

Of course, that so many people are so simplistic in their outlook is a real problem. Indeed, perhaps it is the main problem and, in

the West of Scotland at any rate, faith schools are at the very root of this. Leaving aside the history, if only we could, what purpose do faith schools serve in the present day? It seems to me that they do a fairly competent job at perpetuating segregation. It may not be their intention, or their universal product, but I can't see how a school system that separates children on the basis of their parent's belief can fail to do so, at least on occasion. It certainly institutionalises religious division with a nervous state sponsored legitimacy. The fact that politicians of every creed are not all that keen on debating the issue of faith schools goes some way to demonstrate the hold religion has on society.

I did take some solace recently, however, from the news that Glasgow City Council is questioning the value for money in letting so many Orange marches congest the city's streets. Tax payer's cash could indeed be put to better use than covering the cost of parades that bring with them a poisonous mixture of bigotry, imagined history and religious identity. And it is this religious identity that to complete the circle can be found all the way to the gates of Buckingham Palace and the 'Defender of the Faith' herself. What greater endorsement than a head of state? An individual crowned on the notion that Roman Catholics

are bad does not really send out the right signals. That is why I think there needs to be a complete separation of organised religion from the workings of the state. If, somehow, one lot of people can identify more than others with the institutions that govern a nation, you're on to a problem be it through the perceived Protestantism of the British State that alienates Roman Catholics or, by insisting on being a Christian country, at risk of disenfranchising Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists and everything else in between.

Such a conflict can perhaps be seen in the debate currently raging in Scotland over the issue of assisted suicide. This follows on from Margo MacDonald's

consultation and proposed Member's Bill in the Scottish Parliament and is something I've come to feel particularly strongly about. My grandmother who, as Margo does, suffered from Parkinson's disease was assisted in her suicide by my grandfather. This was something not openly discussed due to the risk of prosecution until after my grandfather himself died and it is pleasing that now it can be brought up in the context of trying to change the law. Whilst there are numerous reasons why people may argue against legalising assisted suicide, it may not surprise you to learn that it is the religious argument that I found most deplorable.

Tax payer's cash could indeed be put to better use than covering the cost of parades that bring with them a poisonous mixture of bigotry, imagined history and religious identity.

Typically this comes in the form of insisting that it is immoral to take a life that was given by god and how, by extension, it is not your life to take. Without going into the finer points of the assisted suicide debate, religion, needless to say, does not have a monopoly on morality and if I don't believe in your god, his god, her god or whoever's god, then you are in no position to tell me what I can or can't do on the basis of your own superstitious belief. Yet, there exists the expectation across society that people of faith do indeed have a greater insight as to what is right or wrong. Understandable, of course, when you consider the great religions of the world have spent the past few thousand years espousing this very message. Yawn.

This is something I know the Humanist Society has taken exception to and has challenged the BBC in its stubbornness to use only priests, rabbis and the like in the 'Thought for the Day' slot. Good for them. Certainly I have various thoughts every day and one or two of them might be of use to someone were I given the chance to broadcast them on the early morning radio waves. I said at the top of the article that religion is a very human creation and I stand by that. Some of what I've written may lead you to the conclusion that I haven't got much time for religion, and you'd be right. But in spite of my foregoing ranting and broad, unsubstantiated swipes at the godly I would like to move the goalposts slightly.

My gripe is really with the dogma so commonly associated with organised religion and, as much as I find the idea of religious faith irrational and unreasonable, it does elicit an attraction. It is

the reason behind this attraction that makes religion so human. It provides a way of dealing with death. Granted, a nonsensical and impossible way, but a way nonetheless. Through belief in an incorruptible higher being and the promise of everlasting life, people are able to reconcile their insignificance and brevity on Earth with their day to day existence.

I don't want to think about dying. I don't like that I and everyone I hold dear are only temporary. It makes me uncomfortable to think of it all coming to an end and there being nothing. This is where religion can come in. Such a consideration will have some people reaching for their Bible or Koran, and good luck to them. I mean that. As the old saying goes, we can only act according to our own lights and if that directs you to the gods please feel free. But on the few occasions when I've been obliged to attend a church service, I've left only with a sense of the desperate futility in the whole exercise. Put simply, there is nobody going to answer those well meant and genuine prayers.

Let's be honest, there is no god. Or, if we can't be honest, let's be assumptive. Let's assume there's no god. That way we might all get along a bit better. If everyone can't make that assumption, and I'm sure everyone can't, let's all agree to disagree and say nothing more about it. ■

Stephen Bowman



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Reviews

Clear Red Water: Welsh Devolution and Socialist Politics by Nick Davis and Darren Williams, Housemans, 2009, £7.99

The maverick Labour MP Paul Flynn has been around Welsh politics since being elected as a councillor in the early 1970's. In his foreword, he describes "Clear Red Water" as a "delight", yet admits to being shamed by the extent to which this polemic on Welsh devolution and socialist politics has exposed his own lack of awareness about the real achievements of the Welsh Assembly and Government since 1999.

His ignorance will be multiplied many times over from the perspective of most Scottish readers. We may be familiar with Welsh politicians like Lloyd George, Nye Bevan and Neil Kinnock who, for better or worse, have all made an impact on the British political stage. But the politics of Wales itself remain a mystery to most of us. "Clear Red Water" reminds us of the high cost of our own ignorance.

Scotland's arguments over home rule have been dominated by the mainstream parties fighting with each other over Royal Commissions, Scotland's oil, funding formulas, slippery slopes, economic and taxation powers and referendums. Yet, not one of them has focussed on the role of self government in building a socialist alternative to the free market policies that all of them share across their nationalist – unionist divide.

Nick Davies and Darren Williams' case for devolution as the road to a democratic and socialist Wales is therefore both a timely and welcome breath of fresh air compared to the stale constitutional stand-off between Scotland's main nationalist and unionist parties. Where Salmond and Gray argue over the relative merits of independence and devolution as the means of saving Scottish capitalism, Davis and Williams insist that the real significance of self government is the opportunity it presents to build a specifically Welsh socialist project.

The authors are members of Welsh Labour Grassroots (WLG), a centre-left activists' network set up five years ago to win the Welsh Labour party back from New Labour. Describing themselves as "friends of the Welsh Labour leadership" but "irreconcilable opponents" of the New Labour project, the network supports greater devolution for Wales and democratic reform of the Welsh Labour party.

Described in these terms, WLG can hardly claim to be a specifically socialist project and the authors are quick to acknowledge many of the views expressed in the book as "primarily" their own and not "necessarily" those of the network. It appears that the first rule of working for change inside today's Labour party is to remember that too much socialism can frighten off a membership used to its party profiting electorally from distancing itself from any taint of socialism.

Yet, socialists with an interest in the national question will find this an entertaining and illuminating read. The title refers to a speech made in Swansea by Rhodri Morgan, the Welsh First Minister, six months before the Assembly elections of 2003. In the speech he set out the "clear red water" that divided Welsh Labour from Westminster Labour and, with that phrase,

provided the accepted shorthand for a distinctive political agenda for devolved Wales. "Unashamedly" a socialist, Morgan argued that the Welsh party preferred the "powerful glue of social solidarity" to the limits of Westminster's market-based policies.

Where New Labour targeted the poor with the means test, Welsh Labour put its faith in universal free public services. Where Westminster government opened up public services to market forces, Welsh government renounced PFI's and foundation hospitals and schools. Where Mandelson moralised about the values of free markets and equality of opportunity, Morgan preached the socialist doctrine of government as a force for good guaranteeing equality of outcome and social justice.

However, the authors are also candid about the severe limits of Welsh devolution with its lack of legislative competence or "primary powers". An All Wales Convention paving the way towards greater democratic devolution is central to their proposals. Unsurprisingly, the idea of transferring political power from London to Cardiff has been met with relentless hostility from Peter Hain and the majority of Welsh Labour MPs at Westminster whom the authors variously and entertainingly dismiss as "devolution sceptics" or "drag anchors on devolution".

They are equally scathing on their party's bureaucrats dismissed as the "New Labour bunker and its Cardiff satellite". The botched attempt by the bunker, backed by the leadership of the big British unions, to impose the Blairite Alun Michael as Labour leader in the Assembly is denounced as bringing the party in Wales into disrepute and demoralising and embittering its membership. The way forward for progressive politics they conclude is to ensure that those policies are made in Wales.

Given the current row over Diageo's threat to sack hundreds of workers in Kilmarnock, Scottish readers will be particularly interested in the authors take on how governments should stand up to multinationals threatening to downsize or disinvest. Debunking the neoliberal argument that governments are powerless in the face of globalisation, they slate governments like Blair and Brown's New Labour administrations for taking political decisions that created economic environments in which corporate tyranny has flourished. Different decisions would have created a different environment in which public ownership becomes a logical and feasible choice. In democracies, they argue, people should control capital, rather than the other way around.

The authors also defend the current One Wales coalition agreement between Labour and Plaid Cymru against the attacks of Labour party patriots who denounce any dealing with the nationalist enemy and argue for "my party right or wrong". They are generous in their assessment of Plaid Cymru as a progressive party with a strong socialist wing, a description that few neutral observers would apply to the Labour party. They also welcome the Greens as a natural partner in the broad cross-party alliance that they identify as necessary for delivering progressive change in Wales.

However, their Labourist understanding of the wider socialist Left leaves much to be desired. Socialists in Left parties are summarily dismissed as lacking popular support and as being delusional about their "vanguard" role. Their place in the authors' progressive alliance is made conditional on their acceptance of the leadership role of those on the centre left who can "command mass support". The cynic might remind the authors that self-proclaimed centre left leaders such as Blair and Brown used their command of mass support as justification for their ditching of socialist principles.

"Clear Red Water", however, provides both a succinct account of Welsh devolution and argues the case for reuniting the historic traditions of self-government and socialism as the basis for building a more progressive and equal country. It is written from the perspective of Labour Party activists who have resisted the New Labour revolution and who want their party back. Therein is its major weakness. Back to the future never has and never will deliver socialist change. But with the prospect of referendums looming in Scotland and Wales sometime in 2011, this remains a good and worthwhile read for socialists in both countries. ■

John McAllion

FEELBAD BRITAIN: Pat Devine, Andrew Pearmain and David Purdy (eds), Lawrence & Wishart, 2009, £14.99

"A project in search of a party" might be the best summary of this essay collection. It covers familiar aspirations on the left/green spectrum but stumbles on the problematic question of how they can be delivered.

Feelbad Britain could more accurately be titled Feelbad England. Some of the contributions are explicitly about developments in English education and health services but even in the more general analysis of what happened to the left over the past forty years, the experience of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland receives only passing reference. This is not just a grrn; the intellectual perspective of the authors is Gramscian and exploring the differences in political culture within the UK and the extent to which this has produced different socio-economic outcomes should have been a core not a peripheral question. There are clearly differences in political culture. The response to Thatcherism by both the middle and working class in Scotland was different from much of England. The political use of the national dimension in England, Scotland and Wales and the communal dimension in Northern Ireland has provided very relevant material on how differing ideologies have promoted change. How significant these changes have been is a valid area for debate that has significance well beyond the devolved areas.

The principal theme in the book is well-developed but familiar. The editors start with a critique of the left in the 1970s for its failure to develop a vision beyond militant labourism with:

"its ambivalent attitude to democracy, its workerism, its economism and its failure to appreciate the role of moral and intellectual leadership..."

They then turn to the contemporary scene where many in the Labour Party were seduced by the market ideology promoted by the radical right:

"Three decades of neo-liberalism, extended by New Labour into the heart of the welfare state, have undermined the institutions and social relations on which solidarity, trust and citizenship depend...."

They identify a disconnection between the old left and younger environmental, human rights, poverty and anti-war campaigners with the result that there is a younger generation interested in radical causes but somewhere between hostile and apathetic to party politics. The problem is that while the analysis of the failures of the left in the past, the current ills produced by hyper-capitalism and the proposals for change would be widely supported by many on the left, the process for delivering change is not convincingly debated. The policy agenda developed by the various contributors is for a sustainable, post-capitalist world with a Citizen's Income, ethical food chains, social ownership with 'negotiated control', greening of energy supplies, genuine local planning with transition towns, and democratisation of Westminster with PR, reduced Prime Ministerial control and devolved city region powers in England. Of course it is important to have an idealistic wish-list to stimulate appetite for radical political change but this is not enough. People need to feel some confidence that there is a route to take us from where we are now to that radically reformed future.

Had Andrew Pearmain's chapter on Gramsci been used as the starting point of the book with the explicit purpose of focussing the contributions on the processes of change, it could have been a more useful collection. As it is, there are differences in the suggested strategies for taking forward the left/green programme and these differences are not debated. In an otherwise informed analysis, Noel Castree asserts that "a new political party should be created without delay" and "it would have to ensure that revolutionary, khaki-wearing, militant types remain firmly on the outside". Where has he been? Not only has the Green Party struggled for thirty years to gain a very small toehold in European and local elections (but not at Westminster) and, in England, Respect has been torn apart in a very short time but in Scotland where it looked as if the Scottish Socialist Party had built itself a credible electoral presence, it also has been almost destroyed by bitter personality disputes. Even without the abysmal record of infighting in left groups, the chances of any electoral gains at Westminster for smaller parties is slight without electoral reform. David Purdy, on the other hand, suggests that the intention of the book is to be "the first of a series of publications/activities leading to a permanent institutionalised presence and links with political parties". How would this differ from the role that Democratic Left has tried to develop over the past two decades? How would it differ from The New Economics Foundation or Compass? Given the very different political situations in England, Wales and Scotland, is there sufficient common ground for action? These are the kind of questions that should have been at the core of the book. ■

Isobel Lindsay

web review

Henry McCubbin

The Odd Job Parliamentarians

If you want to find more from the sources for the article on MP's pursuing outside employment on their constituents time the following should help. On the doors opening for Libian opportunities try the factbox at <http://www.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUKL570922620080905> here you will find a comprehensive list.

Background on Adam Ingram is best at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article5992951.ece> and that for Tony Blair at <http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/?id=32824>

Maenwhile an extended list of others profiting from external

appointments is available at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article3423486.ece>.

It has to be remembered that 22 Labour ministers are members of the unelected second chamber with this level of attachment to the House of Lords don't hold your breath for meaningful reform of the other place. ■

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Kick Up The Tabloids

JOHN SMEATON IN AL-MEGRAHI 'NEAR MISS'

Before the onset of winter, with its depressing short days and long nights, before the depressing realisation set in that 2010 would see yet another World Cup without Scotland, we all let our hair down with a festival or two. Edinburgh, in particular, welcomed visitors from throughout the Globe throughout August, and this year put on a most spectacular show for the tourists. By digging up all the streets, and have bags of shite piled high on the pavements. It does seem a strange set of priorities to be proud to host the World's biggest festival and to be planning a rapid-transit system for the 21st Century but to refuse to pay your binmen a living wage.

This year also saw the promotion of a number of events as part of Homecoming 2009, a year-long festival aiming to tempt ex-pats back to Scotland. So they gave us the Gathering of the Clans, the World's Biggest-Ever Highland Games and the World Pipe Band Championships. In other words, all the pish people left Scotland to get away from in the first place. The main purpose behind Homecoming was to get rich Americans to come over here and spend their cash. So Kenny McAskill decided to join in the spirit of the whole thing, by releasing the Lockerbie Bomber. It was pretty obvious that when al-Megrahi was led on to his plane at Glasgow Airport that John Smeaton wasn't at work that day.

America was up in arms! Imagine any Government acting immorally in the pursuit of oil! There are threats to boycott Scottish produce (Though I reckon they're unlikely to boycott whisky. Have you drunk the piss they distill themselves?) Nonetheless, Americans tend not to know too much about Scotland. During Tartan Week earlier this year, when the Scottish Government throws a bunfight in New York City to encourage US investment in the Scottish economy (good luck with next year's event, fellahs) an opinion poll was held on the streets of Manhattan to find out the Scot best known to the people of Manhattan. And the results were somewhat surprising. Scotland's three best-known faces Stateside were Mel Gibson, Scotty from Star Trek and Groundkeeper Willie from the Simpsons. However, a similar poll amongst the people of Utah, to find out who they thought was the greatest American had a similarly surprising outcome, 50 per cent voting for Jesus.

This has been a year to commemorate heroic events and villainous deeds. September saw the seventieth anniversary of the start of World War II. The Scotsman ran a series of articles chronicling how the people of Edinburgh survived the Blitz. Quite easily, it turns out, because the Blitz never came to Edinburgh. German bombers were never able to disrupt the lives of its citizens, or bring life in the city to a total standstill.

How ironic that seventy years later, German engineering contractors have been able to disrupt the lives of the people of Edinburgh, and bring life in the city grinding to a total standstill.

Fifty years ago, the city decided to get rid of its tram system in order to ease traffic congestion in the city centre. Now they've decided to build a new tram network. In order, it would appear, to maximise traffic congestion in the city centre.

Personally, I am in favour of the trams (although I would never say so to a taxi driver). Only last week, as I was sitting in a traffic jam at Haymarket on the Airport Express bus (yes, that really IS what they call it) I was consoled by the thought that in 2011 (or more likely 2013) the tedious trip out to the Airport is going to be a whole five minutes shorter.

The summer of 2009 may have seen the fortieth anniversary of man landing on the Moon. Yet we've still got to wait at least another two years before we get a rapid link to Edinburgh Airport. In all of the celebrations of the moon landing in the media little was made of its Scottish connections. In fact, the first man on the Moon himself, Neil Armstrong, had strong family links to the town of Langholm, in the Borders. After landing on the moon, Armstrong was awarded the Freedom of the Burgh of Langholm. And he later claimed that visiting the town in his youth had been ideal preparation for the lunar mission. Because, when he landed on the Moon, he found it actually had more atmosphere than Langholm.

When John F Kennedy announced the plans for the expedition to the Moon back in 1961, no-one ever thought that it would actually happen by the end of that decade. But that just goes to show how far we can push back the boundaries of human achievement. For who would have thought, in the summer of 1969, when man first set foot on the Moon that forty short years later Sunday ferry services would finally reach Stornoway.

Predictably, when the ferry did arrive in Stornoway, the Lord's Day Observance Society held a protest on the quayside, complaining about this outrageous breach to the tranquility of the Sabbath. Watching the demonstration on Reporting Scotland, it seemed to me that the only people breaching the tranquility of the Sabbath were the Lord's Day Observance Society.

Yet on that momentous day as the MV Isle of Lewis set sail for the mainland on a Sunday for the first-ever time, all that was lacking was a radio feed from the Captain proudly proclaiming:

"That's one small step for Man, one massive leap for Archie McLeod, who can now get a pint, and a newspaper, in Ullapool on a Sunday!"

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