

The Rain Falls Upwards

How an election fought in the south will affect us in the north

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Comment

With more than ten years of the Scottish Left Review under our belts the Scottish Left Review has been around for long enough to have seen a good many elections - General, Scottish Parliament, European, local. The Scottish Left Review does not and will never advocate voting for any specific party, or indeed against voting for a specific party. What we have done during previous elections has always included two things. The first of these is to help people understand how their vote counts - to explore what options for tactical voting there are, to show the potential effects of different uses of proportional votes and so on. The second was to debate what sorts of outcome might be most likely to deliver a policy shift to the left, or at least would halt any further drift to the right. We have done this in a number of ways in the past, such as by examining the voting record of individual sitting candidates, by reviewing manifestos, by calculating what spread of votes would deliver what balance of party representation and so on.

This time we simply haven't bothered. There are some things we could have looked at. For example, given that there is a very close link between the corrupting of the whole political and economic system in Britain and the corrupting of individual MPs, we could have looked at the conflicts of interests individual candidate have with private financial and business interests. It's just that at Westminster the web of influence between business interests and the elected representatives is so extensive that - with some honourable exceptions - it probably wouldn't really help many of you differentiate between your options. We could have explored the limited opportunities for tactical voting that the Westminster first-past-the-post system offers but Lord Ashcroft got there before us - in the small proportion of seats which will make any real difference to the outcome of this election the parties are all ploughing in massive sums of money to make sure that the will-power of

There reaches a point when to say 'this party will make things less bad less quickly than that party' goes beyond a straw which even the most optimistic among us would invest our time into clutching

independently-minded voters does not accidentally screw-up their master plans. We could review the manifestos, but there reaches a point when to say 'this party will make things less bad less quickly than that party' goes beyond a straw which even the most optimistic among us would invest our time into clutching. There is, plain and simply, not much for those on the left to say or write about this election which is positive.

It shouldn't be like this. Everyone - not least the Tories - knows instinctively that the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the neoliberal political-economic consensus should be a ripe period for those who opposed it. The problem is that none of the political parties with even an outside chance of gaining a seat in this election opposed that consensus. In recent issues (and again in Gary Fraser's article in this issue) we have explored exactly how the blame for the mess that we are in has been at least in part transferred from the private to the public sectors. We could have gone much further with this. For example, it is worth noting the types of story which are increasingly dominating the media agenda - banks and their misdeeds are on the front pages less than they were and while politicians and their peccadilloes are still front and centre, we are seeing another surge in media interest in crime. In particular, the sorts of crime that are seen as 'uniting the views of the nation' - the child killers and paedophiles, the serial killers and people who assault the elderly. We have much more on 'feral teenagers' (and just stop for a second to think about the reaction if it was to become everyday parlance to refer to 'sub-human bankers' - class war is only justifiable when the missiles are directed at the lower classes). And there is no let up in celebrity gossip and its interminable scandals.

This is important. There is a great uneasiness among the powerful just now. We are now out of recession and it is all just

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a process of working out the best way to stabilise and then grow the economy again, right? Well, in fact you will have noticed that there is a bit of fear about a 'double dip' recession creeping around. Just as with 'quantitative easing' and all the other jargon of the crash it is important to decode this. A 'double dip' problem is one which gets worse, gets briefly better and then gets worse again (possibly much worse). Now, imagine taking seriously the idea that when your light bulb is about to give up the ghost and flickers dark, briefly coming back to life before dying for ever you would stand about in the flickering light and say 'I'm a bit worried this might be a double-dip lighting failure'. What people are saying is that there is a real risk that the initial crash is over but that the recession may have barely begun.

The commentator class has suddenly taken a great interest in 20th century economic history and you may find references to the great depression or the Japanese period of 'stagflation' to be 'so 2009'. Perhaps so, but it is worth pointing out two things. Firstly, it is a pity that the commentariat hadn't taken a little more interest in the Wall Street Crash back in 2006 when its lessons might actually have been valuable. But more importantly, ask your more neoliberal minded friends to answer a simple question - what date was the Wall Street Crash and from what date do we generally mark the beginning of the Great Depression? The answer to the question is that the crash happened in 1929 and most people date the Great Depression from about 1932. So, if the neoliberal crash was 2009, why the confidence that the worst is over?

This is not simply to offer doom-mongering, it is to put the 2010 General Election in context. Because if we are going to look to history to teach us anything it is worth remembering what came after the Great Depression, which was fascism and world war. Now, let us not for a second get caught up in hyperbole or allow anyone to suggest that this is yet another lazy warning that a fascist state is round the corner or anything of the sort. But it is point out that if we do face a number of years of very difficult economic circumstances for a very large number of people then we need to know what is likely to come next. The pressures either tend towards those who have been put into difficult circumstances turning on those who put them there or

otherwise transferring their anger and frustration elsewhere. For example on paedophiles, 'feral teenagers', those who mug the elderly. Or possibly we will just start passing laws preventing foreigners (especially if they aren't white) from building places of worship - but that couldn't happen in Europe, right?

OK, none of this is exactly a revelation - economy may still get worse, social cohesion breaks down and transferred anger redirects towards minority groups, a thesis which has been trotted out plenty of times of late. But what does this mean for the election? Well, think about the five years ahead through this prism. On the left we have been primarily focussed on three broad areas - international policy and war, public expenditure and the welfare state and civil liberties. And in the run-up to this election two of these have been set aside (on the basis that there will be a solid parliamentary majority for war and surveillance irrespective of the outcome). And so it has become about who will cut more and who will cut fastest - the predictable successful transference of blame from private to public. But what about the potential to see this election as putting in place a Parliament which will have to preside over potential social upheaval? What if we look at it like that?

There are different ways to look at it. Perhaps a Labour Government would be less likely to swim with the media current of increasing polarisation among the working class. Perhaps. Perhaps a Labour opposition could do more to stem the tide of polarisation if it wasn't in Government. Perhaps. Perhaps the best hope would be for smaller parties to hold some balance of power and moderate the tendency to chase after Murdoch and the Mail. Perhaps. But then, it doesn't actually matter much really, because whichever of these outcomes we conclude would be best, we have such minimal power to influence them (especially in Scotland) it is hard to think of something constructive to say.

So, instead, we hope you find interesting some thoughts from a number of writers on the possible consequences of possible outcomes. As to how to cast your vote? Well, we can only offer you the best of luck. ■



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action and reaction

Michael Keating shows that there are many possible outcomes after the General Election – and even more potential reactions

At the moment of writing, it is impossible to predict the result of the 2010 General Election. Labour seem worn out and mostly resigned to losing, their younger figures positioning for the leadership battle and likely civil war that will follow. The ideological differences among the prospective candidates look like variations on New Labour akin to the Blair-Brown disputes since the 1990s. Yet if Labour look like losers, the Conservatives look anything but winners. They have failed even worse than the Government in adapting to a post-crash world and the end of the false certainties with which both parties have consoled themselves for the last two decades. They stumble from one pronouncement to another, finely tuning their message to the focus groups without any clear message or defined policies. It is this performance, together with the distortions of the electoral system, that has raised the prospect of a hung parliament.

Let us assume, however, that the Conservatives are on track for a working majority. What are the consequences for Scotland and for the constitutional settlement? We can take it for granted that there will be severe cuts in public expenditure, which will impact directly on Scotland in retrenchment in welfare, and indirectly through cuts in the block transfer by the Barnett Formula. This could provoke a sharp reaction in Scotland, especially if oil prices are high and the figures show Scotland paying for the UK recession while suffering cuts in public services. With the SNP still in government in Edinburgh, it could be the Labour Party that benefits from this, especially if the party in Scotland adopts a stronger territorial profile (see below).

It is equally likely that some of the deficit will be filled by raising charges in health, education and social services in England and continuing the gradual privatisation that has been New Labour's legacy. This will encounter a strong rejection in Scotland and Wales where traditions of social democracy have survived in better shape, as have commitments to universalism in provision (and probably in Northern Ireland too). A UK Conservative Government, in turn, could react in two ways. It could seek to impose its will on Scotland and Wales by forcing them into the same kind of restructuring. This could mean reverting to a neo-Thatcherite strategy, a programme of social engineering to wean the Scots from their anachronistic attachment to welfare, the 'dependency culture' as they liked to call it. This would imply recentralisation and an undermining of the devolution settlement. It could also imply the end of the United Kingdom

by provoking a crisis of territorial accommodation deeper than anything that happened in the 1980s and 1990s.

An alternative, and perhaps more likely, scenario is for the Tories to come a new accommodation with Scottish nationalism. Scottish Conservatism is near-dead, which gives the London leadership a free hand; remember that it was the Scottish

Tories, not Westminster, that dreamt up the poll tax and insisted on trying it out here first. All the evidence we have suggests that English Tories are not at all worried about what the Scots do at home or their freedom to do it. What they object to is the perceived influence of Scots in London (recall the London commentariat's musings on the Scottish Raj), and on Scotland's 'excessive' share of government spending. So a deal could be in prospect. The Conservatives bring in English votes for English laws at Westminster, so dealing with the West Lothian Question (this is in their programme). They cut the number of Scottish MPs, already promised as part of an overall reduction of the size of the House of Commons and an equalisation of the electoral quota. They abolish the Barnett Formula, which they erroneously think is responsible for Scotland's spending advantage (in fact Barnett works to reduce it). In return they concede a large measure of fiscal autonomy to the Scottish Parliament. So if the

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Scots want to maintain their 'old-fashioned' social democracy north of the border, they are welcome, just so long as it does not affect England. This, of course, entails abandoning the Scottish Tories but they long since ceased to count for much in the wider party.

This would be a sharp reversal of position, since it has traditionally been the progressive parties that have been most favourable to home rule (although not consistently so). There is, however, nothing in Tory ideology that should rule it out. On the contrary, it could be sold as part of Conservative ideals of self-reliance, much as Ted Heath tried to some forty years ago, only to be frustrated by the Scottish Tories, then a significant force. Whether David Cameron or those around him would have the boldness and imagination to do this, and so liberate Tory England, is far from certain, but let us assume that it came to pass.

It would have profound implications for politics in Scotland. For the first time the Scottish parties would have to face up to the choices modern democracies must make and to their



consequences. The SNP would have to decide whether it is really a low-tax or high-spending party – in recent years it has tried to be both at the same time. All parties would need to think about the scope and limits of universalism in free services. Can we really say that free estuarial bridges are essential social services in the same category as care for the elderly? Do we really need to pay the university fees of students whose parents are wealthy enough to buy them houses to stay in during their years of study, when students from poorer families are many times less likely to get to university? Are tax cuts for companies really a good idea when there are pressing social needs? Should we provide free buses for all over-60s (I confess an interest here)? How can we improve the lot of those hundreds of thousands of Scots living in poverty? In other words, we would have had the policy debate that has been missing these past ten years, about the kind of social project that should underpin devolution.

It is likely that any minority government, Conservative or Labour, would move on constitutional change, including more devolution for Scotland and Wales, since this does not cost much and ties the nationalist parties to the fortunes of the government.

A majority Conservative government, combined with a weakened UK Labour Party, would also pose challenges for Labour in Scotland. With better prospects for returning to power than its Westminster counterpart, Labour at Holyrood could look like a more attractive option for the rising political generation. Scottish Labour could gain in autonomy and start to play the Scottish card, a familiar tactic from its previous bouts in opposition. This could create further pressures for more devolution and an intensified competition with the SNP who, now more than ever, will be seeking the same vote with the same range of policies. This could stimulate a policy competition on the centre-left, in contrast with England, where the competition has largely been on the centre-right and dominated by the concerns of south-east England, with the northern regions increasingly marginalised.

A majority Conservative Government would also reinforce the trend to Euroscepticism in England. We know that the incoming MPs will be even more hostile to Europe than the existing ones, while Cameron has talked of repatriating powers and passing a British Sovereignty Act to limit Europe's jurisdiction. As most of these ideas are incompatible with continued membership of the European Union, the prospect of withdrawal into a loose free-trade zone is a real one. Certainly the Conservatives will be even more hostile than New Labour about extending European provisions on workers' rights and the idea of a 'social Europe' more generally. The UK would thus move ever closer to the American model of market capitalism, while Europe retains its social conscience. At some point, (southern) English and Scottish interests in Europe could diverge so radically that Scotland would have to find its own way, with independence in Europe becoming the only solution.

The prospects of a hung parliament depend as much on the quirks of the electoral system as the behaviour of the voters, but it remains a possibility. With a block of perhaps thirty MPs from territorial parties (including all the Northern Ireland ones) alongside the Liberal Democrats, politics would be opened up on multiple dimensions. A government with a majority in

England could be defeated with the votes on non-English MPs. With SNP members not voting on purely English matters, and Sinn Féin not voting on anything, further uncertainties are created. It is likely that any minority government, Conservative or Labour, would move on constitutional change, including more devolution for Scotland and Wales, since this does not cost much and ties the nationalist parties to the fortunes of the government. A Conservative, but not a Labour government, would bring in English votes for English laws, securing its position in the longer term. A minority Labour government would be much more cautious on Scotland, since Scottish votes would be so important to it, and vulnerable to the SNP. This could create serious strains within the party, as the Scottish branch had to prove its credentials in the face of nationalist competition while the UK party would seek to impose control from the centre – we already saw some

of this in the 1970s.

All of this will set the conditions for the Scottish elections a year later. If Labour is in opposition at Westminster, its life in Scotland will be a great deal easier. It can oppose UK policies on privatisation in social services and education, even those it pursued while in government. It can attack the Westminster Tories for the inevitable cuts and the SNP for carrying them out. Indeed it may at last succeed in outflanking the SNP on the left, especially if the latter gives way to its more neo-liberal wing. Whether such a shift is possible within a year is perhaps questionable, especially if the party at UK level is consumed in a leadership battle but if it can then a return to government in Scotland in 2011 is not to be ruled out. Such a development would represent a further stage in the devolution process: Labour in office in the devolved territories but not at the centre. This could, potentially, rebalance the party and open the way to new thinking for progressive policy in Scotland. That, however, would require considerable renewal, an opening out to civil society and a willingness to engage in debate without preconditions. Whether any of our parties are now capable of such renewal is, alas, doubtful. New ideas will have to come from elsewhere, which is why it is more vital than ever that we develop a capacity here for bold thinking and innovation, looking beyond Westminster to the experience of small progressive nations elsewhere. ■

*Michael Keating is Professor of Politics at the University of Aberdeen. His latest book is **The Independence of Scotland** (Oxford University Press, 2009).*





Scottish Fire Service Governance and Standards

In 2005 the Fire (Scotland) Act came into force, replacing the Fire Services Act 1947, which had served us well.

The new legislation was to be the bedrock of a 'modernised' service that abolished what were claimed to be 'outdated' structures and brought in measures that were designed to vastly improve the service we provide to communities. Among the elements that were removed included the National Standards for Responses to Incidents; Appointments and Promotions Regulations; and Uniformed Establishment Protection Measures (Section 19) and the Central Fire Brigades Advisory Council. Chief Fire Officers (CFO) and Chief Fire Officers Association (a private company) put themselves at the centre, arguing that they were the ones who should be running the Service, as "they knew best".

How has the service fared under their watch? Firstly, due to the removal of national standards, the eight Fire & Rescue Services (FRS) in Scotland are moving in eight different directions. Differing response times, levels of response, training levels, competency levels, promotion criteria and equipment specifications to name but a few, resulting in a post code lottery in service delivery. We have witnessed the rise of the Human Resource teams and the civilianisation of staff ; it makes you wonder how we survived all these years with out them. It's all part of the flawed UK Government 'Bain' (2002) report where they stated their desire to make the fire service a 7 year transient job and not a job that someone sees themselves in for life. It was also an attempt to remove any influence that the FBU may have or was perceived to have had within the advisory structures.

A number of policies have been developed using this philosophy, the New Firefighter Pension Scheme, re-employment in the same role, a minimum ACAS discipline code and procedures and the general attempt to move from intervention to prevention with downgrading of full time fire cover to allow this.

Our governance arrangements have been in tatters since the change in legislation, the replacements have fallen short and have delivered nothing. It will be no surprise to learn that the architect of this downgrading, the then Her Majesties' Chief Inspector and champion of our wonderful Combined Aerial Rescue Platforms (CRAP'S), Mr Jeff Ord, is now busy recruiting a workforce for Asset Co to perform our duties in the event of a strike, a £1M contract from London alone.

In the rush to achieve their changes our CFO's have flung the baby out with the bath water. The retrograde steps taken by the chiefs have coincided with an increase in fire deaths, firefighter fatalities and fire loss. It's time for common sense to prevail and a consensus for the service's future adopted. At this time, with the UK General Election approaching we ask that you all take the opportunity to raise some of these issues with prospective candidates as they canvas for your vote. Ask them to listen to the front line workers and not just the bosses? Community safety needs a properly equipped and fully trained Fire & Rescue Service, that demands a consistent commitment across all levels of Government.

For more details please contact:

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juggling or balancing?

There may be assumptions about what a hung parliament would look like but Stephen Maxwell shows that in fact it might not be that straightforward

While the most likely outcome of May's General Election remains an overall Tory majority the odds on a hung Parliament are narrowing with each opinion poll. The head of the Civil Service Gus O'Donnell is duly dusting off guidance on the constitutional procedures for forming a Government where no party has an overall majority. But the procedural complexities pale beside the political complexities. The assumption behind current speculation about a hung Parliament is that while the Tories may not win an overall majority they will have the largest representation in the House of Commons ensuring that David Cameron will be the first party leader to be invited to form a Government. That's where the problems start.

There are three ways in which a hung parliament can form a Government - a formal coalition with Cabinet Ministers drawn from the participating parties, an informal coalition where one party forms the Government with a promise of support from one or more other parties, or a minority government as in the current Scottish Parliament where one party forms the Government with the aim of attracting support from the other parties issue by issue. The parties will apply the same underlying calculus of party advantage to each of the options. One general rule applies - the harsher the policies required of Government the less potential allies will be attracted towards formal coalition or agreements. Don't be surprised if Westminster follows Holyrood in a period of minority Government.

On their current policies on the key economic issue facing the new Parliament the Tories are likely to be a minority in the Commons. On the timing and the scale of public spending cuts Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the SNP, Plaid Cymru, and even the Ulster Unionists are all likely to be closer to one another than any of them will be to the Tories. It is difficult to imagine the Liberal Democrats joining in a formal coalition with the Tories if the expectation is that George Osborne's promised autumn budget would include spending cuts in the short term significantly larger than the cautious cuts expected in Darling's pre-election budget.

The Tories have emphatically lost the intellectual battle on the short term management of the economy. The Liberal Democrats and the Nationalists share Labour's Keynesian belief in the

need for public deficits to compensate for the rise in private savings and the decrease in manufacturing investment that come with recession. The majority of academic economists and authoritative think tank and media commentators are in the same camp. The Ulster Unionists meanwhile will be mindful of Northern Ireland's particularly high dependence on public subsidy.

Two developments could rescue the Tories from their isolation. If the bond markets decided that the EU had written off Greece then a national crisis could quickly escalate into an international crisis of confidence engulfing the other 'Pigs' (Portugal, Ireland and Spain) and threatening the Euro and the pound. The Tories' preference for an accelerated programme of large cuts would then gain credibility inside and outside Parliament. But this is an improbable scenario. Given the fragile state of the European recovery, Germany and the other leading European economies cannot afford to let Greece founder.

The Tories' problem is that there is no likely replacement for the Liberals. Neither SNP nor the Plaid could afford to be in a coalition with a Tory Government. It is possible to imagine a Tory-SNP agreement under which the Tories exempted Scotland from the worst of the spending cuts but it would be hugely problematic for both parties

The other development that could increase the Tories' chance of forming the Government in a hung Parliament lies in their own hands. George Osborne has already travelled some distance from the Tories' initial call for immediate and swingeing cuts in response to the financial crisis and for the 2010/11 fiscal year is now looking for a relatively meagre £1.5bn. Following his Mais lecture at the end of February in which he committed to an autumn spending review focused on the longer term structural deficit - that is the excess of public spending over revenue in the latter years of the Labour administration preceding the additional deficit from the Government's emergency response to the banking crisis - it is even more difficult to quantify how far his approach would differ from that of a Labour Government committed to halving the overall deficit in the lifetime of the next Parliament. If there are signs of more vigorous growth in the economy in the next few months then a further dose of

Osborne pragmatism might be able to close enough of the gap with the Liberal Democrats to make an agreement possible on the future for spending.

The Conservatives do not have much else to offer the Liberal Democrats. They are currently the least enthusiastic of all the parties on electoral reform though if the margin by which they

are denied an outright majority is judged to be down to the inbuilt bias of the electoral system against the Tories they might become more willing at least to talk about reform. Their interest in replacing the Human Rights Act with a native English version puts the frighteners on Liberal activists as much as does their policy on the European Union. They share Labour's reluctance to think radically on the Trident replacement even if the unions believe that they are less committed to the £5bn order for the two super aircraft carriers. But then the Lib Dems' appetite for reform on national security is itself an unknown quantity: their thinking on Trident seems not to go much further than putting nuclear warheads on Cruise missiles.

One area offering scope for some policy convergence would be on the banks where out of office the Tories seem to have more interest in structural and tax reforms than the Labour Government. Social policy might also offer some deal-making options if only because of the vagueness of much of Tory thinking. Their headline interest in mutuals, an extended role for voluntary organisations in service delivery, greater individual and community empowerment, and their plans for parent-managed schools, will resonate with many Liberals. On the other hand their commitments to a £1m threshold for inheritance tax and to big cuts in the eligibility of children's trust funds would presumably be a major sticking point.

The Tories' problem is that there is no likely replacement for the Liberals. Neither SNP nor the Plaid could afford to be in a coalition with a Tory Government. Alex Salmond's boast that SNP would have a hung Parliament dancing "to a Scottish jig" may be difficult to deliver in practice. It is possible to imagine a Tory-SNP agreement under which the Tories exempted Scotland from the worst of the spending cuts but it would be hugely problematic for both parties. Although its recent record at both Westminster and Holyrood makes SNP less vulnerable to the "Tartan Tories" smear than it was in the 1970s any arrangement that seemed to prop up a Tory Government intent on deep cuts in public spending overall, even if Scotland was partially exempted, would carry a heavy penalty in a country where the centre of political gravity is firmly social democratic and in which support for the Tories is half what it was in the 1970s. In addition to opposition from within their own party, the Tories know their opponents would never let English voters forget it if a Tory Government cut services in England while protecting the already privileged levels of Scottish spending.

The SNP commitment to holding a referendum on Scotland's independence within the lifetime of the Scottish Parliament suggests a further possibility. Could a deal be done with the Tories' UK leadership for the Tories in the Scottish Parliament to support an independence referendum in return for an assurance that SNP's Westminster MPs would not use their votes to block a Tory coalition or minority Government?. The Tories might judge that the minority support for independence in the opinion polls was sufficient security against a victory for independence. But there would be little in it for them if they were not able to secure a continuing majority in government, and that SNP could not afford to provide.

If a Tory-led coalition seems implausible what chance of a Labour led coalition? In policy terms this seems considerably more plausible. On public spending the two parties are close. Where the Liberal Democrats are noticeably more radical than

Labour - tax and banking reform for example - their policies would appeal to many Labour MPs and supporters. Vince Cable as Chancellor in a Labour-led coalition Government might be tolerable to Labour MPs if only because of its probable popularity with the public. On social policy, the environment and industrial policy the Liberal Democrats come and go over much the same territory as the Labour Party. The Liberals' pro-Europeanism would certainly grate with some of the more committed Atlanticists among Labour Ministers and MPs but short of financial Armageddon the issue of Euro membership will be off the agenda of the next Parliament. There would be tensions too on issues of civil rights but again a significant section of the Labour community would welcome the Liberals' progressive influence as a counterweight to their own compromised hardliners such as Straw, Miliband and Johnson.

Two issues would remain - the Prime Minister and voting reform. The Lib Dems would never agree to serve under Gordon Brown. However, as many in the Labour Party would be happy to use Labour's electoral defeat, by whatever margin, as an opportunity finally to dispose of Gordon Brown, that should prove no obstacle. Voting reform might be more difficult for both parties. Having failed to get any progress on proportional voting from their alliance with the minority Labour in 1977-8 the Lib Dems will insist on something more second time around. Under Brown the Labour Government has proposed a referendum on the Alternative Vote which the Lib Dems supported as a small step forward. Under a new leader - David Miliband, Ed Balls, Alistair Darling? - under strong pressure to prevent the Tories returning to power the Labour Party might be persuaded to extend the referendum to include an option for the Lib Dems' preferred STV.

As with the Tories SNP could seek a spending deal with Labour or a deal on a constitutional referendum or a combination of the two. Like the Tories Labour would find it politically difficult to give Scotland even more favourable treatment in mainstream spending budgets than she already enjoys though it might be persuaded to relax Treasury rules to allow the release of the Fossil Fuel Levy or the savings to the UK budget from devolved reforms such as free social care. Given the spending pressures a Labour Government might prefer a deal on the constitution. The simplest deal would be a multi-option referendum, offering Labour's minimalist Calman option, 'devolution max' and independence. There would be a cost to Labour in the risk that independence/devolution max between them might win a clear majority pushing devolution further than Labour would wish. Judging that SNP could not politically afford an alliance with the Tories they might offer no more than a vote on Calman versus independence counting on recession fears to keep the voters in line. ■

Stephen Maxwell was Associate Director of SCVO

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game over, new players needed

Vince Mills argues that there is no real optimistic outcome for the left from the General Election so it is time to look to the next generation

There is no doubt about it. The oncoming general election holds out as much prospect of glory for the left as the end of the football season for Partick Thistle. For us Jags fans there is no possibility of promotion, no cups to be won (we are out of all competitions) and finances being they way they are, not even the prospect of hoping that next season will be much better. Despite this, after Thistle's more or less meaningless victory over Ross County, I heard otherwise intelligent supporters say (unless of course supporting Thistle leads to automatic disqualification from the intelligent category) that it was just possible after all that Dundee, the runaway leaders of the first division, might yet slip up.

I suspect such an introduction will have me consigned to the doom and gloom bucket by both the 'optimism of the will' left and the die hard Mayhill faithful. So let me hasten to add that I am very far from believing in stereotypical Scottish fashion that 'we are all doomed'. But I would like a dose of realism and a workable strategy for left politics to emerge that might replace the empty optimism that emanates both from the Labour Left hoping for a Labour Left turn that is not going to happen, or the New Workers Party brigade, who mistakenly believe that old wine in new bottles with will solve the problem, if the old wine would only recognise that. The problem is no-one wants to drink the wine.

With the opinion polls ever shifting, largely in favour of New Labour, towards the possibility of a hung parliament as fear of a fiercely anti public sector Tory Party grows, there is a school of thought that believes there is a possibility of a progressive minority in Westminster being able to act as power broker insisting on a series of 'left' gains as the price of support. In this scenario, which assumes a narrow Labour victory, Labour left MPs and/or left SNP MPs should be prevailed upon to form such a progressive block. Of course they should, but the problem with this scenario is that it does not acknowledge the existing realities.

Firstly, from a Scottish perspective, let us ask the question: who are these left MPs? The left wing Labour Representation Committee recognises only one Scottish MP as worthy of support - Katy Clark MP for North Ayrshire and Arran

(please bear that in mind if you are in the Labour Party want to work for a progressive candidate this election). In case you think things are much better in England I am sorry to say that Left MPs willing to take such a position, likely to survive even a mild Tory revival, can probably be counted on one hand.

The notion that SNP MPs will turn up in the Westminster parliament ready to work with the left to put neo-liberalism in the Labour Party to the sword is fanciful. SNP MPs will have to consider very carefully how to act. Hobbled by the need for

ideological silence on class, and hence unlikely to join a left caucus, their central calculations will be electoral. What would happen if their refusal to support a minority Labour government caused a general election and the return of the Tories. Memories of 1979 and turkeys voting for Christmas will be strong.

But actually the most compelling argument against this scenario is the ideological consensus that dominates politics in the UK and Scotland. Why would either New Labour or The Tories let the small matter of the size of a majority get in the way of satisfying the demands of corporate capital? If New Labour hang onto power by a small minority they can count on Tory support for any measure necessary to ensure a stable environment for capital, especially financial capital. The Tories have already deployed this strategy and I believe would only abandon it if they felt Labour had gone native.

We have to concede then that like Partick Thistle there are no prizes awaiting the Left at the end of the election contest.

There are three scenarios: the Tories win with a clear majority. We know where we are: we start mobilising to fight cuts, save jobs, stop Trident renewal and end imperialist wars. What it may mean for the nationalists agenda will be considered shortly. Alternatively New Labour wins with a clear majority in which case we start mobilising to fight cuts, save jobs, stop Trident renewal and end imperialist wars. The third scenario which sees Labour winning with only a small majority and hence dependent on its small left, does admittedly offer a more interesting scenario but I believe the number of MPs from any party willing to act as force for serious left politics is small indeed and would

In one scenario, which assumes a narrow Labour victory, Labour left MPs and/or left SNP MPs should be prevailed upon to form a progressive block. Of course they should, but the problem with this scenario is that it does not acknowledge the existing realities. Firstly, from a Scottish perspective, let us ask the question: who are these left MPs?



be powerless in face of a Tory strategy to support New Labour on an issue by issue basis.

Still, we must do all that we can to limit Tory gains. Endorsement of the Tory strategy is a green light to swift and swinging cuts in the public sector. With New Labour at least, the structural and personal relationships that exist between the Party and Unions will act as a brake on the cuts agenda. That means in some places holding your nose and voting Labour if the alternative might send a Tory to parliament with a mandate to slash and burn. Of course there may be seats where that is not the choice and I accept that in those situations comrades on the left may have the opportunity to consider more long term strategies.

As suggested above perhaps the most promising scenario for the SNP is an outright Tory victory. Although looking less likely, this is still a real possibility. If the Tories win on the basis of a reduced public sector then a reduced public sector is what we will get and Scotland will be expected to at least, bear its share. This is important because the more the Tories appear Thatcherite in Scotland the less tolerance they will get and the more likely that there will be a nationalist response. Perhaps that would be better put as a 'national' response because, as we shall see it may have more to do with fear of the Tories than love of nationalism.

There is some recent opinion poll evidence to support this in the shape of The Scotsman's YouGov poll of early March. It was bitter sweet for the SNP. Support for the party fell 17 percentage points behind Labour in voting intentions for the general election.

But while Some 57 per cent said their views would be unchanged if Cameron won an election, 31 per cent said they would be more likely to vote for independence if the Tories won. Interestingly 41 per cent of Labour supporters took the position that they were more likely to support independence in the event of a Tory victory at Westminster.

We must apply all the usual caveats about opinion polls but if this is an accurate reflection of a response to a Tory general election victory, then it seems to me that once again the absence of class-based politics in the shape of a combative Labour Party or militant trade unions, explains the turn to a nationalist response. There were similar responses during the worst excesses of the last Tory government, given expression in the anti-poll tax campaigns and Scotland United. For a sharp turn in this direction it would not only require a Tory victory, but a series of actions by the Tories that would trigger the folk memory. The left, even those sections of it like the SSP long committed to a left/nationalist strategy would, ironically

enough, find it difficult to have much influence on a resurgent SNP at last able to give full throttle to their single pan-class demand. Whether it would be enough to give the SNP victory in an independence referendum remains doubtful given the continued fall in support for that position, but it would certainly change the political mood music in Scotland.

There are various scenarios. In the first the Tories win with a clear majority. We know where we are: we start mobilising to fight cuts, save jobs, stop Trident renewal and end imperialist wars. In the second, New Labour wins with a clear majority in which case we start mobilising to fight cuts, save jobs, stop Trident renewal and end imperialist wars.

So is the Left doomed? Forgive the football comparisons again but Gerry Britton, Thistle's youth coach, had something interesting to say about Thistle's brief return to premiership football a few years ago. He argues that it was down to the then-manager, John Lambie's capacity to put together an effective side by buying players no longer deemed eligible by the bigger clubs and an awful lot of luck. Instead, Britton says, we should have been building up strength through a youth strategy.

The metaphor is obvious. For far too long the left in Scotland has looked to "leaders" and leadership battles in the unions and political parties as well as those already deemed to have a place in the political firmament to articulate on its behalf. When they have not, or indeed worse, mouthed obeisance to New Labour, we have been left stranded, leaderless, and voiceless at the mercy of those whose behaviour we could not defend and whose ideas are anathema to socialism. This

needs to end. The most important priority for the Left is the building of a grass roots movement in the unions and the wider political community that will generate a leadership it can hold to account. This at least has begun to happen through the work in the Peoples Charter and the surge of disputes in the public and private sectors and the campaigns like that against the egregious GHA. In all of this there is evidence of increasing determination by sections of working people to show that they are ready to fight. It is humdrum, painstaking and sometimes draining activity. But it is on these foundations the left will build its way to glory. ■

Vince Mills is the Convener of the Campaign of Socialism Scotland



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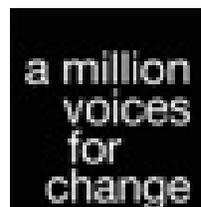
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rebuilding collective prosperity

Dave Moxham looks at the agenda for the STUC Congress and shows that in a space between an economic collapse and the election of a new government the influence of the trade unions has never been more important

As Scotland's trade unions prepare to gather in the Caird Hall, Dundee for the 113th Annual Congress on 19/21 April the ongoing economic crisis will dominate discussion and debate both inside and outside the conference hall. Despite the concerted effort of many in the business community to talk up the so-called green shoots of recovery, the reality for our members is the threat of ongoing cuts to jobs in both private and public sector and a level of attacks on public services which will impact on the most vulnerable in society whilst risking a return to recession. The Congress also takes place just weeks before a General Election which many believe is too close to call but of which one potential outcome is the return of a Tory Government committed to deeper and far more vicious cuts which will scar a generation in the way that characterised previous Conservative responses to economic downturns in the early 1980s and early 1990s.

In this context it can be expected that Congress will receive significant attention from politicians and media and whilst manifestos have obviously long since been written and political approaches agreed, the opportunity to influence the nature of the political discourse in the final weeks of the election must not be missed. There will, no doubt, also be media focus on Congress searching for any evidence of the political stance of affiliates to the parties in the lead up to the election.

As related in my article for Left Review last year, STUC's 2009 Congress by-line was "Rebuilding Collective Prosperity" a theme which reflects its view that notwithstanding the immediate responsibility of the policies of governments and the actions of financial institutions for the crisis in commodities and finance which sparked descent into recession, a more fundamental failure of politics and economics lies at the root of our current difficulties. The demise of the key equalising institutions such as democratically-owned industry and public services, a strong manufacturing sector, progressive taxation, secure employment and strong trade unions, council housing and community organisations, has rendered a situation in which there is little to put a brake on the tendency of a laissez faire economy to produce an income distribution of extremes. In particular, deregulation of labour and product markets cannot be reconciled with aspirations for broadly-shared prosperity launched its Rebuilding Collective Prosperity campaign under five main themes; rebalancing the economy, prioritising jobs

as a response to the recession, tackling income inequality, investing in public services and tackling climate change through just transition.

The General Council will address these challenges in its three major motions to Congress which pick up many of the themes of the STUC's Manifesto for Rebuilding Collective Prosperity, which will be published towards the end of March. The Manifesto outlines a number of social and economic policies which can help to repair the damage of the economic recession and, in so doing, create the conditions for a fairer and more sustainable

future. The focus is on policies which move towards a fundamental rebalancing of the economy through investing in people, redistributing income and ensuring that our banks and industries are accountable and properly regulated. The General Council motion to Congress therefore calls for policies committed to:

- maintaining public spending to ensure that the recovery becomes embedded and that support is provided to those hardest hit by recession;
- paying a national living wage as set by the Scottish Living Wage Campaign and promoting the Living Wage through public contracts;
- reforming the financial sector;
- supporting manufacturing investment in emerging environmental industries to create jobs; and

- overhauling the taxation framework to ensure genuine progressivity.

In immediate response to the current crisis, the General Council is also calling for the UK and Scottish Governments to work with the STUC and employers' organisations to limit the impact of the recession on workers, industries and communities by:

- maintaining support for apprenticeships;
- protecting education, skills and economic development budgets;
- extending the Future Jobs Fund, with a focus on unemployment hotspots;
- introducing specific measures to tackle persistent long-term youth unemployment;

Despite the current understandable cynicism about the political process, there has also never been a more important time for civic Scotland and its communities to be engaged in the formation of a new vision for collective prosperity in Scotland and across the UK



- introducing a wage and training subsidy to support workers faced with short-time working, as a means of saving jobs; and
- increasing out of work and in work benefits, assisting those on low incomes and boosting economic demand.

Despite the current understandable cynicism about the political process, there has also never been a more important time for civic Scotland and its communities to be engaged in the formation of a new vision for collective prosperity in Scotland and across the UK. So we also need a major clean-up and reinvigoration of our politics. STUC's Manifesto calls for a referendum on proportional representation; votes at 16; a fully elected second chamber; and a commitment to the immediate implementation of the Calman Commission proposals. But reform politics is only part of the picture and a root and branch examination of the way civil society relates and applies itself to the political process is also required.

In a special session on the first morning of Congress, STUC will hear from colleagues in the ICTU who will outline the massive challenges faced in Ireland and the swingeing attacks being meted out to public sector workers' pay and pensions. It will serve as a stark reminder that major threats exist in Scotland and the UK.

A key element of the Manifesto for Rebuilding Collective Prosperity, the STUC also launched 'PEOPLE FIRST' - A charter for public services in Scotland. At its core is the view that public services are at the heart of a democratic society, are essential in supporting individuals and families, developing strong, cohesive communities, ensuring social and economic justice and promoting economic growth.

One key message of the charter is that governments at every level, local, Scottish and Westminster have the duty and capacity to assert itself in defence of the services they have a responsibility to deliver for those they represent. It is vital that the Westminster Government is prepared to stand up to big business interests and the global financial institutions in plotting a public services-centred response to the economic downturn but it is also important that Scottish local authorities and the Scottish Government recognise their own duties and recognise that the Concordat and lost revenue from its attendant Council Tax Freeze, not to mention the Small Business Bonus Scheme, are seriously impacting upon public services.

In its Tackling Income Inequality motion, the General Council will propose a major programme of income redistribution based on an overhaul of the tax and benefits system and action on wage inequality. Real wages have fallen as a proportion of output. Because pay did not grow fast enough to underpin final demand, excessive borrowing by earners was encouraged. The increased concentration of wealth and income raised returns on some forms of financial investment. In this way, wage inequality was a direct contributor to the economic crisis. Tackling wage inequality requires a multi-layered strategy including investigating the

potential for maximum wages, raising the minimum wage and supporting the Scottish Living Wage Campaign. STUC has called on government at all levels to become Living Wage employers, both in relation to its direct employees and those employed through services it procures. A joined-up and simplified approach to the tax and benefits systems, including an increase in Job Seeker's Allowance rates to pre-1997 levels and an increase in earnings disregards to reduce barriers to employment are proposed with significant and progressive increases in the rate of the Minimum Wage and increased punishment of those companies found to be in breach of Minimum Wage legislation.

To address these issues the General Council is calling on congress to endorse reform of the tax system including measures to:

- limit tax relief claimed by those earning more than £100,000 a year;
- introduce a financial transaction tax;
- introduce a new law called a 'general anti-avoidance principle' that treats all tax avoidance as unacceptable and therefore open to challenge;
- tackle income shifting by reforming the way in which small companies are taxed; and

- reverse HMRC staff cuts.

In addition to the focus on the economy, public services and tackling economic injustice, the Congress agenda will focus on the defence of workers and trade union rights, continuing to fight the threat of the BNP, international justice and peace.

If, as predicted, the Congress closes two weeks before a General Election, these debates will take place before we know the future direction of an incoming UK government. We may well be facing the very real threat of a Tory Prime Minister. But irrespective of outcome, a united approach amongst Scotland's trade unions and wider civil society to delivering on a shared agenda for change will not disappear. ■

Dave Moxham is Assistant Secretary at the STUC

One key message of the charter is that governments at every level, local, Scottish and Westminster have the duty and capacity to assert itself in defence of the services they have a responsibility to deliver for those they represent

turning the neo-liberal tide

Gary Fraser discusses how the Left can counter the attack on the Welfare State

There are two themes that I want to explore in this article. The first is how did a crisis that began in the financial sector caused by two decades of deregulation end up becoming a crisis in public expenditure. The second theme concerns the challenge facing progressives to develop an alternative economic strategy.

The exact date when this great con trick started was the 8th May, the day the Daily Telegraph published details of MPs expenses. Within hours of the story breaking, it was being covered by every major news outlet. For weeks on end the media discussed nothing but the 'MPs expenses scandal'. Thanks to the corporate media, attention was diverted from the bankers and structural problems in the economy to a bunch of greedy MPs. In the words of one commentator writing in *Scottish Left Review*, 'duck ponds started to replace derivatives as the story of choice'. Just at a time when people were looking to Government to stabilise the economy, all of a sudden parliamentarians were seen as the problem. Leading the charge against public expenditure was David Cameron. Up until this moment, Cameron had struck most serious political analysts as a nebulous politician bereft of any real substance. He was nothing more than the outcome of a marketing strategy that was directed by Tory central office. Before the crisis Cameron had shown little interest in the public sector saying at one point that he would match Labour's spending, something which infuriated traditional Tories. But with the crisis Cameron discovered ideology and has emerged as a serious political figure to be reckoned with. 'Compassionate conservatism', the era when 'Dave' cycled to work and talked about recycling is over. The Nasty Party are back.

According to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, Britain has an annual fiscal gap of £90 billion which urgently needs to be closed. Cameron says he will do this by slashing public expenditure. For Cameron, the problem is not the recession but how to tackle the national debt. In a country where prudence is regarded as a virtue, Cameron's narrative is powerful. In contrast Labour, to use the old cliché, look like a rabbit trapped in the car headlights unsure which way to run. The left is pushing for the Government to return to a genuine social and economic Keynesian programme. Instead Labour has procrastinated and all of the contradictions inherent in 'New Labour' are coming to the surface. For unlike Cameron, who has found ideology, New Labour was the party that proclaimed ideology was dead. It now finds itself without a compass and bereft of a core set of values that offer guidance in these troubled times. This was bound to happen sooner or later. From the outset, 'New Labour' was conceived of as an electoral machine organised by a disciplined group of cadres. These men and they were mostly men, shunned ideology and preferred to see themselves as realists and pragmatists. Winning elections and maintaining power was their primary purpose. It's ironic that New Labour's strategists now fear that Labour is being held hostage to the very formula that made it successful, namely winning the allegiance of a demographic lazily referred to as 'Middle England' on the one hand, whilst securing the support of the traditional working classes on the other. If Gordon Brown talks up state intervention the strategists worry that Labour will lose 'Middle England' whose courtship

is needed to win elections. Yet if he emphasises spending cuts they claim that Labour will lose the support of the traditional working classes who hitherto have remained loyal. This issue is at the core of Brown's leadership crisis. Cameron senses the Labour dilemma and has capitalised accordingly. For the first time in a generation Labour are dithering whilst the Tories seem ideologically confident.

The challenge for the left is to develop an alternative economic strategy. Convincing people will not be an easy task. It needs to be said that many people are passively accepting public sector cuts and job losses. Three decades of neo-liberal social realism has taken its toll. This grim 'realism' espoused in the 'death of politics' discourse has turned Thatcher's mantra of 'There is no alternative' into a dangerous political truism. It is one of the reasons, although not the main one, why left-wing hopes of a return to the politics of 'class struggle' has failed to materialise. Of course there have been several high profile strikes and even workplace occupations but these are the exception not the rule. Moreover, the impact of these small acts of resistance is blown out of all proportion by a far left that is prone to getting easily excited. In his aptly titled article 'Two Swallows Do Not Make a Spring', Gregor Gall, notes, 'it's not uncommon on the left for commentators to herald that a clutch of instances form an observable trend'. Sensitive to the claim that his conclusion might be interpreted as being overly pessimistic, Gregor argues:

'This analysis is not a question of being pessimistic as some ultra-lefts will no doubt think it is. It is a materialist analysis in which it bears heavily on the mind that, with an extremely low level of class consciousness and collective confidence amongst workers, we should not expect the demonstration effect of one group of workers' actions to pass easily and appropriately on to other groups.'

The short term prognosis for the left is not good. The dominant and insurmountable narrative amongst the majority of progressive voters is that 'Labour is the lesser of two evils'. In Scotland, the power of this narrative should ensure that Labour recover important left of centre ground lost to the SNP in 2007. For the left outside of Labour these are troubled times and the troubles are far from over. If individual parties do contest the election it will be nothing more than a perfunctory exercise in f ying the f ag. Meanwhile, cobbled together coalitions that are top down in nature, consisting of disparate groups with no real impact in communities, are unlikely to even save deposits.

Progressives need to take the longer view. More important than the General Election is the need to develop an alternative narrative that not only defends public expenditure but highlight why public spending is crucial in turning the tide of this crisis. Saying that we are opposed to cuts is not enough, and hyperbolic rhetoric that 'we' should pay for 'their' crisis only gets us so far. When it comes to the actual debates about public expenditure progressives have strong arguments. Economists agree that the countries best weathering the storm are those who protect their welfare states and levels of government spending. We should not lose sight of the fact that public spending in the UK remains lower than that of France, Germany, Italy and Sweden.



Neither should we forget that whilst the national debt is high, it's nowhere near the levels of 1945 and 1963. Yet this was the era of the welfare state was built and economic policy was based on full employment which contributed to an increase in living standards for the vast majority.

So what then would an alternative economic strategy entail? There are of course the obvious arguments about withdrawing from Afghanistan, or abolishing Trident and using the money elsewhere. But we need policies that connect to people's everyday experiences. We should be demanding that Government take the lead and uses the public sector to shift us out of recession. At present the opposite is happening. Whilst public services are attacked, the banking sector has been bailed out without any real reform. If the Government gets it's way and all that happens is the nationalisation of debt during the 'bad times' followed by the privatisation of profits during the 'good times', it will be an opportunity squandered. Now is the time for progressives to be discussing what an alternative banking sector should look like. For example, would it be possible to run banks as social enterprises that reinvest profits back into public projects? In terms of the here and now Government needs to instruct banks to increase investment and lending to small business, and where appropriate to individuals and their families, the latter should be seen as part of a strategy to revitalise the slump in the housing market.

At a time when profits are falling the private sector is too nervous to invest. Therefore it's up to Government to lead the way. One example is housing. Government in partnership with local authorities, should be investing in social housing and revitalising a major part of the UK's housing infrastructure. This development would get people in the construction sector working again, whilst helping those currently excluded from the housing market. Government-led investment keeps people in jobs enabling countries with a strong public sector to spend their way out of recession.

This is a point that progressives need to keep making. We should not forget that under both Labour and Tory Governments, the proportion of the economy going to wages has shrunk, leading to declining social mobility and individual debt that is sometimes unmanageable. However, by putting money in the pockets of people at the lower end of the income scale, the overall rate of consumer spending increases which in turn leads to economic growth. This is how arguments about reversing the culture of low-pay must be framed.

Scotland's 32 local authorities have already started the process of cuts. Undoubtedly there will be resistance but resistance needs to be informed. We are not starting from a strong position. For too long, the left has abandoned local government as a potential site for creating an alternative discourse. After 30 years of neo-liberalism it could be argued that we no longer have local 'government' as such. Instead there is local 'administration', a very different concept from 'government'. Privatisation, deregulation and competitive tendering have systematically taken away the powers of old district and regional councils. Today the amount of taxes raised locally are far too low a portion for Councils to spend effectively on services. Local taxation urgently needs to be rethought as does the relationship between local government and central government. Systematic political and economic control by Westminster and Edinburgh is stifling local governments function. Furthermore, power has been taken away from elected representatives at community

level. The consequence is that regardless of which political party gains overall control of a Council it is central government that rules the roost. A whole raft of measures are in place, strictly adhered to by COSLA (Scottish Coalition of Local Authorities) that ensure that local government does not deviate from the neo-liberal path that is dictated by Westminster and Edinburgh.

Of all the areas that highlight the shocking state of local government finance the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) is the most scandalous. Second only to the Iraq war it is Labour's biggest shame. PFI has been Labour's preferred method of building hospitals and schools. As readers will be aware PFI works like a mortgage with Councils being forced to pay back many times more the cost of what they originally borrowed. According to the Treasury, the 640 UK wide PFI projects cost £63 billion yet by the time the taxpayer has finished paying off the PFI debt the bill is likely to be around £246 billion. Money that could be spent on essential services is being handed over to private companies without a question being asked. The result of this non-negotiable Labour policy is an intolerable burden on public finances which could last 30 or more years. The private companies involved in PFI, and it should be pointed out that the vast majority of them are based outside Scotland, are guaranteed by law to receive monthly payments from the same Councils that claim to be strapped for cash. No council is prepared to renege on its obligations to big business it's far easier to renege on their commitments to communities who expect decent public services. Under PFI big business can look forward to regular payments whilst communities lose swimming pools, libraries, community centres and other leisure facilities. Meanwhile, council workers and their colleagues in the voluntary sector, stare into the abyss of unemployment whilst much needed grants for community groups are scrapped or curbed.

Exactly how much of taxpayers money is being squandered by individual local authorities is difficult to find out as PFI is clouded in secrecy. When questioned about PFI payments, Councils refuse to disclose information hiding behind 'commercial confidentiality' agreements. They get an easy run because questions are seldom asked. A local media notorious for its docility seldom challenges Councils in a way that is constructive. Meanwhile anti-cuts campaigners are often ill informed or completely ignorant about PFI. Exposing the PFI scam needs to be raised by the left when engaging with anti-cuts campaigners and framed within a broader alternative economic strategy which must include raising the issue of local government finance and challenging the systematic neglect of Councils by governments in Westminster and Edinburgh.

At the beginning of this crisis there were some on the left who naively proclaimed the death of neo-liberalism. This was incorrect. Whilst it is true that neo-liberalism has been exposed as a bankrupt ideology, neo-liberal politicians are pragmatist's first and ideologues second. The strategy of neo-liberals is to shift attention from structural problems in the economy caused by deregulation and an over reliance on finance, to one that links our current problems to national debt and public expenditure. The challenge for progressives is to expose this strategy as flawed and one which will deepen the recession. As this article demonstrates the path to sustainable economic growth lies in a return to the social state when the governing party ruled in the interests of the country as a whole not on behalf of a select few. ■

Gary Fraser is co-editor of the online magazine Democratic Green Socialist





poisoned or shot – or not

The People's Charter is a real alternative to current politics. Pat Sikorski argues that we can create an effective coalition for resistance.

On a sunny Saturday afternoon in October 2008 about sixty people met in a palatial drawing room of a solicitor's firm in Lincoln's Inn Fields. They came to participate in a discussion started by John McDonnell MP, Matt Wrack, the General Secretary of the FBU and Bob Crow, General Secretary of the RMT. The crash had just started and everybody was still having fun guessing who was collapsing next (and wondering if they should still have their money paid into a bank.) Present were some leaders from other unions, political activists and campaign organisers. And everybody agreed that the left had to make a move. Two things came up in the easy flow of talk. (Most people managed to say something.) The crash would mean a new and bitter battle between the classes. And the BNP could establish a longer term and resilient base inside the white working class. Somebody recalled that when Le Pen got through to the second round in the previous French presidential elections and every voice that could make itself heard in the French-speaking world hurled the taunt of 'Nazi' at him; he still secured 12% of the French voters; nearly 4.5 million people. You can do a lot with 4.5 million people.

The main issue for everybody was finding an alternative. The bankers and their political and economic supporters had failed the country and their system was about to attack us to save itself. The speakers and others from the floor proposed we set up a Charter – a new Peoples Charter. We would not start at the beginning. There were already several versions of a charter circulating. We could bring them all together, in one place and one campaign. A panel was agreed to draw it together and a recall meeting set up to decide the result. Along the way the target of one million signatures was set, a commission mainly representing the supporting unions was established to run it, a launch took place at the House of Commons early in the new year and a movement in the unions was started to get the Charter adopted as union policy across as many unions as possible. Less than a year later every left union and the British TUC has backed the People's Charter.

The original charter in the early nineteenth century won huge support for its list of six political reforms because the political system had failed the new working class. The 1832 Reform Act gave the vote to the middle classes. But the Charter represented far more than the need for parliamentary reform to go deeper. It called together, for the first time, a whole new class of society precisely as the gathering force of the new industrial and social conditions was creating that class. The Charter gave political and thereby social shape to a new actor on the stage of history as the industrial revolution started its momentous advance. The elementary stage that society's development had reached when the Charter started is shown by the fact that the majority of people in Britain still lived in the countryside until the late 1870s. In the 1820s and 30s much of the 'new' working class worked at home as weavers in villages and hamlets. Others migrated between cities and country. Family units mined coal. The truly mass unions of dockers, of gas workers, of transport workers were seventy years away. Radical ideas were borrowed from the American Declaration of Independence via Tom Paine, the Jacobin strand and Babouf's 'conspiracy of equals' from the

French Revolution and some shreds of memory of the English Diggers and Levellers. The colours of the first Charter were blue – for the sky – and green – for the land.

But now we have the vote. And now the working class movement, as an organised movement, represents less than one third of the economically active population in Britain. Millions who only have their labour to sell are tangled up in the struggle for survival between state benefits and the unregulated economy. The Labour Party, whether you believe it is possible to reform it in the future or not, no longer provides a coherent political identity to a fractured working class.

With these realities in mind left leaders who promoted the new Peoples Charter were also launching two key messages. First, the economic system that has been built in this country is a failure. The New Labour dream was that if the markets were let rip enough tax would emerge in the backwash to pay for remodelling welfare. The 'zest' of the market inside the welfare state would build up a state-dependent fresh crop of capital at the same time. (What will Price Waterhouse Coopers do now?) This model has completely collapsed. It has left us with the prospect, pushed by all the main parties, of the biggest single shift of wealth from those who are depending or have depended on their labour power (by hand or by brain) to survive, towards capitalist business and the banks. It is as big a bill for the British people as WW2 was. The new Peoples Charter says that all the banks should be nationalised and taxation made fair. We should own what we are paying for – and not at arms length. We need a society-wide debate about what we want the banks to do and then we should decide. Do we want major support for green technology, for energy development, for public transport? Yes we do.

Thatcher used to say that 'there is no alternative' when people protested at her cuts. Today all the main parties leaderships say 'there is no alternative' when it comes to the people paying the bill for the banker's crash. The only differences between them are over timing. We should be asked – Would you prefer to be poisoned or shot? But there is an alternative. Planning is an alternative. As power has leaked away over fifty years from the House of Commons to the corporations and the banks, the new Peoples Charter says we need reforms to our economy as radical as the reforms to our politics framed by the original chartists. If power has shifted from politics to the 'generals' who run the economy then we need our voice to be represented in the economy. We need economic reforms. Can we get them? Despite their battle the original Chartists did not get their political reforms. Our prospects are brighter. The Attlee government set up the welfare state in the 1940s and took 40% of the economy out of private hands (albeit that it was then run on 'private' principles and for the benefit of the 60% that was left in private hands.) It did that when saddled with war debt. It did that in the face of US nuclear rearmament. Last month three hundred thousand Icelanders struck, marched, protested and campaigned and prevented £4 billion being lifted out of their pockets to pay Icelandic bank debts. There is an alternative and the new Peoples Charter lays out the themes of that alternative in a popular and straightforward way.

Second (and once more) the Peoples Charter is linked to the creation of a class. Arthur Scargill set up the SLP when New Labour ditched Clause 4. Whatever was wrong about the SLP he had a point. It had been, even then, a long time since Labour had done anything about Clause 4. But the significance of Clause 4 was that it stood for the idea, the most powerful idea, that working class people had the right to have a distinct set of ideas about the way society should be run and for whose benefit it should be run. The implosion of the USSR in 1989 seemed to be living proof that the working class ideal had failed. The Labour Party and its programme ceased to be a starting point for millions who had the first inklings that their world was unjust and that a new one was needed. It ceased to gather working class people for action in the political sphere. It ceased to seek to be part of working class identity. It accepted – even encouraged the idea that the working class was draining away out of society, away from political commitment. New Labour formed a political pact with the Thatcher legacy and focussed on the social layers that still think they have enough of a stake in society to vote. Whatever view one might hold about New Labour's future (or even if it has one) calling together once again the actually existing working class, as a class, based on its distinct social and political identity, is a fundamental task for all those who wish to do more than dream about a radical transformation of the future. The new Peoples Charter is designed to help in that call.

Now we face a momentous battle. Economic and political think-tanks dicker over whether social provision should be cut by ten or fifteen or twenty percent; over whether wages should be frozen or cut, whether we should work longer or have our pension entitlements slashed. Already unions find themselves fighting across the board attempts by the employers to make hay while the storm rages. The economic collapse is a turning point in this country's history. Politics is now speeding up to catch up with the economic crisis. The media is full of discussion about a

hung parliament and the first voices can be heard extolling the virtue of a future 'national' government in the face of the mess. The new Peoples Charter's role in all this is simple. The new Chartists stand together with all those who have to fight back now to protect jobs and services and with all those preparing to fight back in the future. The coming election is about preparing that fight back – whoever is elected. Some people who will work hard for the Labour Party support the Peoples Charter. Others supporting independent or socialist candidates will do likewise. Preparing the fight back is all. The Peoples Charter is not affiliated to any party. It is a movement. It embraces all those prepared to support this movement. While it is based on a wide-ranging independent political and economic identity of a class, it is not itself a party political programme.

For myself, it is my view that the next period will both pose us with both the demise of New Labour (and it remains to be seen what will be left of the old Labour Party) and the necessity to create a new party which can honestly claim to represent the working class. My best guess would be that such an organism would arise from the impulse for it created by the social battles to come and the unions at the head of some of those battles. That will certainly test out where the remnants of the Labour Party stand. In fact the social consequences of the shift of such a significant part of the public wealth into private hands will rapidly spill over from the industrial framework and into the city streets. It will be a part of the equation that is needed for a new mass party as to whether the organised sector of the working class movement will be able to give a positive lead and momentum to that part of the working class which takes up the struggle in different ways. The Peoples Charter could be a critical part of that equation- bridging that potential gap. ■

Pat Sikorski is Assistant General Secretary of the RMT and a founder member of the People's Charter who serves on its National Commission. www.thepeoplescharter.com

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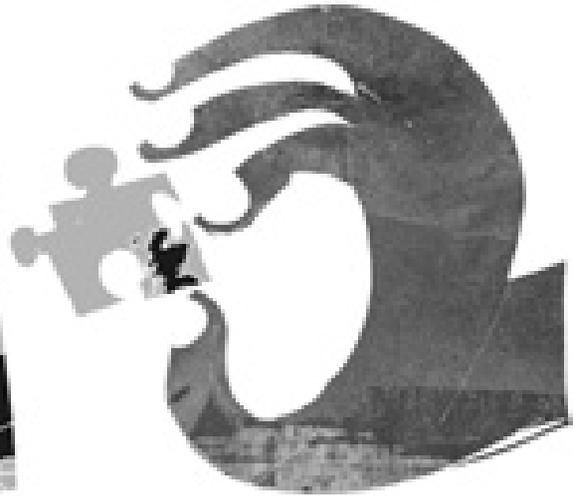
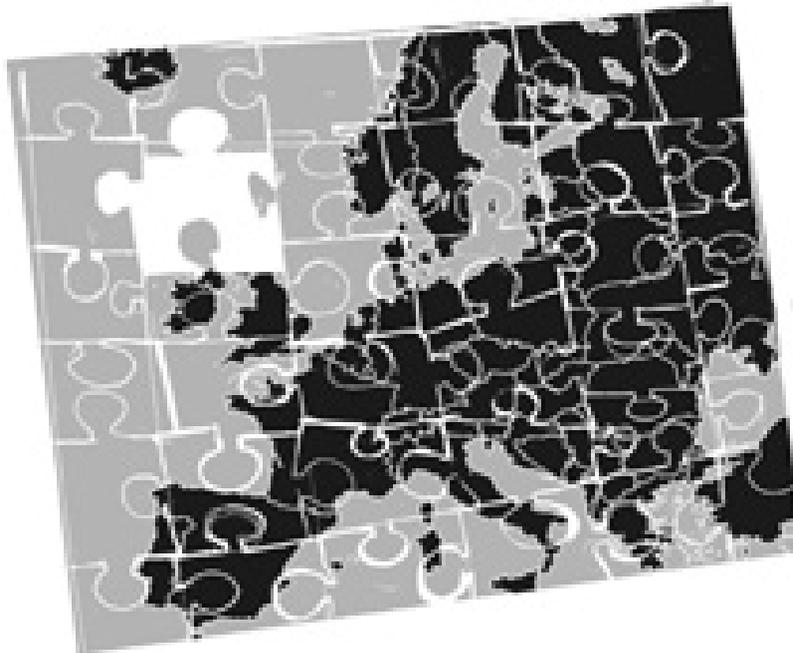
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when a vote isn't a vote

Continuing our series bringing news to Scotland from other countries Antoni Abad i Ninet looks at how the referendums Catalonia has held into its future have been ignored and what that means for nations and democracy

Over the past few months several referendums on self-determination have been held in Catalonia. These public consultations have taken place in hundreds of cities and towns with the collaboration of thousands of private citizens without the financial backing or support of any political party.

As it was expected the position of Spanish political parties and media, has been against this exercise of direct democracy and direct political participation. The reactions have ranged from the criminalisation of the popular referendums to the denial of legal effects regardless the outcome of participation and the results of the elections. The first message to the Spanish national discourse has been that over two hundred thousand people have already voted in a non politically-binding consultation, showing that the national self-determination necessarily requires personal self-determination. The main purpose of this paper is to explain how these popular consultations have been forged, the democratic and political meaning of these democratic movements and finally how this experience can be positive for other constitutionally oppressed nations without State.

In May 6th of 2009 a public legislative petition was presented in the President Board of the Parliament of Catalonia to enact a binding referendum of self-determination. In June 16th of 2009 the parliamentary body rejected the proposal arguing that such initiative was unconstitutional and against the Catalan statute of autonomy. In other words, a political entity such as the President Board of the Parliament of Catalonia, representative of the people of Catalonia, limiting itself and assuming an exclusive competence of the Spanish Constitutional Court decided to disallow a debate in our House of Representatives on the status of Catalonia within the Kingdom of Spain. This refusal was against two resolutions of the Catalan Parliament [December 12 1989 and October 1, 1998] that states:

"The Parliament of Catalonia, in the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights confirms once more

the Catalan people's right to determine freely their future as a people in peace, democracy and solidarity".

In some sense the resolution of the President Board of the Parliament of Catalonia was coincident with the failure to conduct a referendum by the Lehendakari Ibarretxe (Basque President) in 2007. Although in this case the Lehendakari was threaten by the Spanish judiciary for an ad hoc political felony because of his intention to develop a binding referendum in the Basque Country.

Following the refusal of the political representatives, the people decided to organise a popular consultation by themselves. Therefore in September 13, 2009 the town of Arenys de Munt decided to organize the first referendum of independence. Before the completion of the consultation the Spanish political apparatus attempt to limit the right to political participation of the citizens of the Catalan town prohibiting the popular consultation. The injunction of the consultation, the threats of the organisers and the judicial authorisation of a fascist Spanish demonstration in Arenys de Munt did not prevent the realisation of the referendum. The Query was formulated exclusively for residents of this village on the following question: Do you agree on Catalonia becoming an independent, democratic and social State of law, integrated in the European Union? This query was the first democratic one on Catalonia independence and, despite being municipal and symbolic, had a remarkable influence on Catalan and Spanish politics. After this first experience queries have spread throughout the nation, on December 13, 2009 several hundred thousand people in small towns and villages across Catalonia voted and the next queries are planned February 28, 2010 and April 25, 2010, when Barcelona will vote.

The Spanish Government has restricted the political debate on the nonbinding effect of the consultations. Certainly, no much can be done against the people democratically exercising their right of political participation. Although the Spanish Constitutional



text legitimates the armed forces to defend the Spanish territorial integrity, nobody doubted the Spanish reaction to the consultations and most importantly is that nobody seems to matter the reaction. What really matters is the decision of the Catalan people and how the international community will respect our democratic decision. In this last sense, as a citizen of Catalonia I want to thank the work of the international observers (Christopher White, Jan Jambon, Xose Manel Beiras, Agurne Barrusa, Gaizka Amorrortu, and others) as guarantors of the queries' transparency and international emissaries of the will of the people of Catalonia. The significance of the observers is also transcendent from an ideological point of view since they directly affect the Catalan and Spanish popular belief.

But the popular consultations of self-determination are also an excellent exercise of political theory. One of the main issues that emerge is related to the constitutional and democratic legitimacy of this sort of queries. Relations between democracy and constitutionalism have been analysed from Aristotle, Cicero and Polybius until today. This is clear evidence of the unresolved problematic of this issue. The topic appears and disappears in our systems as a kind of eternal return, in a Nietzschean sense, because it has not given a real solution (if there is one). There are basically three theoretical options for conceiving of the relationships between constitutionalism and democracy (Zurn): they can be equivalent, in this sense both concepts can be seen as more or less synonymous, so that use of one of the terms necessarily implies all of the various principles, ideas, institutions and practices involved with the other as well. They can be seen as basically, antithetical: constitutional concerns pull one way, democracy concerns pull the other. And finally they can be seen as mutually presuppositional: according to this view, democracy in some important sense cannot be realised independently of constitutionalism, and constitutionalism likewise inevitably requires forms of popular participation in government.

I consider the relations between constitutionalism and democracy as antithetical, because I see the constitutional/supreme court as a sort of modern oligarchy that needs to maintain a contemporary Mikte, which consolidates an institutional structure mirroring the socioeconomic classes. Demos and Democracy will be the poor class and constitutionalism and constitutional/supreme court will be the rest of economic classes. The antithetical character of these concepts does not mean the need of mediation between them.

I agree with Kramer when he affirms: "Modern Anti-populist sensibility presumes that ordinary people are emotional, ignorant, fuzzy-headed, and simple-minded, in contrast to thoughtful, informed, and clear headed elite. Ordinary people tend to be foolish and irresponsible when it comes to politics: self-interested rather than public spirited, arbitrary rather than principled, impulsive and close-minded rather than deliberate or logical. Ordinary people are like children, really. And being like children, ordinary people are insecure and easily manipulated.

The assumptions that have caused the cyclical appearance of this ancient conflict in modern constitutional democracies are partially based on the semantic indeterminacy (Derrida) of concepts such as democracy and sovereignty, popular consultation or referenda. Another factor to be considered is the political manipulation that occurs through legal constitutional interpretation.

Nowadays there are several champions of the people (Cicero), excellent authors like Mark Tushnet, Larry Kramer, Bruce Ackerman, and others who are trying to bring more transcendence to the people; they are trying to situate the people in the center of the political and juridical system. These theories are important because they educate people to participate in the contemporary decisions-making. Referenda and popular queries such as those related can be understood as an example of direct democracy.

Certain doctrinal and politic sectors in Catalonia have been trying to legitimize these popular queries based on Spanish Constitutional law. The Spanish Constitution of 1978 did not establish a completed or closed model for the territorial organisation of the State that can be subsumed into one of the two great types of State (federal or unitary). The constitutional text does not contain a particular model of territorial organisation because it does not expressly define one: it does not say whether the Spanish State is federal, integrated, unitary or regional; the Spanish State is not even defined as a "State of Autonomous Communities". We cannot fail to mention the fact that the State of Autonomous Communities appeared at a delicate moment of the modern history of the Spanish State and after 40 years of Fascist dictatorship. The Constitution a system biased in favor of the central government.

The Court has jurisdiction over conflicts between state authorities (including nations and regions), the lawfulness of international treaties according with the constitution, and the constitutionality of laws. In the Spanish case, the dispute over the scope of jurisdiction of each unit of government can legally be channelled through the conflict of powers between governments. Compared to the most of the federal systems, this institutional weakness exacerbates a higher level of conflict between the different levels of government. The Spanish Constitutional system does not facilitate communication and negotiation between the autonomous communities and the central state. Furthermore, the Constitutional Court is de facto the only institution that can provide solutions to these conflicts.

I will not deny that some of these arguments appear to be rational and very well grounded. But this strategy loses any sort of potential success in the fact that the only valid and binding constitutional interpretation is performed by the Spanish Constitutional Court, where Catalonia as such, has no representation in the style of Quebec in the Canadian Supreme Court.

Like hundreds of thousands of citizens of Catalonia, their representatives must self determinate individually and act in defense of the will of the citizens of Catalonia. Although this will challenges the Spanish legality.

Unlike the fascist demonstration that occurred on the day of consultation in Arenys de Munt, to consult the Demos is to expand the country's democratic roots. It is a matter of time that Catalonia will organise a legal binding referendum of self-determination, then we expect a response from the international community by rewarding a democratic, non-violent and open process. ■

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Reviews

how stupidity and greed sank the celtic tiger

Ship of Fools, Fintan O'Toole (Faber and Faber, 2009) £12.99

Fintan O'Toole has written a most satisfying book combining some brilliant passages of lucid exposition with wicked criticism of the major fools who believed and propagated the myths of the Celtic Tiger. Please keep in the front of your mind that Alex Salmond is quoted in February 2008 as pledging that "we will create a Celtic Lion economy to rival the Celtic Tiger across the Irish Sea." O'Toole's comments on the Irish model of development:

"The formula was ultimately simple - be nice to the rich. Give capital its head, don't stand in its way and it will work its magic. Let the wealthy become ever more wealthy and

everyone will benefit. The tragedy was not that Ireland's rulers and their cheerleaders chanted this mantra. It was that they actually believed in it."

And on the consequences of evidence of large scale corruption and tax evasion:

"Tens of thousands of people, including a large slice of the business elite, defrauded the Exchequer of hundreds of millions of pounds. The consequences ought to have been profound. Instead, they were simply non-existent."

But in addition to the eloquence, there is solid analysis demonstrating the extent of the rise and fall of the Irish economy. There is no denying that the Irish economic performance in the 1990s was remarkable. Unemployment fell from 15.6 per cent to less than 5 per cent. Poverty from 15 per cent to 5 per cent.

Average GDP per capita from 66 per cent of the EU average in 1986 to 111 per cent in 1999. Ireland benefitted from six times the EU average for foreign investment. In the ten years to 2004 growth was 7 per cent per annum - double the US rate and triple the EU rate. Ireland went from a land of emigration to immigration. Peace was established in Northern Ireland and the Irish felt a lot better about themselves.

But the author shows that there was as much good fortune in the Irish economic miracle as anything else:

- The decades of slow growth right up to 1988 and the status of the sick man of Europe produced a catch up surge.
- The benefits of the long global boom of the 1990s blew wind into the sails of the Irish economy
- The US invested \$375bn in Europe in the nineties and Ireland picked up a small but significant portion.
- Demographic factors - There was a bulge of younger people and women entering the labour market for the first time. Many elderly people were actually in the UK and the ratio of workers to dependents reduced from 10 workers to 22 dependents in 1986 to 10 workers to 5 dependents by 2005.
- The EU poured in IR £8.6bn between 1987 and 1998. (some 2.6 per cent of GDP)
- Heavy investment in state-funded third level education lead to the second highest level of third sector qualified population in Europe -at 42.3 per cent.

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- The Guardian



- A high level of social partnership and industrial peace underpinned the rapid changes.

It was a myth that growth was a result of neo-liberal economic policies as portrayed by some propagandists.

In fact he shows that Ireland's economic performance peaked in 2002 and has declined since with 20,000 manufacturing jobs lost between 2000 and 2006 and a balance of payments down from break-even in 2003 to Euro10m in the red by 2007.

What caused the problems is put down to the Fianna Fail government pursuing a policy of "growth derived from asset price inflation, fuelled by low interest rates, reckless lending and speculation"

Sadly the Celtic Tiger has been brought down. Irish GDP was set to shrink by 13.5 per cent in 2009 and 2010. Govt debt doubled in a year. Irish personal and corporate debt is the highest in Europe. Irish house prices have fallen faster than anywhere in Europe. Dublin has the highest property vacancy rates in Europe. The average Irish family lost half its assets. Unemployment rose faster than anywhere else in Europe. The state has had to establish a bad bank to take over the bad property loans that would otherwise wipe out all its banks- now the biggest property management company in the world. The issue is where does the country go now and the book concludes that it is doubtful whether lessons have been learnt, a new path defined and hope rekindled. He sees people not yet comprehending what has happened and who and what was to blame. There is a vain hope that business as usual can be restored.

The omens are not good. For all the talk of the V shaped recovery and the optimism of the markets, there are the examples of the other small states – Iceland, Greece, the Baltic republics. Iceland is exposed being out of the eurozone to currency markets but as the Greek experience shows a socialist government is powerless in the teeth of a eurozone equipped to enforce austerity measures. Nonetheless the option exists in Iceland to default and to resist the imposition of the errors of private speculators onto the population and the option exists in Greece of popular resistance, as their farmers have shown. The truth is that the battle for the future will be a long one with twists and turns to come with, perhaps, more to be learnt from the example of Brittany than Ireland for the future sustainability of the Celtic vision.

What this book shows with entertaining clarity is the delusions and bunkum that caused the problems in the first place but also that people are reluctant to face up to learn harsh facts. Can anyone tell me what Alex Salmond has learnt from this?

What I have learnt is that politicians in need of party funds to get re-elected and shadowy financial interests looking to promote get rich quick schemes need to be kept well apart. There is another book to be written about New Labour along these lines. ■

Cameron Brown

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web review

Henry McCubbin

It is almost ten years since Sir Stewart Sutherland's report on care for the elderly was published yet care for the elderly has resurfaced as an issue for the UK General Election due soon. The history of this commission is worth revising at this time. It is also well suited to research by internet as having taken place during the late 1990s the papers are all deposited at various government web sites for us to retrieve. A good shortened version of the report can be found at politicsforpeople.org/business/research/pdf_res_notes/rn00-78.pdf

We have to remember that this report was controversial at the time. The committee had twelve members, two of which had been added at Gordon Brown's insistence by the Treasury. It should come as no surprise to those of us who are aware of Brown's Kharsi attitude to democracy that the completed report

had two dissenters and it was the dissenter's report that found favour with the then chancellor. You can find the dissenting report at www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm41/4192/4192.htm

The two dissenters were duly ennobled as Lords Lipsey and Joffe. Lipsey was sent up to Scotland on a visit to try to persuade Henry McLeish to abandon his plans (see www.guardian.co.uk/society/2001/jan/24/socialcare.policy1) to provide universal care for the elderly and he was sent homeward but not before Susan Deacon, described somewhere as a left winger, indicated support for the Lipsey line. Lipsey has resurfaced during this latest debate and like the Bourbons has learned nought and forgotten nought. Joel Joffe has on the other hand been relatively quiet but I have to draw your attention to his interest in Allied Dunbar, which screwed up big on the endowment insurance scandal and of course sold health insurance. His line and Lipsey's was that we should be responsible and take out private insurance to provide for our needs in old age. news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/1128942.stm

Lipsey has been at it again and recently posted this insulting contribution criticising the fact that Scotland had the audacity to implement collective provision for elderly care www.guardian.co.uk/society/joepublic/2009/may/06/second-thoughts-david-lipsey. However Sutherland is not taking it lying down as can be seen at www.guardian.co.uk/society/2009/feb/25/interview-stewart-sutherland

The real problem for voters is that it is PM Brown that is behind this attempt to undermine our Scottish care provision and replace it with a privatised system such as that being promoted by the two ennobled insurance salesmen. In other words he's putting our wellbeing in to the hands of the croupiers. Blair even moved Frank Dobson from the NHS and replaced him with Alan Millburn who now lobbies for the privatisation of healthcare [Diaverum Healthcare AB (non-executive). Remuneration paid annually. Speech to Royal Bank of Scotland healthcare conference in November 2009, for which I was paid £5,198. Address of payer: JLA, 80 Great Portland Street, London W1W 7NW. Hours: 6 hrs. (Registered 11 January 2010) Participation in AstraZeneca private seminar in December 2009 for which I was paid £2,344. Address of payer: TBC. Hours: 4 hrs. (Registered 11 January 2010)]

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TEARFUL BROWN BATTERS INNOCENT SCAPEGOAT HORROR

The next General Election is just around the corner and already the press are sharpening their teeth in anticipation. And, fair play to our elected representatives, they are not shying away from the cut-and-thrust of intellectual debate.

For example, before his appearance in front of the Iraq inquiry, Tony Blair, doubtless mindful of the gravity of the situation chose not to be interviewed by some lightweight such as Andrew Marr or Jeremy Paxman, but to be subjected to the rigorous grilling which can only be received from Fern Britton on the lunchtime sofa. Trivia such as the dodgy dossier, David Kelly's suicide and the WMD nonsense were rightly ignored. Instead, Fern focussed on the important issues of the day, such as Cherie's spring fashion tips and ideas for quick light meals that can be rustled up in 45 minutes. And, naturally, Tony was able to crowbar in a few mentions of God.

Likewise, Gordon Brown before his appearance at the Iraq Enquiry opted to go in front of the nation under the intense forensic scrutiny of one of the country's most respected journalists. It really is no surprise he ended up in tears. In fact, if I'd found myself trapped in a TV studio with a smug self-satisfied oleaginous prick like Piers Morgan, I'd have started greeting a bloody sight earlier. Also, if I was Gordon Brown and realised to what extent I'd fucked up on my lifetime's ambition to run the country, I probably wouldn't stop crying from the moment I got up in the morning until I got the chance to take it out on some poor employee at Number 10.

Because it would appear that the soon-to-be-ex-Prime Minister has another side to him, according to the National Bullying Helpline, which sounds as if it is a very worthy charity but is really in effect a front for the Conservative Party. It seems strange that the Tories, the Tribe of Thatcher, the party of privilege, now headed up by the likes of David Cameron and George Osborne, should be so against bullying. Until, of course, you realise that most of them went to Eton and other similar boarding schools where doubtless the systematic child abuse doled out by teachers and older pupils alike may well have had a traumatising effect.

Anyway, the rather bizarre woman who runs the National Bullying Helpline claims that she has been inundated with calls from 10 Downing Street. Obviously, when faced with such claims, most governments would employ their most caring, sensitive spokesperson to deal with the media, someone the public trust and are reassured by. So Downing Street wheeled out Peter Mandelson to give the official statement that "this government does not support bullying, does not condone bullying, does not

indulge in bullying. That's it, end of story. Got that, you shits? Anyone saying we do is going to get a fucking kicking which they won't forget."

If Brown is indeed a bully, it strikes me he probably became one fairly late in life. Let's face it, he was hardly likely to have one at school. I reckon that a vaguely autistic boss-eyed son of a Church of Scotland minister with limited social skills is always likely to be on the receiving end of a Chinese burn. And anyone talking about having a moral compass is much more likely to get stabbed in the arse with a geometry compass, a much-underestimated weapon in the arsenal of the average 12-year-old playground tyrant.

Meanwhile, up here in Scotland, the Leader of Glasgow City Council Steven Purcell has quit politics on the basis of some habits he developed that he probably shouldn't have. His PR agent said he was suffering from exhaustion, while sources within the council claimed he was being treated for chemical dependency. Right up until everyone admitted what was really going on, the press had to write as if this was some kind of mystery that needs to be unravelled. However, the idea that the two statements were in some way contradictory is predicated on the bizarre assumption that the two states are mutually exclusive. Many people are both chemically-dependent and exhausted at the same time; it's known as cause and effect. One of the commonest side effects of a coke-fuelled weekend on the lash is a sense of acute exhaustion and depression in its aftermath. In fact, who has ever considered entering rehab when they are pissed? Quite the opposite, in fact, as the world normally seems quite a nice place under the protective blanket of booze.... Indeed, the idea of voluntarily checking into an institution where you can't get a drink would be the one thing to cause anxiety. However, when the morning (or much worse, the afternoon) hangover kicks in, all of a sudden the option of booking in to Castle Craig or the Priory suddenly seems very appealing.

I must admit I have a great deal of respect and sympathy for Steven Purcell. We frequently talk these days about our political leaders being out of touch with the voters, and the issues that most affect them. If Steven Purcell really does have a problem with drink and drugs, then surely he has tapped into the zeitgeist of the city he once led. ■

Vladimir McTavish's is appearing at The Stand on Tuesday 23rd March as part of the Glasgow Comedy Festival. His book, The Top 50 Greatest Scots Of All Time Ever is available now in bookshops and on Amazon.co.uk



CAMPAIGNING FOR SCOTTISH WORKERS' RIGHTS SINCE 1979

Congress Greetings

Everyone at Thompsons Solicitors in Scotland would like to wish delegates a successful and productive Congress. There is no doubt that we have many challenges in the year ahead, not least on the Justice front.

The SNP Government have a clear agenda to marginalise workers' rights by forcing health and safety and personal injury cases out of the Supreme Civil Court, the Court of Session, in favour of big business. They have provided for only those who can pay to use the courts.

In the coming year our system shall continue to be under attack from the Civil Courts Review of Lord Gill in support of such an SNP agenda.

The proper agenda must be to ensure that health and safety is given the highest standing in both our civil and criminal courts by:

- Fighting for real Corporate Homicide Legislation
- Calling for changes to anachronistic rules in relation to Fatal Accident Inquiries, demanding that our most senior judges deal with FAIs and that they have real and necessary powers to ensure and demand that lessons are learned from deaths at work
- By changing the law to ensure that those who have lost loved ones by negligent or reckless action of employers receive proper and fair compensation.

We will continue to support Unions in pursuit of Justice for their members.

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