

scottishleftreview

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Really, why bother?

salvaging something from the general election

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feedback

Letters for publication should be emailed to feedback@scottishleftreview.org

The current Labour government is deeply unpopular but it is more than likely to be re-elected but with a reduced majority.

The Conservatives offer little in the way of a serious challenge because they are still despised and internally fractious. The Liberal Democrats are a more serious challenge in terms of ideas and policies but lack the critical mass to make a breakthrough. Parties to the left of Labour without PR are no more than clutches of protest votes.

Does this amount to a democratic deficit, or even a crisis of democracy, in Britain? Whether it does will depend upon two main factors. One concerns Parliament itself and the other the public at large.

Firstly, will those remaining Labour MPs be the more anti-Blairites ones? Projections suggest many Blairites in marginal seats will lose out. Second, if Labour's majority is slim, will those returned Labour MPs being more or less inclined to engage in backbench rebellions and defeating the government? To date, there has been some security in rebelling in the context of a large government majority. Will the rebels have the same mettle, or will they be susceptible to the charge of bringing down their own government and letting the Tories back in?

Outside Parliament, what can ordinary people do to figure in these calculations? Organising in large numbers, like over the war in Iraq or hospitals closures, may have some bearing on this. Demonstrations, petitions and public meetings may have a greater currency than before. If this is fed through to direct pressure on MPs via their mailbags, surgeries and local press then it may make a difference. MPs may calculate they'd better be off being populist than being harried out of office several years down the line.

So ironically, the return of a Labour government, as is likely, may help revive democracy inside and outside of Parliament

precisely because it is a weak Labour government. Then the extent of ordinary people's participation in politics may be more than just voting once every five years, or not even voting at all in many cases. ■

Professor Gregor Gall, University of Stirling

The report commissioned by the Federation of Small Businesses and the Sunday Herald reveals that Scotland is not "the best small country in the world", as claimed by Jack McConnell. On the contrary, in virtually every league table for small, developed countries, Scotland comes last or near the bottom.

To many of us, this does not come as news. However, what concerns me is that the report has prompted calls for 'urgent action'. I strongly suspect that urgent action is the last thing Scotland needs at this moment in her history. We have had 'urgent action' for years now, in a succession of policy initiatives and changes, and things have just got worse. It is 'urgent actions' that have taken us so low. Without exception, these urgent actions have been attempts to treat the symptoms of Scotland's problems. Not once have they attempted to identify and address the deeper, root causes of these problems. For example, smoking is identified as a problem, so the urgent action is to ban it in enclosed public places. While it is true that this may reduce smoking, it does nothing to address whatever it is that causes people to smoke in the first place. Presumably this is a complex mixture of causes, including stress and anxiety. Common sense tells us that this stress and anxiety will look for other outlets if its causes are not addressed.

Similarly, we are told that the solution to many of Scotland's problems is to take people out of poverty and deprivation. If that is true, then why do we not take it seriously? Why do we continue to treat poverty symptomatically rather than

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systemically? Why do we not strike at the very roots of poverty, which is an economic system that pays some people too much and others too little? Giving those at the bottom of the pile a little more is not going to help if those at the top of the pile get a great deal more at the same time. All that happens is that relative poverty increases, as has been happening in Scotland every year since 1999. The rising tide does indeed lift all boats, but it lifts the luxury yachts faster. But I do not think that the real cause of Scotland's problems is poverty, although I agree that the system causing the poverty cannot be allowed to continue. I believe that the main cause of Scotland's problems is the nature of Scottish culture.

I travel a lot and cannot help noticing that people in countries that are materially poorer than Scotland often seem happier, more alive, than people in Scotland. They seem to have a source of happiness and vitality that is independent of how much money they happen to have. In other words, they have a culture that encourages that. Scotland does not need yet more 'urgent actions'. What Scotland most needs is a deep culture change. We need to get away from the fear, cliquishness and conformity that pervades Scottish life and replace them with courage, confidence, openness and passion. I am aware that a few people are trying to do something about this and I welcome that. Culture change will not come easily and may even take a generation or two. But we would do better to focus on that than focus on 'urgent actions'. Much better to step back for a while from the endless firefighting that Scottish policy has become and have a fundamental rethink about who we are and what we really want to be. That would make a big difference. Meanwhile, Scotland could also do with a vision.

There has to be a vision. No nation can hope to survive without a vision. However, it has to be an inspiring vision and it has to speak to people's highest aspirations and potential, not to lowest common denominators. At present, Scotland sights are set very low and very conventionally (i.e. economic growth and

modernisation). No one is energised or inspired by what passes for 'vision' today. We need to raise our aspirations considerably. That will probably happen only when we believe that we are capable of doing so, hence the need for culture change. ■

Chris Thomson, Director, Central Purpose

In virtually every league table for small, developed countries, Scotland comes last or near the bottom. To many of us, this does not come as news. However, what concerns me is that the report has prompted calls for 'urgent action'. I strongly suspect that urgent action is the last thing Scotland needs.

comment: elec-shunned

Commissioning this issue of the Scottish Left Review has not been easy. What we have discovered is that independent, thoughtful people do not really feel motivated to write about the General Election. To have turned it into a platform for the campaigns of the (in some cases nominally) left-of-centre parties would have been dispiriting; whatever this election is about, it is most certainly not a battle of big ideas. In the run-up to past elections SLR has provided guides to tactical voting. However, the overwhelming subtlety that would have to be the mark of any left strategy is so poorly suited to our current brand of mass 'democracy' that it seems pointless to pursue. Calling for people to vote anti-Tory to force an unpopular government out is one thing; calculating constituency by constituency how best to achieve the correct

Labour majority or punish the right politicians (and even then failing to agree) is something else altogether. At the risk of displaying a degree of narcissism, it is bad enough when the voters lose an interest in politics, but when even the committed political classes (other than those directly involved in getting someone elected) don't really seem to care, something is wrong.

It is perhaps this fact more than the election itself which raises the most important questions; what does this mood mean for politics, what does it mean for democracy, what can be done in this election and what can be done to ensure that there is never another election

A man falls from an aeroplane. As he falls towards his certain death he neither flaps his arms in an attempt to fly nor curls himself into a tight ball in the hope that he might bounce. Is this man therefore apathetic about his death?

like it?

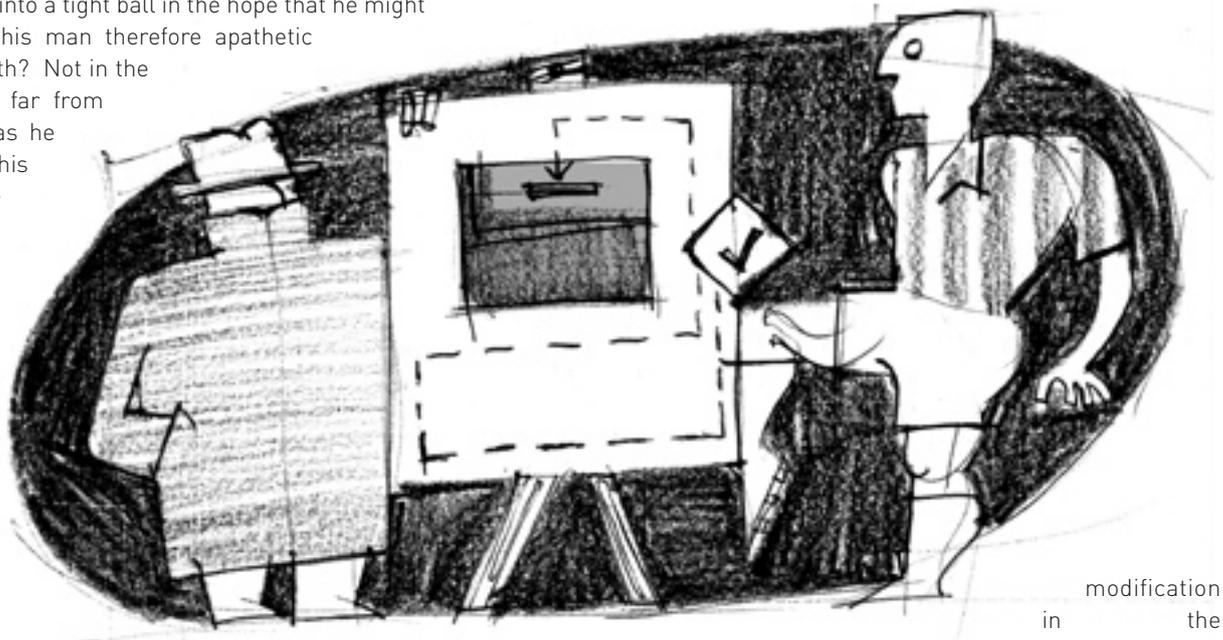


Apathy

In the endlessly lazy language which typifies what passes for political commentary nowadays, this election is all about apathy. Apathy is here used to mean indifference, but in fact apathy means more than being disinterested. It means lack of emotion, listlessness, lack of passion. The use of the word is telling. Why don't we read article after article about 'voter indifference' or the 'disinterested voter', a phraseology which would more accurately describe the mood of the public? In part it is just the herd instinct of a breed of journalist which is paid to think and analyse but which seems to have better things to do. But in part it is because there is a profound misunderstanding of the point of the relationship between voters and government. Yes people are disinterested in political processes – and so they should be. Processes are not the point; outcomes are the point. What people are supposed to be interested in is either change or stability, depending on your political goals. If they were interested in the arcane details of the means through which that change has to be achieved, there would be something wrong.

To illustrate the problem, let us consider an analogy. A man falls from an aeroplane. As he falls towards his

certain death he neither flaps his arms in an attempt to fly nor curls himself into a tight ball in the hope that he might bounce. Is this man therefore apathetic about his death? Not in the least. He is far from emotionless as he thinks about his life and the things he wanted to achieve. He is not



passionless as he hopes against hope that something might happen to save him that he might see his family again. He is not disinterested but is rather filled with horror, fear and anger. But he still doesn't flap his arms.

What is primarily wrong is that 'politics' and 'governance' have come to mean the same thing. Where once people dreamed of creating a better world and met to talk about how to get there, now we have only an endless succession of conferences about governmental processes. Newspapers focus on light-weight gossip and the Prime Minister deplores it – from the couches of the daytime lifestyle programmes. Governments find themselves drifting further from honesty and the newspapers lambaste it – in articles filled with deliberate distortions. One blames the other, and it provides both of them a perpetual get-out, precisely because it is a shared problem. And precisely because it is largely in the interests of both; the corporate press to keep us from changing things it doesn't want changed and politicians because when in power they under no circumstances want to be held to account.

We are in the middle (or, optimistically perhaps near the end) of a project which has lasted at least 30 years and which aims to make us believe that change is impossible. While not co-ordinated, its architects are nonetheless numerous and include the corporate media, much of the political establishment and a nexus of 'influencers' dominated by the corporate lobby. Why do they want us apathetic about politics? Well, because in an era of mass literacy, liberal democracy and rampant inequality, something really ought to give. Unless it can be stopped. What commentators call apathy is not some mutation in the citizen's response to power, it is an deliberate genetic

modification in the relationship. Until people start to accept that what people call apathy is in fact intentional, then it will be difficult to change anything. The first step in a left political strategy for the early decades of the 21st century should not be a campaign to get voters to turn out and vote despite their scepticism that it will change anything. The first step needs to be about propagating the belief that change is possible at all.

Democracy

If the word 'apathy' has been misused, the abuse of the word 'democracy' is quite remarkable. The stated aim of the United States – to 'spread democracy' and its apparent synonym 'freedom' – is of course completely Orwellian. In this construction, the word democracy very explicitly means the control of public will through political process and most certainly not the expression of that will. If in any doubt, look at the way democratic processes have been imposed on countries which don't have their own embedded democratic traditions. If a country has a clear public will to change something against the interests of a ruling or commercial elite, a proportional voting system is used. In Iraq the utmost effort was put into assuring that the proportional system of voting would not return any mandate for change. No electoral slate was to be allowed to gain over 50 per cent of cast votes (it took almost two weeks of counting to make sure that the main Shia slate came out at a percentage point below fifty), and of course any party campaigning on the immediate withdrawal of American troops was more or less banned. Meanwhile, in countries where the views of the population are split and a mandate for change is shared by less than half of likely voters (those who will

Russian intellectuals of this young century tend to have an attitude that would shock intellectuals in Western Europe. They tend not to talk about politics, on the basis that democracy and politics do not change anything. But who really understands 21st century democracy – us or them?



in isolation, you might think we were living in a totalitarian socialist state. What is problematic for the Scotsman world view is that the only sensible conclusion from the 2003 Scottish parliamentary election is that the public will in Scotland feels the 'consensus' simply isn't left enough. Democracy, it seems, is only for unruly Arabs.

Just like the debate about the use of politics, the democratic process is being transformed by vested interests to deal with the confluence between mass education and mass inequality. Russian intellectuals of this young century tend to have an attitude that would shock intellectuals in Western Europe. They tend not to talk about politics, on the basis that democracy and politics do not change anything and are therefore pointless topics of conversation. Our initial reaction might be that this view is the aberrant result of years of totalitarian rule. It is perhaps sobering to think what our second reaction might be if we were to be a bit more honest about The Facts on the Ground in our own country. Who understands 21st century democracy – us or them?

turn up and vote), a non-proportional system is used to keep the lever of power in the hands of the status quo. So generally Latin America does not have a proportional democracy but more usually a presidential system. And the word freedom has almost explicitly been used as a synonym for free trade or freedom of investment; in other words, freedom for commercial interests to gain maximum advantage. The American project is to spread a system of control of the public in the interests of big business – it requires only a dictionary, a regular glance at a broadsheet newspaper and half a wit to recognise this.

This is not a remote phenomenon. As historians look back at our era – not the Battle for Democracy but the Battle *of* Democracy – Europe and Britain in particular will not be a footnote. It is assumed that our 'mature' democracy has settled and established itself. In fact it is changing all the time. The democratic process is being shaped by all sides – apart, of course, from the public. In Scotland we have a campaign coming which will seek to change the voting system in Scotland to try to exclude all but the four big parties. In London the system of Cabinet Government which is the basis of our 'mature democracy' is being dismantled unilaterally by one man, and his vision of what 'democracy' should actually be is odd. 'It doesn't matter', we are told, 'if you think the things I have done are bad and wrong; you have to forgive me and vote for me anyway because I'm A Good Guy'. Meanwhile, the increasingly unhinged Scotsman group of ideological newssheets are terribly concerned about the immovable and harmfully cosy 'liberal left consensus' in Scotland which they blame for all our ills. If you were to read Scotsman commentary

Strategy

The problems are undoubtedly much bigger than this looming election, but we're going to have to vote anyway. So what to do? The Scottish Left Review is of course independent from all political parties and certainly has no editorial line on whom our readers should vote for. But there are some factors it is worth considering. There is no-one who really believes that much change can be achieved, but there are four possible outcomes which those on the left might make a case for.

Blair has said that if the people don't like what he's done they can vote him out; well, he asked for it say some anti-war voters

The first is the 'shockwave effect'. This is the hope that there might be an electoral curveball which catches the establishment on the hop and forces re-evaluation of the political status quo. In Scotland that would be most likely to mean large SNP gains, forcing the constitutional question to the front of the agenda again (perhaps even solving the question once and

for all by gaining Scotland its independence) and providing a much-needed stimulus to the left in the Scottish Labour Party. A large SSP vote might do the same thing, but would be much less likely to scare anyone by actually taking seats from them. At a UK level, this might mean large numbers of independent MPs being elected, or some sort of breakthrough for a radical party such as George Galloway's Respect Party. It in theory might even mean an outright Liberal Democrat win. It could force the UK Labour Party to scramble back towards its now-abandoned ideological homeland and could stimulate wider political dissent. There are two problems with this. The first is that the New Labour Project is experienced at resisting all

pressure from the left. It is easy to imagine Blair wringing his hands over such a result and claiming that his new majority must therefore be used to meet these concerns by upping the pace of public service reforms. (It is fair to say, however, that this sort of result might have a more favourable affect on Scottish Labour which is at some genuine risk from the left.) But the main problem with this hope is of course that the UK electoral system is designed precisely to ensure that such an outcome doesn't happen. And, other than possibly in Scotland, Wales and a few isolated examples in England, it won't.

The second outcome might be called the 'Gulliver Effect'. Here, the political behemoths of Labour and the Tories are bound down and restrained by small majorities. This needs Labour to lose enough seats to be forced to compromise with the Liberal Democrats to govern, tempering Blair's crusading militarism and neo-liberal economics and forcing constitutional change onto the agenda. Perhaps the Lib Dems might make proportional representation Blair's only hope of governing thus finally opening up Britain's democracy. The problem with this is that it is tricky to achieve this with your vote. Some fear this strategy might elect a Howard government by mistake, others fear that if uncoordinated it would simply fail and waste a lot of votes. Labour Party members might also raise fears about whether the Lib Dems are actually better than a chastened Blair. Nevertheless, this is a genuinely possible outcome.

The third we might call the 'Grail of the Chastened Blair'. This suggests that we hold with Labour and that a chastened Blair (and eventually a Gordon succession) will do the things a Labour government ought to do. Unfortunately, you have to be completely unfamiliar with Tony Blair and his track record to believe this. Blair would take a working majority of any sort as a clear indication of the overall righteousness of his warmongering and privatisation. The Labour Party can of course once again be a party of the left, but casting a vote for this would be a long-term investment and certainly not a down-payment on a socially progressive five years. It is a likely outcome nevertheless.

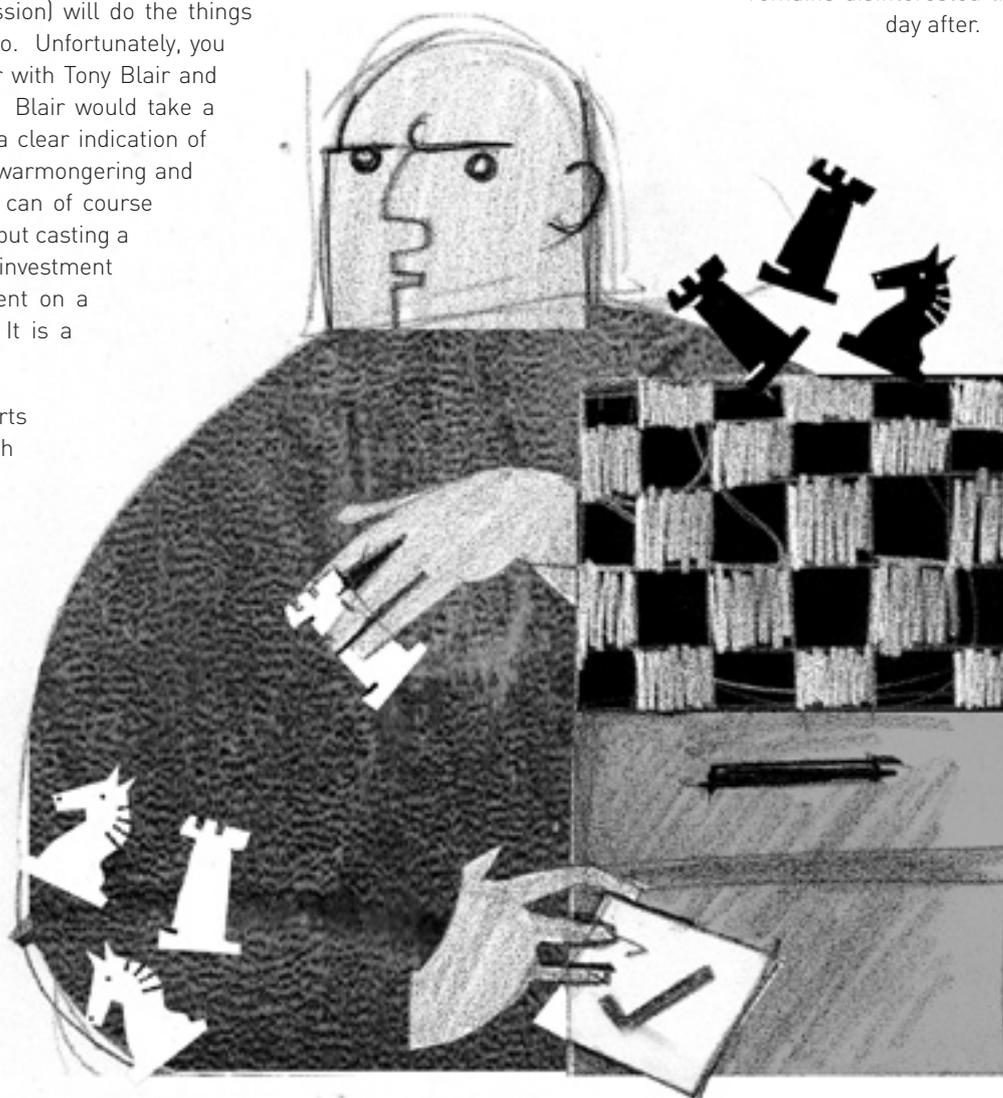
Finally, there is the 'Just Deserts Strategy'. This is an approach which says that you have to vote on what people have done and not what they will do, and that Blair must be punished. If this means a Tory government, so be it. Blair has said that if the people don't like what he's done they can vote him out; well, he asked for it say some anti-war voters. The fear is that if he does get re-elected Blair will draw conclusions based on this narrow formulation. In favour of this is the argument that in fact the Tories are not much worse than Labour in most policy terms

and that an opposition to the free-market agenda, even if not in government, might be preferable to the right-wing consensus in Westminster. The problem is that this is a pretty big jump. Frankly, it is difficult to accept that a Tory government is ever a good thing. In entirely selfish terms, this might not be so bad in Scotland where there would be able to insulate ourselves from much of the Tory agenda (and many hope this would free Scottish Labour to be radical). But it is probably not something we ought to wish on the poor and the non-whites of England.

Reformation

And then there is the after-election. In fact, not so much needs to be said about this. Simply put, the left is going to have to swallow its own disinterest and gather round a major campaign for constitutional change in Britain. We need a written constitution, we need a proportional voting system which can dismantle millennia of rule by essentially the same elites, we need the Monarchy taken out of government, we need political education so that ordinary voters can understand what is happening in their country and make a more informed decision about change, we need plurality in the media so that the edifice of free-market propaganda is removed, and we need to support the development of an intellectualism which can engage with the big problems of our age and come up with big solutions. The left may well be disinterested in polling day. It

will make a terrible mistake if it remains disinterested the day after. ■



briefing: the new constituencies

The new Scottish Westminster constituencies mean that the majorities from the last election provide no guide for voting. Adding the 2001 votes ward by ward, the party positions in the new constituencies can be calculated. The following should be all the information you need.

Labour seats ranked in order of % majority

	Constituency	Majority	Majority %	Closest challenger
1	Dumfries & Galloway	141	0.28	Con
2	Dundee East	496	1.29	SNP
3	Ochil & South Perthshire	821	1.83	SNP
4	Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey	1134	2.65	LD
5	Dunbartonshire East	2601	6.29	LD
6	Na h -Eileanan an Iar	1074	8.16	SNP
7	Aberdeen South	3931	9.49	LD
8	Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale & Tweeddale	5254	12.06	Con
9	Edinburgh South	5785	13.95	LD
10	Edinburgh South West	7951	17.91	Con
11	Renfrewshire East	9141	18.90	Con
12	Stirling	8303	19.28	Con
13	Edinburgh North & Leith	8688	21.56	LD
14	Dundee West	8410	22.54	SNP
15	Ayrshire Central	9772	22.96	Con
16	Aberdeen North	9294	23.66	SNP
17	Linlithgow & Falkirk East	11796	26.46	SNP
18	Ayr, Carrick & Cumnock	12387	26.56	Con
19	Ayrshire North & Arran	12140	27.33	SNP
20	Lanark & Hamilton East	12861	28.59	SNP
21	Inverclyde	11314	29.06	LD
22	East Kilbride, Strathaven & Lesmahagow	13999	29.29	SNP
23	Glasgow North	8023	29.36	LD
24	Paisley & Renfrewshire North	12417	29.58	SNP
25	Falkirk	13555	30.17	SNP
26	Kilmarnock & Loudoun	13621	30.51	SNP
27	Midlothian	12017	31.29	SNP
28	East Lothian	14011	31.73	LD
29	Cumbernauld, Kilsyth & Kirkintilloch East	12667	31.79	SNP
30	Livingston	13638	31.88	SNP
31	Edinburgh East	12808	32.56	LD
32	Glasgow South	13042	33.15	SNP
33	Glasgow Central	9382	33.82	SNP
34	Glenrothes	12988	33.95	SNP
35	Paisley & Renfrewshire South	13968	36.10	SNP
36	Motherwell & Wishaw	13778	36.33	SNP
37	Dunfermline & West Fife	14845	36.64	SNP
38	Glasgow North West	13231	38.83	SNP
39	Airdrie & Shotts	13545	39.46	SNP
40	Dunbartonshire West	18169	39.49	SNP
41	Kirkcaldy & Cowdenbeath	16238	39.91	SNP
42	Rutherglen & Hamilton West	18504	44.42	SNP
43	Glasgow South West	14687	44.42	SNP
44	Glasgow East	15238	46.62	SNP

Top five target seats for Labour

	SNP
1	Dundee East from Labour
2	Ochil & South Perthshire
3	Na h-Eileanan an Iar
4	Dumfries & Galloway
5	Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey from Labour

SNP seats ranked in order of % majority

Constituency	Majority	Majority %	Closest challenger
1 Angus	532	1.52	Con
2 Moray	1852	5.06	Lab
3 Perth & North Perthshire	5020	11.01	Con
4 Banff & Buchan	9744	27.37	Con

Liberal Democrat seats ranked in order of % majority

Constituency	Majority	Majority %	Closest challenger
1 Argyll & Bute	3832	9.16	Con
2 Edinburgh West	5320	11.86	Lab
3 Aberdeenshire West & Kincardine	5146	13.44	Con
4 Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross	4078	14.33	Lab
5 Gordon	6845	17.36	Lab
6 Orkney & Shetland	3475	20.77	Lab
7 Ross, Skye & Lochaber	6567	21.26	Lab
8 Berwickshire, Roxburgh & Selkirk	10770	24.80	Con
9 Fif e North East	9686	26.20	Con

Three-way marginal seats - less than 15% separating first & third parties

Constituency	First	Majority % first over second	Second	Majority % first over third	Third
Moray	SNP	5.06	Lab	6.49	Con
Angus	SNP	1.52	Con	14.90	Lab
Perth & North Perthshire	SNP	11.01	Con	11.55	Lab
Ochil & South Perthshire	Lab	1.83	SNP	11.34	Con
Dumfries & Galloway	Lab	0.28	Con	7.27	SNP
Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey	Lab	2.65	LD	9.20	SNP
Argyll & Bute	LD	9.16	Con	10.12	Lab
Dunbartonshire East	Lab	6.29	LD	10.88	Con

Source D. Denver, C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, Media Guide to the New Scottish Parliamentary Constituencies, Plymouth: Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre

for each party

Lib Dem	Labour	Conservative
Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey from Labour	Moray from SNP	Dumfries & Galloway from Labour
Dunbartonshire East from Labour	Argyll & Bute from Lib Dems	Angus from SNP
Aberdeen South from Labour	Perth & North Perthshire from SNP	Moray from SNP
Moray from SNP	Edinburgh West from Lib Dems	Argyll & Bute from Lib Dems
Edinburgh South from Labour	Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross from Lib Dems	Dunbartonshire East from Labour

When they said public services stretched from the cradle to the grave, I didn't think they meant me, personally.



Government pension changes will force us to work till we drop. Help us make them think again.

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Scotland



Public service workers do stressful jobs, or jobs that carry heavy physical demands. Local government workers are twice as likely to die between the ages of 60-64 than someone working in IT or financial services. 73% of Paramedics retire with ill-health before they are 60. Government proposals will force people to choose between working till they drop, and taking a cut of up to 30% in their pension.

For further information please contact UNISON, UNISON House, 14 West Campbell Street, Glasgow, G2 6BX.
Tel 0870 7777 000, www.unison.scotland.org.uk/pensions/index.html



SCOTTISH EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

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- standing up for press freedom
- raising standards of journalism
- campaigning for better employment law

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you're a socialist; can you vote labour? discuss

Tommy Sheppard was Deputy General Secretary of the Scottish Labour Party but resigned his membership unhappy about the drift of the party. He now runs The Stand Comedy Club. Elaine Smith is Labour MSP for Coatbridge and Chryston. Here they debate whether a socialist can still vote for Labour at the forthcoming General Election

Tommy:

The question I've been asked to start with is 'can Labour be saved?'. I'll take this to mean 'is there much chance of the Labour Party once again being a crusade for social change at home and abroad, rather than the conservative force it has become in recent times'. The answer is no, not much. More importantly, even if this reversal were possible, it will not be brought about by voting Labour this year.

You and I don't agree on everything Elaine, but by and large we are part of a left social democratic tradition that believes in better public services, the eradication of poverty, the use of government to temper the actions of private firms to the public interest, and action to make those who can afford to pay more of our community costs. And of course a break with US foreign policy and the creation of international progressive alliances.

Put simply, the lower the Labour majority in the next parliament, and the more MPs there are from left of centre opposition parties, the more likely it is that policies like these will see the light of day. And to take it further, the very best chance of getting some progressive policies on the statute book, or some of the Labour Cabinet's more reactionary ideas kept off, is a minority Labour government dependant on the support of Liberal Democrats, Nationalists, or Independents.

I'm guessing, but I'd say that between 15 to 25 per cent of the electorate might agree with a modern left agenda. These people, once almost entirely labour voters and now spread across the

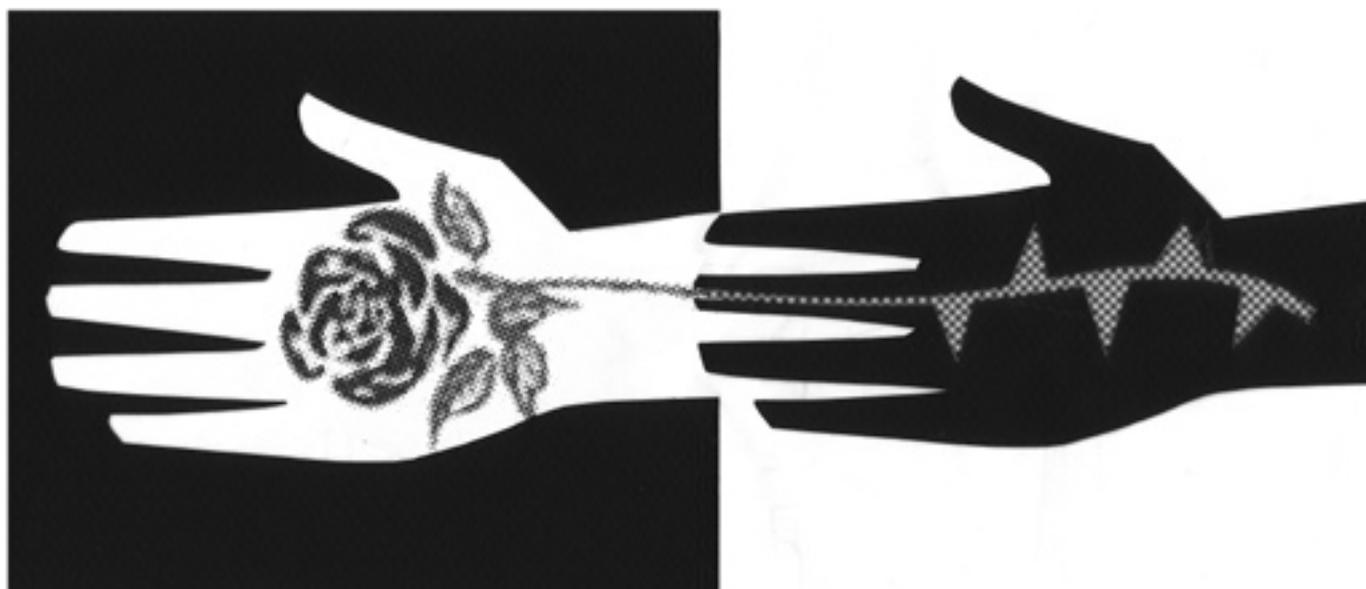
supporters of several parties, are completely unrepresented in parliament. Worse, the Labour Party now believes they do not need to be represented, and that if a centre right coalition can be maintained to the exclusion of the Tories, the left will simply have nowhere else to go. It is this outrageous political arrogance which needs to be challenged. And if it means voting Liberal Democrat to challenge it, so be it.

Elaine:

I think that Labour can be saved, but only if the party members who have hung on to their cards by their finger nails take action to reclaim the party. Change will also be helped if those who have left in disgust and despair at the neo-liberal tenets of the right wing New Labour Project rejoin and work within the party to shift the direction and policies. The trade unions must also recognise their responsibility to take action to deliver change.

In addressing the voting issues you raise, I don't believe that tactical voting will achieve what you hope for. This can be evidenced by the Lib/Lab coalition in the Scottish Parliament, which, contrary to what you propose, has not resulted in a swing to the left. Indeed, action such as the removal of poindings and warrant sales, the rejection of changes to the Fire Service and, more recently, the backlash against tendering of the state owned Calmac, have only taken effect due to back bench Labour MSPs breaking the whip or threatening to do so.

Whilst I would agree that from an overall perspective New Labour in Government has behaved like a 'wet' Tory administration, it



is nevertheless indisputable that policy and legislative changes that are sympathetic to the aims of the Labour and trade union movement have been implemented since 1997. Urging people not to vote Labour is, I believe, a dangerous tactic that could well result in the election of Michael Howard's Tories, or even a coalition of Tories, Independents, Liberals or Nationalists. This would be an infinitely worse scenario than New Labour for Britain and the Labour and trade union movements – although it might hold some interesting implications for the future direction of the Scottish Parliament.

I do agree with you that the maintenance of a centre-right coalition suits New Labour and works to exclude the left. I don't, however, believe that the kind of coalitions with Labour you mention would necessarily change that. Deals have to be done and the lure of VIP Volvos and Ministerial salaries is often strong enough to pull to the right known left-wingers, never mind centrist parties. The best way to achieve social change still has to be through the Labour Party in Government, with reclamation of the party paramount to that aim. If you believe in a parliamentary road to socialism, then I would contend that you must accept that a reclaimed Labour party is the best way to achieve that aim. As for your suggestion of voting Liberal Democrat, you are clearly in the right career running comedy clubs!

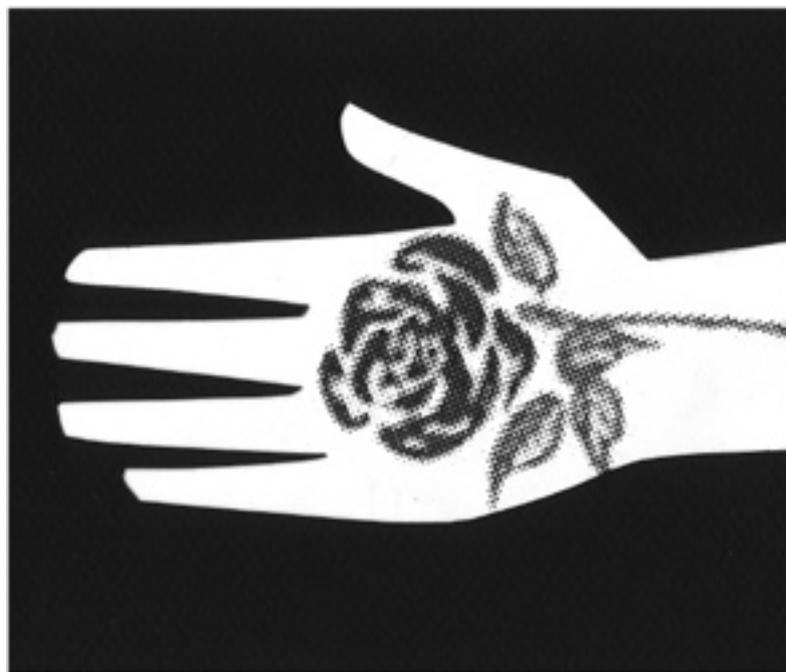
Tommy:

Don't get me wrong. I accept that it has been better these last seven and half years having Labour in power rather than the Tories. Public spending has increased, although not at the rate we would have liked, and sadly a lot of it has been siphoned off for the rich by subsidising poverty wages and funding private finance initiatives. There've been other advances too, not least the creation of the Scottish parliament. But it's not a great end of term report from any sort of left perspective. There's got to be more to life and politics than simply being a wee bit better than the Tories (and in some cases not even that).

And what exactly are we supposed to be voting for next time. Should we give New Labour a retrospective mandate for its continuing Iraqi adventure? Am I to support imprisonment without trial and compulsory identity cards? Do we continue to use the public finances to provide private capital with a return on investment? Is it another four years of not tackling the huge inequality of wealth and power in modern Britain?

I recently read in **The Herald** that Labour Chairman (sic) Ian McCartney is promising the LibDems a bloody nose by painting them as soft on drugs, crime, and just about anything else it is possible to be soft on. Dear God, what has it come that the Labour Party utilises almost to the letter the attacks made on it not twenty years before to demonise its opponents for being too left-wing, too radical, too soft. The truth is that many of the progressive policies of the Scottish parliament – such as free care for the elderly or the abolition of tuition fees – would not have been adopted so quickly had there been a huge Labour majority. Not because Labour MSPs wouldn't have wanted it, but because the London party machine would quickly have taken control. LibDem or SNP pressure serves as a convenient excuse for the Scottish administration to get off the hook when their London masters seek explanations for apparent political deviance.

I hold no brief for the Liberal Democrats. But they happen to be there. In many parts of England punters have no other alternative. Frankly, I hope they win a bucketful of seats



because this is the only thing now that will force the Labour Party to acknowledge any constituency to its left. It is the only way to give new Labour a wake-up call. This isn't the early eighties. The left inside the Labour Party is incredibly weak. The right has taken unprecedented control of the party organisation. There is no activist base any more. The return to the fold that you dream of isn't going to happen. The alienation is deeper and more long-lasting than ever before. There are no troops for you to rally any more. The most sensible approach for anyone wanting a parliament of a more progressive and reforming hue is to vote tactically to achieve the twin objectives of minimising the number of both Labour and Tory members.

Ironically, even though you disagree with this, it might just achieve the regeneration of the Labour left you wish for. Apart from anything else it would get rid of a fair number of the odious little carpetbaggers and toe-rags in the current Parliamentary Labour Party. They'll not hang around in the nasty working class places which gave them a good living all these years, and as they scuttle back to their PR firms and banks, there might actually be some sense in local activists joining the party as obedience to the central machine becomes less slavish. But that will be then. This is now. Another huge Labour majority will simply continue the process of suffocating the last remaining radical voices in the party.

Elaine

It is difficult to argue with what you say since I agree with much of it and share your concerns for the future. Therefore, I can only do so from the basic premise that I believe the Labour Party can be revitalised and made more democratically accountable to its members. That can only happen if current members take a more active stance, the trade unions flex their muscles and members who have left rejoin. On the latter point, I don't mean the 'New Labour, New Member' brigade who joined Tony's fan club, but rather the real Labour members who have left in disgust and frustration.

I don't agree with your analysis that the Liberals are more left wing than Labour. Throughout England and Wales and even in one instance here in Scotland the Liberal Democrats and Tories have joined forces to form the governing coalitions of nearly 30



Local Authorities. In terms of the Scottish Parliament, any left wing credentials on the part of the Lib Dems may be visible through the rose tint of tuition fees or free care for the elderly. However, two favourable policies do not a movement make and the reality is that neither would have seen the light of day had the majority of the Scottish Parliamentary Labour Party disagreed with them. If the Liberals were to take control of Westminster, or enter coalition with the Tories, we would be catapulted back to the *19th* century and the trade unions could say goodbye to any influence on government policy and legislation. You may of course argue that they have little influence on New Labour, but I would dispute that as evidenced by the recent Warwick agreement. In terms of trade union influence in Scotland, I would point to the memorandum of understanding with the Scottish Executives and the recent challenge to the Executive on Cal-Mac.

I disagree with you about the left inside the Labour Party being weak. I can't argue from any in-depth knowledge of the situation in England but I would merely point out with regard to the healthy campaign to 'Save the Labour Party' of which I am a member and the recent setting up of the Labour Representation Committee that there are strong moves afoot to challenge New Labour and the 'Third Way'. In Scotland, the Campaign for Socialism has been growing in numbers over the last few years, lately gaining a number of young party members. The CfS has been very successful in gaining media attention and has been actively involved with the major Trade Unions in instigating the Revitalise alliance, which aims to gain more democracy for the party and grassroots members in Scotland. CfS members have also been successful in achieving selections as Election candidates.

Of course it is hard to remain in a party when you're at odds with many of your Government's policies. However, do the Lib Dems and their willingness to be all things to all people – evidenced by the gaping policy expanse between their left-of-centre tactics in Scotland and their widespread alliances with the Conservatives in the South of England – really offer a credible and consistent alternative? As I have said, if you believe in the Parliamentary road to socialism, surely you must concede that the Labour party is the only vehicle capable of achieving it. Even George Galloway, who has more reason than most to despise New Labour, said in the Weekly Worker December 4, 2003:

"The Labour Party has millions of voters. It is known in every household in the land. It has hundreds of MPs, thousands of councillors. Even now - though we note the haemorrhaging in its ranks - it still has a couple of hundred thousand members. This is a behemoth compared to other left groups, even the most successful of them"

I hope that another Labour majority in the elections will result in a radical third term that delivers for the people that the Labour Party was founded to represent. However, to ensure that happens, and to ensure that the impostors masquerading as the Labour Party disappear back to their PR firms, banks and boardrooms, party members must overturn the democratic deficit and take their party back. I applaud all those who remain in the party, in particular the members of CfS, during this difficult time in the party's history and I remain hopeful that we can regain the party to, at the least, a social democratic agenda. Why be on the fringes Tommy? Join in the fight!

Tommy

It's always hard to face the futility of one's actions. I should know. But it's time to get real, Elaine. The point is not whether there are some good socialists in the Labour party - there are. Nor is it whether there are right-wingers in the Liberal Democrats or SNP - there are. The point is whether we can achieve more equality, greater personal freedom and increase democracy by voting Labour. And the sad truth is that we cannot. Do not pretend that it is your views that will be put before the electorate in May. They will not. I guess that some of them (certainly some of mine) may be represented by the SSP, but given the scandalous anti-democratic distortions of the Westminster electoral system I cannot advance an argument for voting for them other than as a protest. When I joined the Labour Party twenty-five years ago, probably 90 per cent of the people who believed in what I believed in were members too. Nowadays, though my views haven't changed much, I'd guess 90 per cent of the people who agree with me are not members of the Labour Party. You ignore this seismic change at your peril.

And here's the rub. It is vital for progress that the size of the Labour majority is less than the number of people inside the Parliamentary Labour Party with a socialist (or even social-democratic) conscience. If not, then there will be more insignificant rebellions and much hand-wringing at Campaign for Socialism meetings as Blair continues his Christian democratic crusade for social capitalism. And since Labour MPs with a capacity for independent thought are constantly under attack, we'll need to try to make that majority as small as possible. The truth is that support for a political party has now become a matter of tactics rather than principle inasmuch as the party which will further what you believe in may change from one year to the next. I'd never advocate voting Tory since they don't believe in what I believe. But with everybody else, all bets are off. What I'd really like is parliament with Labour as the biggest party, the Tories reduced to a rump and a huge swathe of Liberals, Nationalists and mavericks in between. I bet people would take more of an interest in politics then. We'd certainly get rather more of a left agenda implemented. And there is the irony. If I get what I want, your position will be so much stronger. And if I don't, it won't be that long until they come for you. ■

Tommy Sheppard was Deputy General Secretary of the Scottish Labour Party and now runs The Stand Comedy Club Elaine Smith is Labour MSP for Coatbridge and Chryston

an MOT for MP hopefuls

Henry McCubbin looks at the record of those MPs standing for re-election to help you work out whether your local MP is worth voting for

As you can guess, in this edition of Scottish Left Review we are attempting to bring together information, which will help readers towards an informed opinion on the parties and the candidates before them at the upcoming election. The information in this article has been gleaned from a variety of sources about existing Westminster MPs who have, as the police would say, 'previous'. This is a game anyone can play and the sources will be provided to aid personal involvement in this escapade. The list of candidates or PPCs (Prospective Parliamentary Candidates) is not complete as the parties have still to make up their minds on some seats, so there is still a chance of sitting MPs being given a quango or a seat in the House of Appointees to make way for Eric Joyce clones.

The composition of the table is straightforward. The new constituency that an old MP has migrated to is given and four litmus test votes are shown. 'F' means that they voted for the subject in the title and 'A' against. 'NS' – no show – means they were in the toilet at the time of the vote. Socialism has an effect deep down in to the bowels of new Labour. 'IW' refers, of course, to the Labour Party's imperial misadventures in Iraq. 'TF' refers to the imposition of top up fees south of the border and to how those Scottish MPs that participated in that vote behaved. The next column ('FH') refers to the votes on so called foundation hospitals to allow us to evaluate whether MPs from Scotland change ideologies at Gretna. The final vote column ('RP') refers to a vote held on a motion supporting the Labour Party Conference decision to bring the railways back into public ownership as the franchises end. Difficult one this because it appears that there are more Labour conference decision supporters in the Lib Dems and the SNP in Scotland than in the Labour's entire contingent in Westminster.

Finally the last column is a performance chart to let readers see what they get for appointing a representative on a salary in excess of £55,000 a year. We need pass no comment except to say that in business you would expect some independent thinking on that scale of pay. Now here's an odd thing; Alex Salmond never voted against his own party, just what you would expect since he is the party – but Charles Kennedy did. Shurely shome mistake here?

As to the sources, readers are directed to www.theyworkforyou.com , www.publicwhip.org.uk/ , www.westminsterwatch.co.uk/ and www.alba.org.uk/ . Theses sites are continuously updated and provide you with a wealth of information on your MP. Make your own chart and think of it as a sort of value for money exercise.



			IW	TF	FH	RP	
Aberdeen North	Lab	Frank Doran	A	F	F	A	Spoke in seven debates in the last year — 557th out of 659 MPs. Asked no written questions in the last year — 548th out of 659 MPs. This MP hardly ever votes against their party — 336th out of 650 MPs. Rebelled against war in Iraq and again in order to double his pensions accrual rate against that of public sector workers
Aberdeen South	Lab	Anne Begg	A	F	F	NS	Spoke in 35 debates in the last year — 167th out of 659 MPs. Asked 20 written questions in the last year — 376th out of 659 MPs. Rebelled against Iraq war and also the reduction of MP's generous mileage allowances.
Airdrie & Shotts	Lab	John Reid	F	F	F	NS	He has held more offices than any other minister in the Labour government having been successively Minister of State for Defence, Minister of State for the Environment, Secretary of State for Scotland, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Chairman of the Labour Party, Leader of the House of Commons, then Secretary of State for "Oh fuck not Health". Reid's current position is somewhat delicate with the Scottish Parliament legislating on health matters in Scotland, his responsibility is solely for England & Wales. Reid has made many enemies, especially in his own party, and at the last general election Reid was described by the then First Minister of Scotland, Henry McLeish MSP, as 'a patronising bastard'. Helen Liddle, who had been sacked as Secretary of State for Scotland in 2003, was tempted to stand down with an offer of the post of British High Commissioner to Australia, and Reid was shoe-horned into her seat. Defied the whip on the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill.
Angus	SNP	Mike Weir	A	A	A	F	Spoke in 43 debates in the last year — 107th out of 659 MPs. Asked 83 written questions in the last year — 173rd out of 659 MPs. This MP never rebels against his party — 619th out of 650 MPs.
Argyll & Bute	LibDem	Alan Reid	A	A	A	NS	Spoke in 36 debates in the last year — 153rd out of 659 MPs. Asked 28 written questions in the last year — 330th out of 659 MPs. This MP occasionally rebels against his party — 161st out of 650 MPs.
Ayr, Carrick & Cumnock	Lab	Sandra Osborne	F + NS	F	F	A	Spoke in seven debates in the last year — 557th out of 659 MPs. Asked five written questions in the last year — 486th out of 659 MPs. This MP hardly ever rebels against her party — 353rd out of 650 MPs.
Banff & Buchan	SNP	Alex Salmond	A	A	A	NS	Spoke in 64 debates in the last year — 41st out of 659 MPs. Asked 82 written questions in the last year — 175th out of 659 MPs.
Berwickshire, Roxburgh & Selkirk	LibDem	Michael Moore	A	A	A	NS	Spoke in 29 debates in the last year — 223rd out of 659 MPs. Asked 71 written questions in the last year — 194th out of 659 MPs. This MP occasionally rebels against his party, mainly on hunting — 120th out of 650 MPs.

Key: IW = vote on war in Iraq TF = vote on tuition fees FH = vote on foundation hospitals RP = vote on rail nationalisation
F = voted for A = voted against NS = no show NV = no vote

			IW	TF	FH	RP	
Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross	LibDem	John Sinclair, third Viscount Thurso	A	A	A	F	Spoke in 39 debates in the last year — 131st out of 659 MPs. Asked 310 written questions in the last year — 32nd out of 659 MPs. This MP occasionally rebels against his party — 150th out of 650 MPs.
Central Ayrshire	Lab	Brian Donohoe	A+ NS	F	F	A	Spoke in 21 debates in the last year — 349th out of 659 MPs. Asked 23 written questions in the last year — 359th out of 659 MPs. This MP occasionally rebels against his party — 146th out of 650 MPs. Last five were over Member's allowances, modernisation of the House of Commons and Car Mileage Allowance.
Coatbridge, Chryston & Bellshill	Lab	Tom Clarke	A	F	F	A	Spoke in 34 debates in the last year — 176th out of 659 MPs. Asked six written questions in the last year — 478th out of 659 MPs. This MP hardly ever rebels against his party — 343rd out of 650 MPs.
Cumbernauld, Kilsyth & Kirkintilloch East	Lab	Rosemary McKenna	F	F	F	A	Spoke in seven debates in the last year — 557th out of 659 MPs. Asked one written question in the last year — 528th out of 659 MPs. This MP hardly ever rebels against her party — 340th out of 650 MPs. Described by alba.org.uk as "one of the most sinister figures in Scottish politics, is on the extreme right wing of the Labour party. The constituency party was not allowed to chose its own candidate and the London leadership imposed McKenna. - she was a leading member of the Network organisation, Labour's equivalent of the Thought Police. McKenna is best known for her leading role in the notorious Labour selection committee for candidates for the first Scottish parliamentary elections. While McKenna's committee found that her own daughter was the kind of candidate who would make an ideal Labour MSP, better known candidates were rejected. These included Dennis Canavan MP (now an Independent MSP), Ian Davidson MP, Michael Connarty MP, Donald Dewar's special advisor, Murray (now Lord) Elder, East Ayrshire Council leader David Sneller, North Lanarkshire Council leader Harry McGuigan, former Labour assistant general secretary Tommy Shephard, former Labour Glasgow chairman Mary Picken, former SNP activist Isobel Lindsay, and Susan Deacon."
Dumfries & Galloway	Lab	Russell Brown	F	F	F	NS	Spoke in 30 debates in the last year — 211th out of 659 MPs. Asked 27 written questions in the last year — 341st out of 659 MPs. This MP never rebels against his party — 571st out of 650 MPs.
Dundee East	Lab	Iain Luke	A	A	F	NS	Spoke in 32 debates in the last year — 186th out of 659 MPs. Asked six written questions in the last year — 478th out of 659 MPs. This MP occasionally rebels against his party — 236th out of 650 MPs.
Dunfermline & West Fife	Lab	Rachel Squire	F	F	F	NS	Spoke in 12 debates in the last year — 487th out of 659 MPs. Asked three written questions in the last year — 508th out of 659 MPs. This MP hardly ever rebels against her party — 251st out of 650 MPs. She worked as a social worker and a NUPE union official but that was before she saw the light and came to support foundation hospitals, top up fees and war.

			IW	TF	FH	RP	
East Dunbartonshire	Lab	John Lyons	A	F	NS	NS	Spoke in 18 debates in the last year — 399th out of 659 MPs. Asked 69 written questions in the last year — 199th out of 659 MPs. This MP occasionally rebels against his party — 216th out of 650 MPs.
East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow	Lab	Adam Ingram	F	F	F	NS	No signs of independent life.
East Lothian	Lab	Anne Picking	F	F	A+ NV	A	Spoke in 25 debates in the last year — 276th out of 659 MPs. Asked 17 written questions in the last year — 391st out of 659 MPs. This MP hardly ever rebels against her party — 428th out of 650 MPs. According to alba.org.uk "Anne Pickings is a shadowy and highly elusive character who succeeded John Home Robertson as MP for East Lothian in 2001. Her selection in 2001 was a surprise as she was, and remains, largely unknown in the constituency. Picking's attendance record in the House of Commons was the poorest of any Scottish MP, while her expenses claims were amongst the highest. She supports the illegal war in Iraq."
East Renfrewshire	Lab	Jim Murphy	F	F	F	A	Spoke in two debates in the last year — 625th out of 659 MPs. Asked no written questions in the last year — 548th out of 659 MPs. This MP hardly ever rebels against his party — 317th out of 650 MPs. Like all former NUS activists for the war, for tuition fees, for foundation hospitals, against public ownership.
Edinburgh East	Lab	David Gray Gavin Stang	A	A	F	NS	Spoke in 13 debates in the last year — 472nd out of 659 MPs. Asked two written questions in the last year — 517th out of 659 MPs. This MP occasionally rebels against his party — 146th out of 650 MPs.
Edinburgh North & Leith	Lab	Mark Lazarowicz	A	F	F	NS	Spoke in 43 debates in the last year — 107th out of 659 MPs. Asked 57 written questions in the last year — 230th out of 659 MPs. This MP occasionally rebels against his party — 244th out of 650 MPs.
Glasgow Central	Lab	Mohamad Sarwar	F	F	A	A	Spoke in 13 debates in the last year — 477th out of 659 MPs. Asked 47 written questions in the last year — 254th out of 659 MPs. This MP hardly ever rebels against his party — 302nd out of 650 MPs.
Glasgow East	Lab	David Marshall	F+ A+ NV	F	F	NV	Spoke in 11 debates in the last year — 505th out of 659 MPs. Asked 33 written questions in the last year — 309th out of 659 MPs. This MP occasionally rebels against his party — 165th out of 650 MPs.
Ochil & South Perthshire	SNP	Annabelle Ewing	A	A	A	NS	Spoke in 39 debates in the last year — 131st out of 659 MPs. Asked 196 written questions in the last year — 69th out of 659 MPs. This MP never rebels against her party — 630th out of 650 MPs.
Ross, Skye & Lochaber	LibDem	Charles Kennedy	A	A	A	F	Spoke in 46 debates in the last year — 90th out of 659 MPs. Asked three written questions in the last year — 507th out of 659 MPs. This MP occasionally rebels against his party — 187th out of 650 MPs. Which is odd, given that he's the leader. ■

Key: IW = vote on war in Iraq TF = vote on tuition fees FH = vote on foundation hospitals RP = vote on rail nationalisation
F = voted for A = voted against NS = no show NV = no vote

Henry McCubbin is a former Labour MEP

old age poverty

Ian Tasker looks at the various proposals for reforming the pensions system and argues that none of them will remove the obligation from Government

Public servants heal the sick, teach our children, keep our communities safe, clean and secure and perform every other vital public service. So why are they facing changes and cuts to their pension? The Government, through its attack on public sector pension provision, has threatened to reinvigorate the pensions debate and lead to further industrial disputes between the Government and public sector trade unions.

The employers have no real rationale for imposing changes that radically alter the retirement expectations of thousands of workers, whose contracts explicitly state that their retirement age is 60, by imposing a longer working life on hundreds of thousand of Scottish public service workers. The changes also mean that early retirement will only be accessible after reaching the age of 55. Many workers also entered the civil and public services for security of employment, security in retirement and the opportunity to retire at 60 with a regular retirement income to supplement their state pension. However, we should at this point dispel the myth that public service workers retire and lead a life of luxury and financial security. The average pension in payment to workers is only £3800, a sum that reflects the low pay that many workers in the civil service and local government have to endure throughout their working lives. Glynn Jenkins, head of pensions for Unison, said in 2002 that without their pension, "many public service workers would retire to poverty relying on the taxpayer to supplement their pension".

This exercise is simply a betrayal of hundreds of thousands of civil servants and local authority workers, many who are low paid but accept that other terms and conditions are generally better than in the private sector. Such attacks on occupational pensions schemes had previously been limited to private sector schemes with employers accelerating the closure of defined benefit schemes to be replaced by less favourable defined contribution arrangements that pass the risk from the employer to the employee, with the big gamble being the performance of their investments at the time of their retiral. Employers continue to argue that poor performance in world stock markets and increasing longevity make it necessary to close their final salary schemes to new employees and, in the worst cases, existing workers. While it is clearly the case that people are living longer (unless they live in socially deprived areas) this is not a trend that has developed overnight. There have been warnings in relation to increased life expectancy in recent years although it appears to have been beyond employers to realise this would have a significant impact on pension liabilities. Similarly, employers appearing to have forgotten the good years, when many took contributions holidays during years of good investment performance, and we have now witnessed a herd-mentality of businesses eager to close schemes. It is unacceptable that workers lose out of financial security in retirement following this legalised plundering of their deferred pay.

There are still deep concerns among public and private sector trade unions in relation to the direction that the Government's

policy on occupational and state pensions is heading. We still have situations arising where workers, having contributed to an occupational pension, fear they have lost their retirement income despite the commitment to introduce the Financial Assistance Scheme. Only recently, workers at Richards Textiles in Aberdeen faced an agonising wait to see if they would be covered as their scheme went into liquidation before the company did. The STUC believes that the responsibility for pension provision should be shared between the state, the employers and their workers. However, our initial concern when the Government announced that it wanted to place more responsibility on business and individuals for pension provision, was that business would not rise to that challenge. Unfortunately, our concerns appear to have been accurate, according to the interim report of the pensions commission which states that far from taking on the role left by the decline in state provision, the private pension system is continuing to decline. The Turner Commission, as it is now known, was originally set up to review what unions saw, as a failing private pensions regime. We welcomed the specific task of the commission to investigate the arguments for moving beyond current voluntary arrangements. The interim report published last autumn concluded that individuals and society in general had a choice of options:

- Accept as a principle that pensioners will become poorer in comparison with the rest of society.
- The proportion of taxes and/or national insurance devoted to state pension provision should rise.
- The rate of private savings must increase.
- Average retirement ages must rise.

The first option is completely unacceptable to the trade union movement in Scotland and we will continue to campaign, along with the TUC and the Scottish Pensioners Forum, for significant improvement in state pension provision to eliminate pensioner poverty and end means testing of supplementary benefits such as pensions credit. The second option, while recognising the increase in spending by the Government since coming to power in 1997 and the now unrealistic assumption that the major share of pension provision would shift from the state to individuals, would require recognition by Government that a higher proportion of GDP needs to be directed towards pensions. Option three suggests that if current pension shortfalls were to be addressed by increases in private savings alone, including occupational pension schemes, then the rate of savings would have to be doubled. Considering, the average savings rate has shown little change in four decades this is quite clearly not a realistic option, and would discriminate against lower paid and part-time workers, many of whom cannot afford to save.

For many the prospect of working beyond 60 is not something they would wish to contemplate and the STUC opposed previous suggestions in relation to a compulsory increase in the retirement age. Presently in the United Kingdom, employers can impose a normal retirement age on their workforce, (the Government

is currently trying to impose an increased retirement age on millions of civil and public servants) with working beyond this at the discretion of the employer. Additionally, Britain has no national retirement age and, of more concern, those who work beyond 65 do not have rights to claim unfair dismissal or redundancy pay. The commission has suggested that this 'default' retirement age of 65 either be removed or increased. Given the Government's previous encouragement to support individuals wishing to work longer by introducing deferred state pension benefits, only complete removal of a default retirement age will ensure that those who chose to do so will be secure in their employment and not be forced into retirement by their employers.

If the Government is committed to resolving the pensions crisis, pensions provision and products have to be simplified. Providing security in retirement and workers with choice will mean it has to give serious consideration to the alternatives put forward in this interim report. The Government alone has control over the proportion of taxes and National Insurance Contributions it direct towards ensuring that state pension benefits are maintained and hopefully improved. However, the rate of growth in relation to its contributions to pension is less than the increase in the number of pensioners in our society. Currently, the Government continues to rely on the stigmatic means testing system to ascertain entitlement to additional benefits over and above the basic state pension. The Commission took the view that means testing is, to a certain extent, acting as a barrier to retirement saving. While such an effect is hard to measure, the fairest way to ensure pensioner poverty is eradicated is to provide a state pension in line with the current guaranteed income of £105.45 a week if you are single or £160.95 a week if you have a partner. This should then be linked to earnings, a proposal that this Labour Government has steadfastly resisted. At the very least the Government has to accept responsibility for ensuring that those who cannot afford to have access to adequate second-tier pension provision. If we are to increase pensions savings that further moves away from the current voluntary approach to pension provision is inevitable according to the Employers Task Force on pensions, a group set up following the publication of the Government's Green Paper, *Simplicity, Security and Choice*. Their report recommended; "Employers ought to aim, over time, for combined contribution

levels of around 10-15 per cent, ideally shared on a 2:1 basis between employer and employee". Trade unions would see this as a positive move and believe that most workers, given a commitment by employers to contribute

10 per cent to a second-tier pension and a strong lead from trade unions, would recognise the benefit of pension provision and contribute their share. Reluctant employers should also

consider that a substantial part of the cost of providing a second-tier pension, amounting in effect to more than five per cent of pensionable payroll, is already being paid in the form of notional contributions to S2P or an alternative contracted-out arrangement.

The Government is imposing an increase in the retirement age for civil and public servants to 65. There is no choice, no flexibility. Take it or leave it.

Had compulsion been introduced before or at the same time as stakeholder pensions, the rich might not have hijacked this particular pension product as a tax efficient saving vehicle for spouses and children by exploiting the cap on administration charges designed to encourage lower wage earners to save. The report of the Employers Task Force also highlighted the massive disparity between defined benefits schemes and the less favourably defined contribution arrangements. The encouraged employers to actively consider alternatives, including modification of existing final salary schemes, replacement with career average schemes or some form of hybrid scheme containing elements of both final salary and money purchase schemes. In conclusion, the Turner Report makes some stark recommendations in relation to alternative options to closing the savings gap and will provide opportunities for constructive debate in the coming months between trade unions, employers and Government.

What is deeply disappointing is that the Government, as an employer, does not want to enter into discussions with unions that represent their own employees to resolve issues in relation to their own schemes.

The Government is imposing an increase in the retirement age for civil and public servants to 65. There is no choice, no flexibility. Take it or leave it. In addition, it appears to be endorsing the media frenzy that seeks to drive a wedge between public and private sector workers over the pensions issue. We believe that public sector pension arrangements should become the standard against which occupational pension provision is measured. The success of future pension campaigns relies on the collective support of all trade union members for those trade unions currently balloting on strike action on the 23 March, ensuring that the Government not only listens to those who vote in May, but also it's own workers. ■

Ian Tasker an Asistant Secretary at STUC

what's going on in America?

Bernie Sanders is a radical independent member of the US House of Congress. He will be visiting Scotland for May Day. He explains for the Scottish Left Review the state of politics in America.

What is going on in the United States? I know that there are many Europeans who are asking that question. For that matter, there are many Americans who are asking the same question. As the Independent Congressman from the small state of Vermont, let me briefly try to shed some light on the matter.

First, a piece of reality that many Europeans may not be familiar with. In the United States today the middle class is shrinking, poverty is increasing and the gap between the rich and the poor, already the widest in the industrialized world, is growing even wider. In the last four years we have lost 2.7 million good paying manufacturing jobs – 16 per cent of the manufacturing sector – and are now starting to hemorrhage millions of high-paying white-collar information technology jobs. Most of the new jobs that are being created in the United States now, as exemplified by Wal-Mart being the largest employer, are low-paying service industry jobs with minimal benefits.

(This is an important point not only from a wage perspective but in terms of healthcare coverage. Healthcare in the United States is delivered through private companies and most American workers can only afford health insurance if their employer pays for most of the cost.)

With workers in the United States now working the longest hours in any major country, it is not uncommon for people to be employed at two or three part time jobs to make a living, and working 50 or 60 hours a week. A new worker in most American jobs today finds him/herself lucky to get two weeks paid vacation. Taking advantage of disastrous trade agreements negotiated by both Democratic and Republican governments, one major corporation after another has made it abundantly clear that their future is in China and other low-wage countries, and not in the United States.

Further, the American 'safety net' is under a savage attack from Big Money interests and the Bush Administration, the most right wing government in the modern history of our country. As the only industrialised country on earth without a national healthcare system, 45 million Americans now lack any health insurance, even more have totally inadequate insurance policies, and our people are forced to pay the highest prices in the world for their medicine. Many older people now face serious financial problems as companies renege on the pension benefits they promised their employees. The Bush Administration is now working feverishly, along with Wall Street, to privatise our Social Security system - America's extremely successful public pension system which has gone a very long way in lowering the

poverty rate among the elderly. In terms of education, many low-income and working-class families are finding it harder and harder to afford college for their kids – their ticket to a middle class standard of living. The best colleges in America now cost over \$40,000 a year, and the average graduate of a four-year college is \$17,000 in debt. That is some of the day-to-day reality that millions of Americans are experiencing.

Now, let me give you another aspect of American reality. Most of the issues that I have just mentioned – the indisputable truth of what is happening to low and moderate income Americans – gets very little discussion in the corporate media here or in the political process. George Bush, for example, in the last presidential election had very little to say about any of these issues and much of the media, especially television, largely ignores them. One of the reasons that Bush and his right-wing

agenda have been successful is that attention has been deflected away from the pain and struggles that the working class and middle class are experiencing. Through the conscious efforts of the Bush Administration and the support of the corporate media, attention has been focused elsewhere.

To understand what is going on in the United States today it is necessary to know about the growing concentration of ownership in the American media and the reality that a handful of huge media conglomerates own and control what most Americans see, hear and read. By and large, most of the media owners are extremely sympathetic to the Bush Administration's

agenda of tax breaks for the rich and large corporations, anti-unionism, unfettered free trade, de-regulation and privatisation, and a militaristic foreign policy. Recent efforts by Bush for more media de-regulation and legislation that would impose large fines on radio and television stations for 'indecentcy' will make it even harder for the American people to hear alternative points of view.

During the last campaign, with the help of the corporate media and tens of millions in advertising dollars, Bush and his allies were successful in focusing their message in two areas: terrorism and the war in Iraq, and gay marriage. Over and over again, through both positive and negative images, Bush and his supporters painted the picture that the war in Iraq was an integral part of the fight against terrorism and that our country would be safe only with a Bush presidency. The Bush campaign also worked very effectively with evangelical churches, made up mostly of lower income and working class people, in pushing the view that the

Europeans should understand that while the Bush Administration has been successful in pushing much of its agenda through an extreme rightwing Republican Congress, most Americans have very serious concerns about what the President is trying to do

most important issues facing America were opposition to gay civil rights and a woman's right to have an abortion. For many Americans voting for John Kerry constituted a 'sin'.

Where do we go from here? First, most Europeans should understand that while the Bush Administration has been successful in pushing much of its agenda through an extreme rightwing Republican Congress, most Americans have very serious concerns about what the President is trying to do. In terms of the war in Iraq, a majority of Americans now believe that it was a bad idea. In terms of taxes, most Americans are far more worried about the record-breaking deficit that Bush has created than the need for more tax breaks - especially for the rich. In terms of Social Security, most Americans do not accept Bush's view that this 70-year-old program is in 'crisis' and needs radical restructuring. In terms of abortion, most Americans continue to believe, in opposition to Bush, that a woman should make that decision, and not the government.

Nevertheless, these are very difficult political times for progressive Americans. The Democratic Party, the party of opposition, is weak and divided. On one side are those who see the future of their party in terms of being more accommodating to corporate interests and the wealthy. Another faction continues to be very vocal on 'social issues' such as women's rights, gay rights, the environment and the war in Iraq, but has relatively little contact with the working class. Another part of the party continues the tradition, begun by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the 1930s, of trying to represent the interests of working people and the dwindling number of trade-unionists.

As the only Independent in Congress, my own strong view is that progressive political activists have got to be extremely aggressive in educating and organising working people in opposition to the savage attacks that corporate America and the Bush Administration are waging against them. We must also provide a concrete alternative to the class warfare and 'Social Darwinism' that Bush and his allies are pushing. The fact that, today, almost two-thirds of rural white working class men vote Republican is a political failure of enormous magnitude. ■

Among other issues that some of us are organising around are:

- The need for a national health care program which guarantees health care for all.
- Increasing the minimum wage to a living wage.
- Fundamental changes in our trade policy so that corporate America does not continue to ship millions of decent paying jobs abroad and exploit workers in the developing world.
- Changes in labor law so that those workers who want to join a union are able to do so without harassment.
- Tax reform which asks the wealthy to pay their fair of taxes while lowering taxes on the middle class.
- Opposition to media concentration and the right of the people to hear diverse points of view.
- Opposition to Bush's attacks on civil liberties and constitutional rights.
- Bringing our troops home from Iraq as soon as possible.

Bernie Sanders is the Independent Congressman for Vermont

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politics is a joke

As the Glasgow International Comedy Festival begins, John Flint asks if political comedy makes any difference

This month Glasgow hosts its Third International Comedy Festival, a successful and rapidly growing cousin of the Edinburgh Fringe. The fact that a small country like Scotland provides two such prominent comedy festivals is remarkable. The large presence of Scotland centre stage in the comedy spotlight, and the very healthy indigenous Scottish comedy scene, both live and media-based, raises the question of how much this flourishing movement contributes to and influences political debate in our country. Certainly this explicit linking of comedy and politics was one of the central motivations behind the establishment of The Stand comedy clubs, led by ex-senior Scottish Labour Party official, Tommy Shepherd and his partner, comedienne Jane Mackay, herself with a background in left politics. Indeed part of the money that led to the building of the Stand's venue in Edinburgh came from Tommy's severance deal from the Labour Party- so there is at least one thing that we have to be thankful to Tony Blair for!

Before assessing the health of political comedy in Scotland, there are a number of more general connections that may be made. Stand up comedy is a democratic art form for a number of reasons. Firstly, there are very few financial barriers to performing, enabling the inclusion of anyone with an interest to give it a go, given that it requires only a voice and microphone. For promoters too, stand up also offers an achievable event. Thus, whilst there are predominant clubs (The Stand, Jongleurs and the various big Fringe venues), there is a very dynamic and dispersed smaller club scene, providing work for a large number of comedians throughout Scotland, located in our big cities but also in numerous smaller towns, often outwith the Central Belt. Not only do these clubs counter any elitism by offering platforms for less established acts and challenging any monopolistic tendencies of the bigger operations, many of these nights are free or ask for a small entrance fee, reducing the financial impediments to watching live Scottish comedy.

Secondly, stand up comedy provides an intimate and immediate platform for the trading of ideas, values and perceptions, and in so doing offers an analogy to the old political stump meetings which are rapidly being displaced by targeted leafleting and call centre conversations. If the material covered may not always seem explicitly party political, this reaction to others' values and the targets of anger or ridicule are the very essence of political dialogue and negotiation. Indeed, comedians, like politicians, often face the temptations of populism, through saying things for 'easy laughs' rather than risking more challenging utterances.

Thirdly, and perhaps most crucially, live comedy is inherently inclusive and diverse. That is, it enables a wide range of voices to be heard, and appreciated (or not) by a Scottish audience. Immediate success on the night is as likely for someone from

a peripheral housing scheme as from leafy suburbia. As such it removes the many layers of exclusion and advantage in other aspects of life. It also enables individual's cultural background, appearance, gender, age, accent etc. to be acknowledged and accepted. Much of the best comedy arises from exploring this diversity and challenging or at times reinforcing the stereotypes that come along with difference. Thus, we have working-class and middle-class, male and female comics, we have Scottish

The very fact that there is a healthy and distinctive Scottish comedy scene ensures that the big issues of the day are satirised and laughed about from a Scottish perspective

stand ups who are aged 16 and aged 65, who are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim, who are white, Asian, black, gay, straight etc., and we have a large number of comics who are originally from England, Ireland, Canada and elsewhere. Whilst the work of these individuals will often very funnily address issues arising from their specific characteristics, often much of their material will not be directly related to this, and there is a refreshing acceptance amongst

comedy audiences to move beyond superficial perceptions to engage with what an individual is saying and to judge (positively and negatively) on the basis of the actual material. Of course, whether this is translated into similar actions when someone walks out the door of a club is questionable, but with Scotland still struggling to find adequate responses to its increasingly multi-cultural society, comedy seems to offer at least some lessons.

What then of the extent of more specifically political comedy in Scotland? Scotland does not have, to my knowledge, a live act comedian who is entirely defined by the political nature of their act and would be directly comparable to several excellent English acts including Mark Thomas, Rob Newman and Andy Zaltzman, although we could make some claims on Rory Bremner. It is not clear why this should be the case, although part of the explanation may lie in the nature of the club scene. Comedy has to be entertainment. The rise of UK political stand up, symbolised by Ben Elton et al., occurred in the context of the social and economic upheavals of Thatcherism and the breaking down of the post-war consensus. When people lament the lower visibility of political comedy compared to the 1980s they neglect the fact that other art forms have witnessed the same shift (for example, the Red Wedge musical movement's successors are the charity appeal concerts which lack an explicit political edge). Audience tastes have changed, and there is a balance to be struck here, in the context of a 20-minute club set, between making political points and ensuring laughter. Of course the best proponents manage to do both, but it's a difficult skill, and there is always a considerable section of an audience which doesn't regard politics as part of the Saturday night entertainment that they've paid hard cash for. There is also an element of escapism in attending comedy, encapsulated by one heckle I heard towards a solely political act: "We've come here to laugh, not to hear a lecture". Undoubtedly, as well as their undisputed talent, part of the reason that Thomas, Newman etc. manage to successfully use stand up as a vehicle for politics is

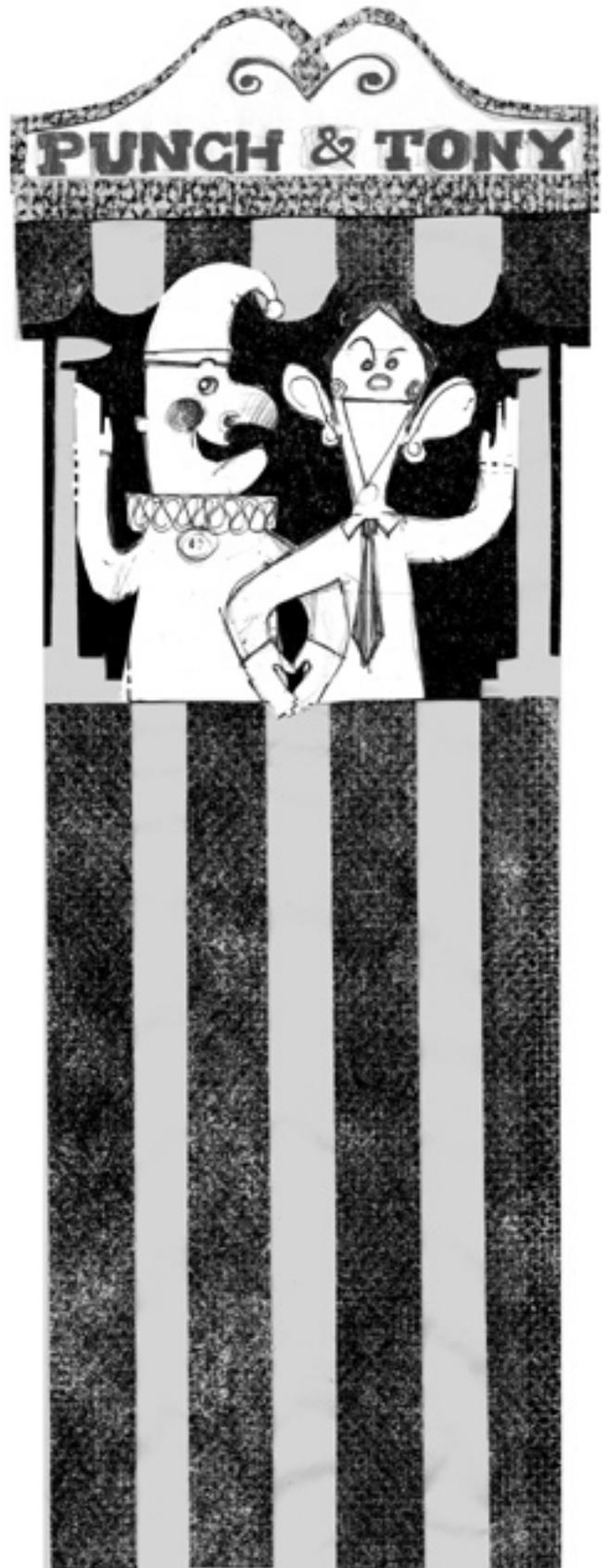
they are able to attract a specific audience to theatre venues who know what they are getting. This is less an option for the many relatively unknown acts appearing on a multi-act bill with only 10-20 minutes to win over a crowd from scratch.

That said, I don't think the lack of a big name explicit political comedian in Scotland is in any way a problem. Why? Because there are a large number of acts in Scotland who address political issues as part of wider-ranging sets. Whilst there are some marvellous proponents of political and topical material working today in our country, I will deliberately refrain from naming individuals, simply because it would unfairly leave out too many other comedians who refer to Scottish, UK and international political events and actors. Also, the very fact that there is a healthy and distinctive Scottish comedy scene ensures that the big issues of the day are satirised and laughed about from a Scottish perspective. For instance, the Scottish Parliament fiasco, Iraq and the war on terror, sectarian divisions and debates about 'neds' are all comprehensively-explored territory in contemporary Scottish stand up. There are many working towards a more confident and distinctive Scottish comedy scene, which will marry parochial navel gazing (which is of great value) with an embracing of the best international stand up contributions. How we see ourselves and how others see us have equal value in building the strong (multi)cultural identity which forms the necessary basis for successful political devolution.

The final question is the extent to which political comedy actually changes anything. In this regard it is interesting to note the increasing frustration of Bill Hicks towards the end of his short life with the limitations of comedy to challenge attitudes and political structures, and how his personification as a comedian prevented him being taken more seriously as a social commentator and activist. Similarly, Mark Thomas increasingly moved away from getting laughs towards more explicit and effective political mischief making and arguably had a far greater impact in doing so. Gravitas is always regarded as a key requirement when it comes to the hard end of achieving political power. William Hague's undoubted comic timing in the House of Commons arguably actually detracted from any image he tried to erect of himself as a serious political contender (allied to some appalling policies of course).

That said, strong satire may be forceful and ultimately corrosive for those in power. The growing recognition that we seemed to be governed as if on the set of an Ealing Comedy undoubtedly contributed towards the scale of Tory defeat in 1997. Similarly, the 'so bad it's funny' nature of the Scottish Parliament building has created a culture of mocking and disbelief directed towards politicians in Scotland. Satirical comedians can ride an easy wave here, but ultimately have to balance this with attempts to persuade others that positive political action is worthwhile. The fact that there are many comedy benefit nights for political causes and certain clubs deliberately promote and support female acts and gay friendly comedy and topical satire shows are (albeit modest) examples of Scottish comedy being used to challenge the status quo.

If in Stendhal's words a novel is a mirror walking down a street, then comedy is a slightly distorted mirror on current society, and its main value here is offering a space where political correctness is not dictated. Thus, disdain is equally likely to be dished out to George W Bush and to 'neds' and Big Issue sellers. Perhaps the biggest contribution Scottish comedy makes is to challenge the assumptions Scotland has about itself, and to



enable a forum where prejudices and beliefs can be aired. It might not change the big things, but it has no choice but to recognise and engage with the concerns and perspectives of the Scottish public in a way that politicians often avoid. Ask any act who has done material about religion in Lanarkshire on the day of an Old Firm game!

John Flint is a stand up comedian and author of Scottish Left Review's Kick Up The Tabloids



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atomised science

Jim and Margaret Cuthbert find that disjointed policy across the border is harming Scottish science

The link between devolved and reserved responsibilities is vitally important: to give one example, the Department of Trade and Industry has UK wide responsibility for developing the knowledge economy. It is clearly desirable that this should interact efficiently with the way the Executive discharges its responsibility for developing the Scottish economy. Unfortunately, despite the importance of interface issues, the evidence that we have uncovered indicates that they are not being handled well – indeed, in some respects, such issues are being handled less well now than they were pre-devolution. By common consent, at all levels of government and beyond, having a vibrant science base is vital for the development of the economy and to maintain competitiveness in an increasingly globalised world. Under devolution, important parts of government support for science fall on either side of the devolved/reserved boundary. The Scottish Executive, from its devolved funds, is responsible for funding the higher education sector in Scotland, not just for teaching, but also for its core research capabilities. The Executive also funds certain non-university research institutes including the five Scottish Agricultural and Biological Research Institutes, (SABRIs). And, through initiatives such as the Proof of Concept Fund and the Intermediary Technology Institutes, is seeking to have a major impact on research and development and its commercialisation. On the other hand, it is Westminster which is responsible for overall science policy and, from reserved funds, for funding the research councils, who allocate grants to research projects across the whole of the UK.

There are particular features about science which mean that it differs fundamentally from more traditional devolved services. For services such as health and education, it makes sense, indeed it is inherent in the very idea of devolution, for each administration to organise the service within its area as it sees fit. But as regards science, each part of the UK has a vested interest in ensuring that the science base for the UK works well, not just in the interests of each individual country but as a coherent whole. This was recognised in a report by the Royal Society and the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1999 which stated; “These are benefits, which Scotland shares, which flow from the large size and competitiveness of the UK basic research system. The diseconomies of small scale are severe, and barriers between Scotland and the rest of the UK would be to the great disadvantage of all. It is vital therefore that Scotland remains a well integrated part of the UK SET base.”

These particular features of science do not mean that all of science should be reserved to Westminster, or that the Scottish Executive should restrict itself to areas of science that are of local significance. On the contrary, it is clearly essential that the Scottish Executive has a major stake in what is one of

the commanding heights of the economy and that Scotland retains and enhances its tradition for world class science. It is entirely appropriate that the Scottish Executive is responsible for a significant part of the UK science base. But what is also required is for there to be effective liaison mechanisms with the agencies responsible for funding other parts of the UK science base; both those responsible for spending reserved funding for the whole of the UK (such as the research councils), and those who are responsible for administering ‘English devolved’ spend in support of the higher education system in England, as well as those responsible for devolved spend in other parts of the UK.

So how well are the UK governments grappling with the complex requirements surrounding the planning and funding of science under devolution? When we looked at the publicly available evidence, the answer was – not at all well. The most glaring example we found was the case of the SABRIs, and it is a discussion of this example which forms a major part of our recent Fraser of Allander paper. The SABRIs are prestigious research institutions, originally concerned primarily with agriculture, but now also more broadly involved in other areas such as biotechnology, genetics and immunology. Their core funding of £35.6 million (2003-04), is provided by direct grant by the Scottish Executive Environment and Rural Affairs department (SEERAD), i.e. out of devolved funding, and in constitutional terms this makes the SABRIs sponsored bodies of the Executive – a status which, as we show, has important and unfortunate implications for the SABRIs. It is clear from various statements made by SEERAD that the SABRIs are meant to fulfil a role which ranges from supporting Scottish Executive ministers’ legislative, policy and enforcement to forming part of the UK science base, which involves taking the UK lead in certain specific areas and carrying out strategic research of international significance.

We are not qualified to comment on how the SABRIs carry out these roles – other than to say that it seems clear that the

It is clearly essential that the Scottish Executive has a major stake in what is one of the commanding heights of the economy and that Scotland retains and enhances its tradition for world class science

SABRIs do indeed carry out much excellent work. What is clear, however, is that the way the Scottish Executive has chosen to organise the SABRIs places them under a grave handicap as regards their ability to access major sources of reserved, and other, funding. This arises because of the Haldane principle, dating from 1918,

which states that research money derived from government sources should not be linked to government’s own agenda. Under this directive, the research councils do not provide funds to support government policy-driven research. As sponsored bodies of the Executive, the SABRIs fall foul of this rule, which means they are not eligible to apply for the bulk of research council funding. Even worse, since major charities like the Wellcome Foundation adopt similar principles to the research

councils, the SABRIs are debarred from such major charity funding as well. The SABRIs are thus put in an anomalous, not to say ridiculous, position. They are meant to be a vital part of the UK science base and yet they are debarred from applying for the major reserved source of funding for this base, unlike higher education institutes and, very significantly, unlike sister bodies such as the John Innes and Rothamsted institutes down South. These sister institutes, while doing complementary strategic research to the SABRIs, are charitable trusts and are successful in attracting very significant amounts of research council funding. In essence, England has organised things differently in this field. The direct policy support for the Department of the Environment, Fisheries and Rural Affairs, (the equivalent English department to SEERAD), is carried out by an executive agency, the Central Science Laboratory. Strategic research is contracted out to the charitable institutes and to higher education institutes.

The SABRIs' anomalous position has a number of adverse implications. First, it greatly reduces the ability for extra funding to be leveraged in by the investment the Scottish Executive makes in the SABRIs. For example, in 2001-02, funding of £32 million put into the SABRIs by the Scottish Executive resulted in total SABRI funding of £52million, taking into account funding from other sources. However, the SABRIs sister institutions, mainly in England, attracted £27 million from English departments, but this leveraged in the much greater total of £117million in all, a large part of which was from the research councils. Second, this handicap on the SABRIs arguably distorts the Scottish Executive's own priorities. On the face of it, it could seem surprising that the Scottish Executive devotes as much as £50 million in total to support the SABRIs, the Scottish Agricultural College and the Royal Botanic, compared with its support of £177 million towards all basic research at Scottish Higher Education institutes. Third, it is possible that the SABRIs' own priorities are also distorted. Since they cannot apply for research council funds, this may force them to look for sources of EU or international funding, which may be tied to projects which are less relevant to the needs of the Scottish or UK economies. The failure of the Scottish Executive to recognise and address the implications of the SABRIs' anomalous position falls little short of incompetence.

More generally, what requirements should be fulfilled by the system of planning and funding science under devolution? We suggest that there are three primary requirements. Firstly, fully integrated planning of respective contributions to the UK science base by devolved departments and by departments managing reserved functions. Secondly, where a devolved department is (through historical accident, or choice, or both) responsible for a section of the UK science base, then this should not distort the priorities of the department's own science budget. Thirdly, where the UK science base is funded both by devolved and reserved funds, then these different financing streams should interact efficiently. We have seen, from the example of the SABRIs that the second and third requirements are not met under the present system. (Indeed, the second criterion is unlikely to be met under any system which involves a devolved administration funding part of the UK national science base from funds which are ultimately determined by the

Barnett formula.) It is also abundantly clear, unfortunately, that neither is the third requirement. Two quotations taken from the UK's Council for Science and Technology Quinquennial Review illustrate this. First, the review recommended that "Work should be undertaken urgently to clarify the present relevance of UK-wide science and technology policy to the devolved administrations". Second, the author of the review stated that "I have not been able to discover how devolution works in the area of science and technology policy".

What can be done about these problems? Given the will, it should not be difficult to tackle the specific problems with the SABRIs. The Haldane principle could be amended, by recognising that government-funded research falls along a spectrum - from short term research for specific applications, to long term strategic research. And that where government is funding an institution to carry out research largely at the latter end of the spectrum, there is considerable potential benefit to all concerned if the

institution is also able to bid for research council funding. Failing such a change in Haldane, then an alternative approach would be to alter the constitutional position of the SABRIs themselves so that they became charitable trusts, or merged with higher education institutions. Much more difficult is the wider problem of how the UK science base as a whole should be planned and funded under devolution. It is easy to state platitudes about the need for greater co-ordination: and many such platitudes can be found in government documents. There is, however, a fundamental problem which makes effective co-ordination difficult. This arises because the Westminster Parliament combines the functions both of a quasi-federal parliament looking after reserved functions for the whole of the UK, and a local parliament looking after those responsibilities

for England which are devolved to Scotland or Wales. Similarly, Whitehall combines, very often in the same department, both reserved functions and local English responsibilities. Given this, when a problem appears on the Westminster/Whitehall radar, the combined force of reserved and local powers will be brought to bear to solve that problem. In other words, the default position is very much that parts of science which are reserved will be structured to work seamlessly with the way in which 'devolved' science is organised in England. In these circumstances, getting Scotland's interests adequately represented in the planning of UK science will be inherently difficult.

We suggest that more needs to be done, not just to improve co-ordination between Scotland and Westminster/Whitehall on science, but also to increase Scotland's basic leverage. Co-ordination could be improved by, for example, giving a senior Scottish minister a seat on the Westminster Ministerial Committee on Science Policy, with the minister being shadowed by a senior professional adviser. But for increased leverage, Scotland really needs to bring more cards to the table: and one way of doing this could be, for example, to devolve to Scotland the Scottish component of the work and funding of the research councils. Paradoxically, a greater degree of devolution might actually improve the currently unsatisfactory way in which the science base is planned, for the benefit not just of Scotland but for the UK as a whole. ■

Jim Cuthbert was formerly Chief Statistician at the Scottish Office. Margaret Cuthbert is an economist.



ASLEF calls for the Government to introduce a charter of workers' rights that would include, the right to full employment, rights from day one of employment, the repeal of oppressive anti trade union legislation and positive laws encouraging trade unions to represent their members individually and collectively.

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reviews

Psychoraag by **Suhayl Saadi** £12.99 ISBN 845020 10 3.
www.suhaylsaadi.com. www.blackandwhitepublishing.com.

Suhayl Saadi is in many respects a special kind of Glaswegian – a General Practitioner-turned-writer, aficionado of Glasgow's bohemian West End, devotee of music from East and West, community activist and a new and modern voice in Scottish literature. Married to a doctor, the dynamic Alina Mirza, with a three year old daughter, Nadia, Suhayl connects to a distinguished Pakistani literary tradition through his father-in-law Ayub Mirza who was a close friend and biographer of the famous left wing poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Modest and unassuming by nature, Suhayl brings a very broad understanding of literature, language and music across centuries and national boundaries to his work and to this stunning latest novel, **Psychoraag**.

About a year ago I invited Suhayl to address the Annual General Meeting of West of Scotland Racial Equality Council on the theme of the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 and to approach it in any way he wished. It was a beautiful summer evening in June and we were sitting in the magnificent City Chambers in Glasgow with the sun streaming in the stained glass windows. Suhayl read a piece that he had just written about the Hidden Garden, a newly opened community garden in Pollokshields in Glasgow's South Side. The Garden lies in the heart of the South Side's Pakistani community, close to the Sikh community's oldest Gudwara, and has been designed to celebrate Glasgow's religious and cultural diversity with its huge brick chimney retained to remember a vibrant industrial past. Suhayl's description of the Garden's running water, reminiscent of ancient Moghul gardens, and its areas celebrating Buddhist traditions of peace and non-violence, was done with such style and persuasiveness that many of us made our way to the Tramway in Albert Drive the following weekend and for several visits afterwards when the Garden celebrated Eid, Divali and Guru Nanak's birthday with the local communities.

Psychoraag, with its unique mix of Hindi/Urdu/Punjabi and Glaswegian speech has a very helpful glossary at the back charting linguistic and cultural references.

Psychoraag traces a night in the life of its hero, Zaf, as he completes a three month stint at the local Asian radio station, Radio Chandni. It is a huge sweeping novel reminding one of Joyce's *Ulysses* with its mosaic of personal and family stories of love, both past and present, and its sexual intensity. It is a gritty and honest book, perhaps influenced by Suhayl's life as a doctor in working class areas of Glasgow. Dark undertones of racial harassment and violence strike discordant notes in the musical raga of the title.

The intertwining of the narrative of Zaf's parents' romantic exodus from Pakistan with the music and patter of Zaf the disc

The intertwining of the narrative of Zaf's parents' romantic exodus from Pakistan with the music and patter of Zaf the disc jockey and his chaotic love life, capture the spirit and history of multi-cultural Scotland in a way that no other novel has

jockey and his chaotic love life, capture the spirit and history of multi-cultural Scotland in a way that no other novel has. This is an erudite, affectionate tribute to a great industrial city and its people who are seeking to reinvent themselves in a period of political and economic aridity and decline. Zaf and his friends reach out to each other across boundaries of ethnicity. Many modern references are to be found to the changing Scottish political landscape. Young Scottish people, both white and Asian, are well portrayed in the descriptions of new generations trying to escape some of the narrowness and stereotyping of their parents. I found it a positive and optimistic novel capturing very well the thrusting and chaotic nature of social change and the ease with which young people repudiate racism through love and relationships.

Recently when Suhayl was giving a reading alongside South African writers at a symposium convened by Anti-apartheid's successor organisation, ACTSA, he commented that his novel had been very well received and reviewed in Scotland, Pakistan and in the United States but had received little interest from London-based reviewers. When questioned about this, he said that he suspected that **Psychoraag** was perhaps viewed as a parochial Scottish novel. If this was indeed the case, it was a matter of regret because he was anxious to be read by English readers including Asian readers in the South. Perhaps this review might help to bring this about! ■

Maggie Chetty

Paterson, L., Bechhofer, F. and McCrone, D. Living in Scotland: Social and Economic Change Since 1980, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2004, xix + 236, p/b £16.99, ISBN 0 7486 1785 X

According to the back cover, **Living Scotland** gives an account of the key social changes in Scottish society ... over the last two or three decades ... build[ing] a picture of a changing Scotland at the beginning of the 21st century'. This, enforced by the previous, well-regarded work of Paterson and McCrone based on the Scottish Social Attitudes surveys, promises to deliver much. Unfortunately, the work was found to be wanting in several important areas.

Compared to McCrone's **Understanding Scotland** (second edition, Routledge, 2001), there is an under-conceptualisation and under-theorisation, for most of the analysis is descriptive analysis and there is a tendency to let the facts 'speak for themselves'. Often the terminology of 'telling a story' is employed. When the authors state (p80) that: "A society dominated neither by primary or secondary producers, nor

by manual jobs, is not, on the whole, a working class society" and use occupational classifications as their basis, there is an imperative to fully discuss the implications and consequences of such a framework and to appraise the merits of other contrasting and alternative approaches such as Marxism.

Following from this but needing further elaboration and explanation, the authors then state (p101): "... increasing pluralism of Scottish voting around an essentially left-of-centre position ... is perhaps what you get when a more affluent, more middle class and much better-educated electorate tries to find a means of expressing its persisting sense of being working class".

The claim to utilise the wealth of quantitative material that now exists on demography, identity, employment, education, wealth and so on for Scotland was only partially realised. The attempt to cover such a wide terrain in a relatively slim volume has come at the cost of depth of coverage of these issues. Of the 236 pages, only 154 are text, the remaining being comprised of data and technical notes. Even within the 154 pages, much space is given over to tables and figures.

But the analysis of the data contained therein is broadly comparative with societies in the rest of Europe and further afield. It confirms and elaborates on what are commonly taken to be unremarkable 'universal truths'. Thus, economy and society in Scotland have witnessed the move from manufacturing to service activity accompanied by a rise in non-manual work, while a rise in real incomes has continued within a framework of inequality. Moreover, work flexibility has increased while so too has employment insecurity alongside the increasing importance of educational qualifications not being commensurate with a meritocratic society.

Some of the overall conclusions are interesting but unsatisfying in that they are essentially commentary. For example, the authors note the continuing allegiance of a majority of citizens to the provision of major public services by public means and paid for by general taxation but then teasingly add (p154): "[This] does not seem to be the ideological basis of the kinds of radical political action that ... would be required to truly bring the persisting poverty and social exclusion to an end". The paragraph that follows does not do much to explore the issues at hand. That is a great pity because the tone of the conclusion and where it is pointing suggest that a significant contribution to progressive and radical political strategy could have been made. ■

Gregor Gall, Professor of Industrial Relations, University of Stirling

You Are Here, Rory Bremner, John Fortune, John Bird. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, £16.99. ISBN: 0297847783

In an era when New Labour and the Tory opposition look and sound the same, the role of political satirist has never been more marked. In this regard, Rory Bremner – with John Bird and John Fortune – have been like a beacon exposing this cosy consensus for the reactionary crusade that it is.

For more than a decade their TV programme, with its mixture of humour and biting political satire, has given voice to a progressive alternative which struggles to be heard in most of the establishment-controlled media. That Channel Four is willing to provide such a space suggests that they know an untapped audience when they see it.

Much has been made by New Labour of being radical reforming government drawing comparisons with the Labour Government of 1945. The book demolishes this argument

Following their TV success, Bremner, Bird and Fortune have produced a book, *You Are Here*, that follows much of the format of the show. Bremner actually wanted to give the book an alternative name, 'You Couldn't Make This Stuff Up', which gives some clue to the content. Meticulously researched, it is a wonderful study into the what government actually does as opposed to what it says it's going to do; the difference between spin and reality. For example, The Government has identified itself with a number of high profile initiatives to 'save Africa', that

'scar on the conscience of the world', highlighting in particular the devastating wars which have destroyed so much of the continent. What has the government actually done? It has massively increased arms sales to African states fuelling many of these same conflicts. The book goes on in similar lines with everything from public services to PFI, from the war in Iraq to the relationship with America, from saving the environment to the failure to do anything meaningful about the environment and from the clean, honest government promised in 1997 to the hideous opposite which actually emerged. Much has been made by New Labour of being radical reforming government drawing comparisons with the Labour Government of 1945. The book demolishes this argument. On issue after issue they are the antithesis of everything that previous government stood for and achieved. The New Labour Government is radical and reforming, but in a manner which is more heir to the Thatcher Government of the eighties.

Perhaps it is on the issue of morality that the book most nails New Labour. It is exposed as a government which lies as a matter of course (Iraq), regards principle as completely expendable (ethical foreign policy), is quite prepared to sink to the level of the gutter to be popular (asylum seekers) and is contemptuous of democracy (Blair's elective dictatorship style of government). The book is full of quotes and statements from government ministers. In fact, it is difficult when reading the book not to imagine Rory Bremner doing his stand up routine. Perhaps the most poignant are things New Labour said when in opposition compared to what it says in power. Usually the exact opposite.

It is also a book about betrayal. What comes over is that Rory Bremner personally was one of those who enthusiastically supported New Labour in 1997 and believed what it said on the tin. The book traces his own political journey over the past seven years from disillusionment to cynicism and anger. New Labour is exposed for having one basic message; why vote Tory when we do Toryism better than them. And it poses the inevitable question; after reading this book why on earth would any traditional Labour voter vote Labour again? ■

William Bonnar

web review

Will this be the first election in which the web has an influence? Probably not, but it isn't going to stop the bloggers having a go. The following example is from Wales, but it is to be hoped that we will see similar things springing up across Scotland in the coming months.

In the run up to the 2005 General Election a new web-site has been launched for the general public. Delyn Democracy: The Political Watchdog is a non-profit making, public awareness raising tool that is freely available online at www.delyndemocracy.blogspot.com. Its primary target audience is the 70,000-plus residents of the Delyn electoral constituency in Flintshire, North Wales. The editorial team is made up of Delyn constituents; all either born, raised and/or currently living in Flintshire towns and villages.

The website's facilitator says: "Delyn Democracy will provide a slightly satirical take on events in the run up to the 2005 General Election. It is hoped that this web-site will prove to be a little thorn in the side of the political establishment in Delyn. But there is a serious point too, in a country and constituency which lacks a credible political opposition, we will be using our small website to do what we can to publicly hold candidates and parties in Delyn to account." The website will be updated regularly over the next few months before the General Election, which is expected on May 5th. The content will include:

- Details on how to register to vote in elections
- Maps and profiles of the Delyn electoral constituency

- Light-hearted quizzes
- A breakdown of David Hanson MP's parliamentary voting record and analysis of his ministerial prospects
- Articles that scrutinise the views and policies of candidates and parties
- Interviews with candidates

The website's facilitator explained how public scrutiny and democratic accountability are an essential part of the website's mission. "We are demanding trustworthiness, truthfulness and decency from all political candidates in Delyn. To begin with we will undertake a detailed analysis of David Hanson's role as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the PM. He has been described not only as Tony Blair's 'right-hand man' but also as his 'eyes and ears'."

The Delyn constituent added: "We are waiting for our MP to voice his unqualified support for the publication of all drafts, details and dates of the government's advice as to the legality of the Iraq war. Why might he be reluctant to support publication under the Freedom of Information Act 2000? Perhaps, he has insider knowledge that (a) the Iraq war was agreed between Blair and Bush in April 2002 and that (b) the official legal advice is being concealed because it says the war could be ruled illegal."

Delyn constituents are welcome to post comments on the site and/or email possible news items or articles to delyn.democracy@gmail.com ■

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Kick Up The Tabloids

BLAIR ANNOUNCES 'KIDS TO FINLAND' SCHEME

We kick off with this month's besieged Minister, Cathy Jamieson, whose visit to Auchinleck was marred by disrespectful youths taunting her with shouts including "Didn't you used to be a Socialist doll?". The reason for their wrath at our Cath was her proposal to ban the sale of Buckfast, which along with the outlawing of smoking and hunting with dogs has severely curtailed leisure activities in our deprived housing estates. Ms Jamieson swiftly clarified her plans, stating that Buckie would not be banned outright, but would be limited to two bottles per day to each individual, which reassured everyone, given that it is only on the third bottle of the stuff that the madness tends to kick in...

The fact that the elites of British society will find it harder to actually murder a Fox came as some relief to the new leader of the Scottish Socialists. The SSP created a stir with their debated proposal to support the insurgents in Iraq. This support did not extend to an actual willingness to hide explosives under their XL Che T shirts and run into Baghdad police stations. It appeared more to be moral solidarity (!!!) and logistic weapons assistance such as shipping out broken ashtrays for the street fighting and burnt out Golf GTIs for the car bombings.

Jack McConnell launched his summit on sectarianism, proudly showing delegates the infamous painting his wife bought him: "Yes Cardinal don't you agree it's a beautiful capturing of a 17th Century man on a white horse waving a sword as he crosses some river in Ireland? What on earth could it mean?". The timeliness of Jack's worthy attempt to address religious division in Scotland was demonstrated by further violence at an Old Firm game where Rangers' Fernando Ricksen was hit by a disposable lighter. Commentators rightly pointed out that this was not the action of a true Celtic fan, who would surely have used a Zippo. Attempts at the summit to modernise the behaviour of the Orange Order, for example getting them to use taxis rather than marching everywhere, largely fell on deaf ears (it's the sound of the drums that does it). Indeed the Orange Order demanded the Act of Settlement be upheld, which as they rightly pointed out defends the religious rights of everyone in our country, as long as they're Proddies. The irony of the Orange Order's position is hilarious given that the Queen quite obviously would be happy for Charles to marry a Catholic, a Muslim, and indeed a man, rather than CPB. Given Her Majesty's unwillingness to support the Royal betrothal, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness may cheekily offer to pay for the bash with some of that spare cash they have lying about.

Tony Blair launched six pledges for the new election. These pearls of wisdom included 'protecting this country's borders' (and presumably all our other bookshops) and 'giving your child the best possible start in life'. Quite how the government will pay for all our children to be brought up in Finland is unclear.

The SNP launched their own election campaign promising more modest aims than previously – so no 'Free by 93', more 'Still Alive in 2005.'

The PM launched a daytime television show offensive, and plans to do many more between now and election day. So look out for Tony's DIY makeover show from Falluja where he suggests that the interior décor is so bad that a fresh start is required, beginning with flattening everyone's home. Also Antiques Bargain Hunt where Tony enables a private company to use all their £500 spending money to buy the NHS. Obviously, the lie detector test on Trisha re legal advice over Iraq may have to wait until June.

Civil liberties continue to bite the dust as Bush and Blair have given up trying to make Iraq like a Western democracy and have instead decided to make the UK and US like Iraq (in Saddam's days). One of the gems includes house arrest for terrorist suspects. Not only will this encourage the thousands of homeless people in the UK to become terrorists as the only way of getting a roof over their head, but it does seem a rather uninspired weapon: "We think you were planning a major gas attack on the London underground in order to kill 10,000 civilians – right, that's it, you're grounded!". More Home and Away parenting than a war on terror. You can imagine an Al Queida terrorist going 'Oh mum, that's not fair. I promised Osama I'd definitely go to the Servicemen's Disco in Hamburg this weekend.'. "Any more from you young man and we'll take the TV out your bedroom.". One poor Belmarsh inmate is to be locked in his house with his five children, which will make the torture suffered in Guantanamo Bay pale into insignificance. Terrorist suspects are also to be electronically tagged and subject to fines if they break the conditions of their release, which is a bit like hoping that Green Lanes will deter a car bomber.

Finally, David McLetchie was forced to admit being a businessman and a Conservative MSP represented a conflict of interests, given the Tories economic track record, and the Greens were saddened by the good people of our capital city rejecting a greater reliance on public transport, which would undoubtedly have led to an intolerable need for Edinburgh folk to talk to strangers on a daily basis... ■

Kick Up the Tabloids is the Stand Comedy Club's monthly satirical comedy show. Totally live and interactive, it offers an irreverent take on who and what has been making the news in Scotland and beyond. The Kick Up the Tabloids team includes Bruce Devlin, John Flint, Susan Morrison and Paul Sneddon with special guest appearances. The show takes place on the third Wednesday each month at The Stand, Yorkhill Place, Edinburgh (Tel 0131 558 7373 or visit the website at www.thestand.co.uk). The doors open at 7.30pm, with the shows kicking off at 9pm.

RMT SCOTTISH REGIONAL COUNCIL RAIL AGAINST PRIVATISATION

RMT has launched a campaign for public ownership of the railways and to end further privatisation. Privatisation has been a disaster for our railways. The network has been fragmented and services have deteriorated, yet the private train companies continue to receive billions of pounds in subsidy and bank billions of pounds in profits. The great railway rip-off has been a total failure.

Scotland is crying out for a decent transport network run in the public interest. The Rail Against Privatisation campaign aims to persuade the government that public ownership will provide a better deal for the passenger and the taxpayer.



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